

Waterbirdnews

Monitoring internationally important waterbird populations across the UK



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Welcome...

to the newsletter of the Wetland Bird Survey and the Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme

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Orkney Wild Goose Chase

By Neil Calbrade, GSMP Organiser

Every autumn, around 60,000 Greylag Geese travel from Iceland to winter in the UK, with about 75% of these wintering on Orkney. As Icelandic Greylag Geese are a population monitored by the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA), accurate counts of their numbers across the flyway are needed, however, the presence of a large number of resident Greylag Geese on Orkney makes being able to accurately assess the Icelandic population increasingly difficult.

These resident birds also cause issues for the farmers on the islands, and to fit in with Goose Management work, each year, a team from NatureScot attempt to count the resident Greylag Geese on Orkney in August, just before the Icelandic birds arrive. The figure derived can also be used when the November IGC census is carried out, these resident birds can be discounted from the overall total. This year, with my GSMP hat on, I was invited to join them.

After a long journey north from Thetford over the weekend, via a couple of stops to look at the Stejneger's Scoter on the Forth Estuary and Crested Tits around the Cairngorms, I then had the relatively short drive from Inverness to Caithness. On the Monday morning, I met up with a few of the NatureScot team who were travelling across on the hour-long ferry crossing from Gills Bay in Caithness to St Margaret's Hope on South Ronaldsay and also Hálfván Helgason from Náttúrustofu Austurlands in Iceland. Hálfván and Icelandic colleagues are working with Scottish counterparts on a project to generate more accurate population estimates of the Icelandic population using satellite tags – more on that at a later date!



Editorial

By Neil Calbrade, Waterbird Surveys Officer and *Waterbird News* editor, BTO

I have just returned from an excellent week on Orkney, assisting NatureScot staff with their annual Greylag Goose counts. These important counts of the resident population help to work out how many migratory Greylag Geese will soon be arriving from Iceland (pgs 1–5).

As a birder growing up in Greater Manchester in the 1990s, I would regularly phone Birdline Northwest (remember those days of having to phone up for bird news?!), and very often, the site Woolston Eyes, in Cheshire, would feature. This amazing site, that lies beneath the M6, which began its life as a desolate wasteland is now a SSSI and holds important numbers of many species and has been counted for WeBS for 45 years (pgs 6–7).

The Exe Estuary holds internationally important numbers of Black-tailed Godwits, and nationally important numbers of a further three species, and as with many key wetlands, is constantly under threat of development. Wildlife Refuges have been established to protect key areas and reduce disturbance to these and other species (pgs 10–11).

The BTO Heronries Census is the longest running species survey for any breeding bird in the world, and is now in the capable hands of WeBS's own Gill Birtles! Find out more about this survey and how you could contribute to its continued success (pgs 14–15).

With autumn migration now upon us, this is a good time of year to carry out age assessments of waders passing through, which you can enter as part of your monthly WeBS Counts. Migratory swans and geese will also be starting to arrive, and many being in family parties, make them easier to record for age assessments and can be entered into either GSMP Online or WeBS Online.

The WeBS and GSMP team & contacts

Although the first port of call for counters should be their Local Organiser, many counters and Local Organisers are in regular contact with the WeBS and GSMP team. For those that are not sure who to contact for various matters, the following 'Who's who' should help...

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We are grateful to Dan Owen for his account of his WeBS site Woolston Eyes Nature Reserve in Cheshire, and to the NatureScot team who welcomed Neil Calbrade on their annual Greylag Goose count on Orkney. Thanks also for Imogen Salmon for her article on the Exe Estuary Wildlife Refuges.

WEBS PARTNERSHIP

The Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) monitors the UK's waterbirds and contributes to the International Waterbird Census.

WeBS is a partnership jointly funded by the BTO, RSPB and JNCC, with fieldwork conducted by volunteers.


GSMP PARTNERSHIP

The Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme (GSMP) monitors the abundance and breeding success of the UK's native geese and migratory swans during the non-breeding season.

GSMP is a partnership, run by and jointly funded by BTO, JNCC and NatureScot, with fieldwork conducted by both volunteer and professional surveyors

 www.bto.org

 www.jncc.gov.uk

 www.rspb.org.uk

 www.nature.scot

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Waking up to rain lashing down on the windows on Tuesday morning was not the way I was hoping to get this trip started, though in typical Orkney fashion where the weather changes multiple times in the same day, it didn't last too long, and by the afternoon it was glorious sunshine, much better than being stuck in an office!

We met up at the NatureScot Office in Kirkwall, where we were split into pairings and handed maps of the area we would be recording that day and forms to record our counts on and set on our way. On the first day, we were all covering areas on the west side of Mainland, and I was teamed with Jen, covering the area around Sandwick. At first, the area didn't look that big on the map, but there were lots of small roads that needed to be driven down, often requiring retracing of steps to ensure that as much of the area as possible could be counted from public roads.

Although I see Greylag Geese every day on my morning birding walk around the Nunnery Lakes reserve in Thetford, trying to accurately count, and where possible, age, them in this landscape was a challenge. The first flock we found was a family party of seven, a pair with five young, quite close to the road, so not only easy to count, but age as well. Unfortunately as the morning went on, it was soon obvious that not all the geese would be this cooperative. Many more flocks were seen, some on nice open grassland which were easy to count and others in rank grass or waterside vegetation around a couple of small lochs where, try as you might, it is easy to miss a few birds if they didn't pop their head up whilst you were scanning through the flock with the scope.

By the time we had finished our area, we had counted, and dutifully mapped 1,997 birds, which was a promising start to the week, while a stunning male Hen Harrier around The Loons RSPB reserve added a bit of interest.

The second day we were all dispatched to count on various islands, and as I was teamed up with James to head up to Westray, one of the northern islands, it was an early start to catch the ferry. In contrast to Mainland, Westray is a very linear island to cover, with a main road running along its spine, with a handful of smaller roads running off it. Shortly after leaving the harbour, we came across the first couple of flocks of geese in adjacent fields, though from the road it was apparent that there were almost certainly more birds over the brow of the hill than we could count from the road, and our count of 131 felt underwhelming. Thankfully, shortly after we had finished counting them, the birds suddenly began calling loudly and all lifted and our suspicions of a serious undercount were confirmed with at least 275 birds flying around before resettling, again mostly out of sight.

Heading north, we reached Loch Saintear where the majority of the rest of the birds we were to see that day were hanging out with around 550 birds on the loch and surrounding fields. Away from here, there were very few birds further north, though we did come across a familiar looking local and a rather shifty looking chicken!



Goose counter: Jenny Park; Other photos: Neil Calbrade



We were finished counting by mid-afternoon, and after a coffee break, we then caught the small 12 man ferry across from Pierowall to Papa Westray. Here it was great to meet up with Tim Dodman, the Icelandic-breeding Goose Census (IGC) Local Organiser for Orkney, where we had a 45 minute chat about the forthcoming autumn's counts and a look at St Tredwell's Loch before it was time to head back to Westray and then a rush back to the south end of the island to catch the ferry back to Mainland.

For the final day, some teams again covered islands, while others covered the east side of the Orkney Mainland. I joined Arabella to visit Hoy and South Walls. Hoy is the second largest island in the Orkney archipelago, after Mainland, though is largely moorland, much of which is not viewable from the few roads that skirt the coast. South Walls, a small

island attached to the south coast of Hoy by a causeway, however, is mostly agricultural, and unsurprisingly, this is where we found the vast majority of the Greylags that day scattered in several flocks before the weather closed in and made for a rather wet end to the counting.

Over three very enjoyable days, I counted a total of 3,410 geese which NatureScot can include in their totals when they finish collating the results from across the different teams to assess how this resident population is faring.

A huge thank you to NatureScot for inviting me along and especially James Winter for his job in coordinating the counters and Christine Murchison for organising transport and accommodation for us all, which made the week run smoothly.







Woolston Eyes

By Dan Owen



Woolston Eyes is a large nature reserve and SSSI, located just east of Warrington, roughly 2 miles from the town centre. The reserve is owned by the Manchester Ship Canal Company (MSCCo) and managed jointly by local voluntary group Woolston Eyes Conservation Group (WECG) and the RSPB. A key and annual permit may be purchased for a small cost at <https://woolstoneyes.com/visiting/#permit-applications-and-group-visits>.

The reserve itself is made up of four dredging beds nestled between the River Mersey to the north and Manchester Ship Canal to the south. The two westernmost beds, No.3 and No.4 Beds, are accessible to permit-holders. In 2019, WECG, in collaboration with MSCCo, RSPB, Natural England and Carbon Landscape, raised £650,000 to create a large new wetland on No.4 Bed. At the time of writing the wetland is now complete bar a few final touches and has already proved a great success. Black-necked Grebes colonised whilst the wetland was still being dug, with birds using the site to both stage on migration and breed. Rarities include White-tailed

Lapwing, Temminck's Stint, Ferruginous Ducks and Penduline Tit.

No.3 Bed is a mature wetland, with large stands of Phragmites and wet willow scrub. There is a pedestrian footbridge by the small car park for access, as the bed is surrounded by the Mersey oxbow – an underwatched part of the reserve that looks prime for a Night Heron. It was favoured by a pair of Ferruginous Duck in Spring 2024. The bed itself is where the main Black-headed Gull and Black-necked Grebe colony can be found and can be viewed from six hides around the lagoon. The willow scrub remains one of the best places to see Willow Tit locally. Woolston Weir basin is situated just north-east of No.3 Bed and can host decent Aythya flocks in winter. It is also one of the last places Goldeneye may be regular encountered, and the best part of the reserve to look for Common Scoter on passage.

Wildfowl counts here started in 1979, and has taken place every year since, though counts have only been

conducted between September to April, until 2024. With a 45-year data set, population changes are inevitable, and WeBS data helps to outline this. In the early days, illegal shooting was still occurring on the reserve, though was quickly stopped. Wildfowl counts show that the wintering population of Teal rose from 400 to 1,600 because of this. Over 400 Pintail wintered several times during the 1980s, with a peak of 782 in 1982, but now a handful of birds would constitute a 'good showing'. Other high dabbling duck counts include 5,500 Teal, 915 Mallard and 605 Shoveler. Numbers of all species are now much lower, though have all seen an increase following the completion of the new wetland. Aythya have had mixed fortunes too. Gone are the days of 1,700 wintering Pochard and 2,600 Tufted Duck. However, breeding success has increased, with a new peak of 36 successful broods of Pochard in 2023. Unfortunately, Tufted Duck have declined on both accounts, though is showing signs of recovery as a breeding species with 24 broods in 2023.

One species in particular is bucking the trend. Gadwall has undergone a dramatic rise throughout the reserve's history. Woolston has a decent breeding population, with 22 successful broods in 2023, and many more unsuccessful attempts. However, a large number of moulting adults congregates from mid-June onwards. A count of 300 was made for the first time in 2000 and has increased steadily since. A new record was set in 2024 with 1,115 counted across the reserve in late July. Once the birds have finished moulting and are able to fly again they leave the reserve in mid-August. Another, smaller, build-up occurs in September.

Garganey is another species faring well. Following suspicions, I set out and first confirmed breeding in 2019 – this was the first confirmed breeding in Cheshire for 50 years. Thereafter, breeding has been confirmed most years since. Numbers of this summer visitor have been increasing too. A count of four in 1989 remained the highest until 2019. During July 2023, 16 present on the reserve became a new county record and a minimum of nine were present in Spring 2024.

Woolston is arguably the most important site for breeding Black-necked Grebe in the country, with the species breeding here since 1986. To this day the species is doing very well at the site, and productivity is very high.



The reserve's first brood of four arrived in 2023 and all four chicks fledged. Other grebe species fare well too, and Woolston is recognised as the best site for breeding Little Grebes in the county, with over 20 pairs.

Waders are largely restricted to passage. This can occur throughout the year, but typically Spring and late Summer are best. Most species just pass straight through or stop briefly. Typical passage species include Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew, Whimbrel, Greenshank and Ruff. Typical coastal species such as Sanderling, Bar-tailed Godwit and Grey Plover occur less often



and are always a treat. Lapwing and Little Ringed Plover both breed annually, with Oystercatcher and Ringed Plover attempting on occasion. Common Sandpiper, Snipe and Redshank have all bred historically.

Ringling is an important aspect to the reserve's ornithology, with several ongoing colour ringling projects taking place by Merseyside Ringling Group. Green Sandpipers have been colour ringling at the reserve for several years now, with resightings in Lancashire and Slimbridge WWT. The birds are fitted with an orange darvic with two black numbers on the left tibia and a small green ring on the right tibia.

Woolston Eyes is undoubtedly a special place throughout the year. With important numbers of wintering wildfowl replaced by large numbers of both breeding and moulting birds in the summer months. It's a privilege to help maintain the site, and WeBS plays a key role in monitoring such numbers. The site should also serve as hope and demonstrates how successful a site can be with cooperation from different bodies.



Woolston Eyes: David Bowman; Black-necked Grebe and Black Tern: Dan Evans

Gulls on the Move



By Emma Caulfield WinGS Organiser

The Winter Gull Survey 2023/24–2024/25 (WinGS) had a successful first winter survey period in January 2024. A huge thank you to all of you who took part - over one thousand volunteers headed to key and random sites across the UK, Isle of Man and Channel Islands to count roosting gulls at dusk. The dedication of our counters through the wind and rain of last January has resulted in an exemplary level of coverage, but the work is not over yet!

A novel aspect of this year's WinGS is the introduction of an Autumn Survey period. Information on the distribution of gulls during the passage period has not been previously collated, and we aim to identify areas of importance for post-breeding aggregations. Monitoring roosts in autumn will also aid in capturing seasonal peaks in some species that are scarcer during the winter months.

MONITORING ON PASSAGE

The global phenomenon of bird migration inspires annual wonder amongst those that track these movements. Mass migration of species from breeding to wintering grounds makes for interesting birdwatching, supplying a revolving selection of species, change in distribution and fluctuating numbers to observe across the seasons.

Through colour ringing projects we can link individuals from their breeding to subsequent wintering grounds locations with an assumed path between locations. Using new technologies such as GPS and Geolocator tags we also now have the ability to position birds on the globe to a staggering degree of accuracy along their migration routes.

Counting populations at different stages of migration is another invaluable tool for understanding species distribution at different times of the year. Through these monitoring activities we have the ability to identify locations that are important to large numbers of a migration population and can understand how distribution of a species changes across seasons.

UK GULL MOVEMENTS

Gulls are ubiquitous in the UK, observed on our coastlines and urban areas. This group can be observed widely and throughout the year, leading to the assumption of apparent residency. However, this is not always the case. There are a number of different populations that depart and arrive in the UK throughout the year, post breeding. Some UK breeders choose to winter here, taking advantage of the temperate conditions afforded to us by the Gulf Stream, while many travel further afield to take advantage of warmer climates and different food sources. Movement ecology of gulls is interestingly varied across our regularly occurring species.

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL

Lesser Black-backed Gull (LBBG) present in the UK display a high degree of migratory behaviour, and are well studied. LBBGs display a diverse range of migration strategies, with four distinct categories; those that winter in the UK, in France, on the Iberian peninsula and West Africa. The out movement from British colonies begins in August and continues through to September. By November the furthest fliers arrive at their destination on the Canary Islands.

The movement of resident birds generally seems to bring them inland as well as southerly, supported by colour ring recoveries and tracking work.

The migration routes taken by LBBG is further complicated by the split of the species into three subspecies (*graellsii*, *intermedius* and *fuscus*). The breeding ranges of these subspecies are largely distinct, with the UK harbouring 71% of the *graellsii* subspecies.

Subspecies *intermedius*, that largely breed in Denmark, Southern Norway and Sweden, are found in the UK in the highest concentrations during the autumn and winter. This gull subspecies shifts south and eastward from their breeding range during the winter, wintering in the UK, or using shores and reservoirs as a stopoff location on their way to sunnier climes.

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL

The UK breeding population of Great Black-backed Gull (GBBG) is mainly sedentary and the species as a whole do not undertake large migration trips as we see in other black-backed gulls. However, colour ringing recoveries have shown a general movement eastwards and south post-breeding. Monitoring in the autumn will aid in capturing inland movements as they travel to wintering locations. Numbers of GBBG increase in the winter due to the influx of Norwegian breeding birds, where more individuals move inland for the season.

HERRING GULL

Herring Gull are similarly residential in their movements post-breeding. However, the degree of movement depends largely on breeding distribution within the UK. During the autumn there is a general southward movement observed at Scottish colonies in Northern England. However, this species disperses in all directions within the UK during the autumn with a higher degree of dispersal at southern colonies. There is also an influx of Herring Gull breeding in Northern Europe to the UK from September to February resulting in seasonal peaks around this time.

BLACK-HEADED GULL

The movement behaviour of Black-headed Gull (BHG) vary across breeding populations from highly migratory to dispersive habits post-breeding. Birds breeding in the north of the UK have the highest degree of movement outside the breeding season, where they display a south-westerly dispersal pattern. Counts of BHG generally increase in the UK during the winter months. This is primarily due to the arrival of individuals from the continent, particularly Scandinavia and the Baltics. Ringing recoveries have also shown movements from Eastern Russia, Inland Germany and Iceland. Young will remain within the vicinity of their natal colonies for two months before they move further afield, and counts in autumn makes the capture of this movement possible.

COMMON GULL

Common Gull are widely distributed in the UK throughout the winter, compared to their breeding distribution.

Individuals travel to the UK in search of temperate wintering locations across Central Europe and from as far as Western Russia. This immigration begins in August and September. The influx continues into the winter where we see peaks in the numbers and broad distribution across inland and coastal locations. Common Gull breeding at northern latitudes will also winter further south than the UK, so will stop-off here along their travels. Unlike other species of gull, such as LBBG and Herring Gull, there is little evidence to suggest that there are differences in distances travelled based on age classes.

Differences in migration distances are born of the trade off between cost and benefit of migration itself. Differential migration patterns develop as a result of the physiological capabilities of differing age and sex classes, and monitoring throughout peak passage periods are instrumental in understanding the extent of this movement across different species.

AUTUMN PERIOD WINGS

Accurate monitoring of transient gull populations across the UK requires bespoke survey techniques. To understand the distribution and numbers of gulls throughout the autumn, and how this changes in comparison to winter, roost counts are necessary across seasons.

Other surveys, such as WeBS, involve key counts throughout autumn. While gulls can be monitored using data received from WeBS surveys, these counts are conducted during the day when gulls are broadly distributed across their feeding grounds. This means it is difficult to gain an accurate picture of gulls present and estimate the proportion we are undoubtedly missing. WinGS surveys are completed at dusk when gulls are more densely aggregated at roost sites. We take advantage of this roosting behaviour to gain a more accurate representation of their numbers.

Surveys of sample sites as well as known key roosts helps improve national estimates of these populations and allows us to assess where 1% thresholds are exceeded and potential protective measures at those sites are required for wintering and passage gulls.

By taking part in the autumn WinGS survey period, you will be directly contributing to our understanding of places important to passage gulls. Find out more about WinGS on our website and sign up to take part this Autumn, or check back later in the year to help with the final winter surveys, when we hope the weather will be kinder than last year! WeBS Counters are also strongly encouraged to add their optional counts of gulls throughout the coming winter during their WeBS counts, so we can compare the relative WinGS and WeBS results and get an idea of how numbers are changing between the key WinGS dates.

Key date for autumn: September 29th 2024

Key date for winter: January 19th 2025

Go to app.bto.org/wings to browse vacant sites and find roosts in your area or visit www.bto.org/wings for more information.

The Exe Estuary Wildlife Refuges: Creating Safe Spaces for Birds to Thrive

By Imogen Salmon, South East Devon Wildlife

Situated in South East Devon, the Exe Estuary meanders for 10km south from the city of Exeter to the sea. As a Special Protection Area (SPA), RAMSAR wetland and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) with a myriad of protected wetland habitats, it is a haven for waterbirds.

From autumn until spring, the Exe is teeming with over 20,000 winter migrants. In the upper reaches, the Exe reed beds and inter-tidal mudflats home nearly one third of the UK's overwintering Avocet population, while large flocks of Black-tailed Godwit and Lapwing are also a frequent sight. At low tide, the sandbanks further south provide a feeding platform for both some of the largest and smallest waders, the Red-listed Curlew and Dunlin, whilst they keep an eye out for hunting Peregrine.

Nearer the mouth of the estuary, between the sand spit at Dawlish Warren and the railway, an expanse of salt marsh homes Redshank and Ringed Plover. Seagrass meadows offer a vital food source for wildfowl including Wigeon and Dark-bellied Brent Geese, as well as a home to both species of Seahorse and a nursery for young fish.

As the first point of land for species arriving from overseas, passage birds such as Osprey and Spoonbill make sure to stop by in both directions of their migratory journeys. In summer, the estuary is quieter for birdlife, as juvenile Oystercatcher,

Sandwich Terns and coastal passerines, such as Cirl Bunting take centre stage.

RECREATIONAL PRESSURES

In contrast, the Exe Estuary is also a recreational hotspot, renowned for watersports and popular with dog walkers, fishermen, and powerboaters. Plans for 30,000 new homes locally could increase recreational pressure on nature. To mitigate this pressure, the Habitats Regulations 2017 ensure that likely impacts to internationally important wildlife sites, such as the Exe Estuary, are prevented before they can occur. South East Devon Wildlife (SEDW), funded by developer contributions from new homes, was established by Teignbridge, Exeter, and East Devon Councils to help protect critical wildlife sites.

THE EXE WILDLIFE REFUGES

Research commissioned by the Exe Estuary Management Partnership (EEMP) identified two zones where human activity was causing up to five bird disturbances per hour. Repeated disturbances can impact bird survival, causing unnecessary energy expense. This prevents birds from rebuilding fat stocks essential for migration, leading to reduced breeding success and the use of less suitable habitats. To prevent disturbance from new development, SEDW undertook a public consultation on introducing areas reserved for overwintering birds, based on WeBS counts and Footprint Ecology evidence. As a result of the consultation,

the timing and size of these areas were adapted to make space for people and wildlife. From 15 September to 31 December, the Exmouth refuge protects a sheltered inlet and crucial feeding ground – a seagrass meadow. After this period, herbivorous waterbirds tend to move onto adjacent land for grazing and the Dawlish Warren wildlife refuge. This refuge is year-round, safeguarding both food sources and a high-tide roost. People are asked to avoid both wildlife refuges from land and water.

MONITORING

A three-year period of detailed monitoring by Footprint Ecology has confirmed that the Exe Wildlife Refuges are experiencing fewer recreational disturbances and increased bird usage over time. While these initial results are encouraging, we must continue to ensure these areas remain effective sanctuaries for wildlife. SEDW continues to collaborate with site managers (Natural England, RSPB, Devon Wildlife Trust, East Devon District Council, Teignbridge District Council and EEMP) to ensure a coordinated approach.

SEDW’s wardens continue to monitor the wildlife refuges using Footprint Ecology’s methodology. Their primary technique is Vantage Point Counts, snapshot surveys designed to capture how different user groups interact with these protected areas across the seasons and tides. These surveys not only record human activity but also track the presence and populations of target species.

SEDW’s efforts are further bolstered by the long-standing WeBS dataset, upheld by dedicated volunteers since the 1970s. This invaluable data provides a comprehensive view of wader and wildfowl populations on the Exe, allowing us to assess trends and ensure the effectiveness of conservation strategies. As WeBS volunteer David Price notes, despite fluctuations in certain species, the overall number of waterbirds on the Exe has remained impressively stable. The refuges at Exmouth and Dawlish Warren are particularly vital, offering essential food supplies.



ONGOING CHALLENGES

Changing human behaviour is lengthy and complex. Groups of visitors are easier to reach but independent visitors, such as dog walkers, are more labour-intensive. Devon Loves Dogs, a free membership scheme, helps dog walkers protect and respect nature. It promotes the “Four Paws Code,” runs guided ‘waggy’ walks, and provides a wealth of useful advice. Additionally, mitigation funding is used to provide alternative green spaces, such as Dawlish Countryside Park, accommodating dog walkers with 26 hectares of semi-natural countryside, well-kept trails, dog-proof fencing, free parking, and a BBQ zone. More parks will be created in the future, diverting pressure away from protected sites.

Educating new site visitors and changing old habits are ongoing challenges. Onsite wardens and signage help to educate people. Fitting nature into fixed seasons and zones is impossible. Frequently, birds use refuges outside designated times, perhaps due to weather or climate change. Likewise, birds are not aware of boundaries, often residing outside their borders. SEDW’s wardens maintain site presence while birds are there, but it is also vital that the refuges remain responsive to nature’s needs, leaving scope for review if pressures change.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

SEDW is dedicated to monitoring and evaluating the refuges to ensure they meet wildlife needs. Collaboration is key, and we seek to work with partners who share our goals to maximise our impact. Increasing community engagement and awareness remains a priority, to foster a sense of stewardship among locals and visitors. In the future, we aim to expand our team to extend site presence.

Interested in our work? We’d love to hear from you! Follow us @sedwildlife, sign up for our newsletter at www.southeastdevonwildlife.org.uk, or email us at sedwildlife@eastdevon.gov.uk



Oystercatchers and pop up stand: Imogen Salmon; WeBS Counters: Sama Eurlidge

Domestic wildfowl and WeBS

By Neil Calbrade, WeBS Organiser

Although not key WeBS species, the recording of domesticated wildfowl, and what constitutes a bird being classed as 'domesticated', often causes confusion.

A domestic Greylag Goose is a goose that has escaped from captivity or maybe a direct descendant of such a goose and should not be confused with the re-established population of British/Irish Greylags. The latter are descendants of mainly north-west Scottish birds that were translocated to England by wildfowlers. There are sites where many of the Greylags present have characteristics, such as a few white feathers often associated with domestic geese, but this can equally be the result of inbreeding within a relatively closed population and have nothing to do with regular interbreeding with escaped domestic geese. In fact, individuals with domestic ancestry are probably the exception rather than the rule.

Greylag, and other geese, particularly in an urban environment where people enjoy taking their children to feed the birds, may become habituated and very tame as they take advantage of the free handouts, but, for recording purposes, these are not technically domesticated birds. Should these birds move away from that site and join other Greylag Geese at a nearby site where they don't get fed, they would be inseparable from "wild" Greylags.

It can be difficult to know where to draw the line but as a general rule, aside from obvious 'farmyard' geese, unless you have evidence that true domestic escapes have contributed to the makeup of the local birds we would prefer them to be recorded as Greylag Goose (GJ).



Only true 'farmyard' type geese, or obvious descendants of, should be recorded as 'Domesticated' Greylag Goose

The situation surrounding Domestic Mallards can be even more confusing, complicated with the release of birds for shooting on some sites. The site where I carry out my monthly WeBS counts, is such a site, where each autumn, several thousand Mallards are released onto the site, and are regularly shot throughout the winter. As with Greylag Geese, should these birds disperse into the wider countryside, they would be indistinguishable from other Mallards, and so are recorded as Mallard, rather than Domesticated Mallard. This has resulted in this site now having the third highest five year average for Mallard in the UK, the peak of 5,000 last autumn being the highest UK count since 2014/15.

While it would be easy to ignore these obviously released birds for shooting from the counts, but as with non-native species, it is important that these are recorded to enable us to be able to assess their impact on wild birds.

True 'Domestic Mallards', sometimes colourfully referred to as 'Manky Mallards', come in various colours and forms. From the pure white Aylesbury Duck, to the bottle green Cayuga Duck and the increasingly common Swedish Blue, these often appear on WeBS sites, particularly where large numbers of Mallard occur. All of these varieties are quite distinctive and easy to distinguish from Mallards and are easy to record as such in WeBS.



Only 'Manky Mallards', should be recorded as 'Domesticated' Mallard

In the same way as with Greylag Geese, pure Mallards that readily come to breed or other handouts from the public should also be counted as Mallard rather than domestic Mallards. Birds in these settings usually include a few Domesticated Mallard breeds and so where it is practical to do so, should be separated out.

Your WeBS Core Count priority dates for the 2024–2025 season...

2024...

20 October

17 November

15 December

2025...

12 January

16 February

16 March

13 April

25 May

15 June

13 July

10 August

7 September

12 October

9 November

7 December

Where tidal conditions at coastal sites are unfavourable on these dates, Local Organisers are encouraged to agree alternative dates. Ideally, these should be separated by at least three weeks from counts in the preceding and following months. Counts on different count units within complex sites should be coordinated to avoid the possibility of double counting.

Keep up-to-date with count dates and add them to your electronic calendar at: www.bto.org/webs/coredates

BTO's Heronries Census



By Gill Birtles, Heronries Census Organiser

As some of you may already be aware, earlier this year, I took over from Ian Woodward the role of the Heronries Census Organiser, which I'll be carrying out alongside my WeBS Counter Network Organiser duties. Ian has been at the helm of the Heronries Census since 2016, so we'd like to thank him for his years of expert leadership and I'm very pleased to say that Ian is remaining in a supporting role within the Census team.

As I am now working across two surveys, I thought I would take this opportunity to introduce the Heronries Census scheme for those who have not heard of BTO's smallest but longest running survey.

BACKGROUND

The BTO Heronries Census began in 1928 as a one-off investigation for the journal *British Birds* and has now matured into an annual survey still ongoing more than 90 years later. Its Grey Heron data represent the longest-running monitoring data set for any breeding bird in the world.

The main species covered by the Census is Grey Heron but Little Egrets and Cormorants are also included, as are rarer, but increasing, species of colonial waterbirds such as Cattle Egrets, Great White Egrets and Spoonbill.

Many heronries hold a dozen or more nesting pairs, while some may have even a hundred or more, and occupy traditional, well-known sites that are active for many decades. Changes in the numbers of nests over time are a clear measure of population trends at national, regional and local scales.

CARRYING OUT COUNTS

The simple aim of the Heronries Census is to collect counts of 'apparently occupied nests' (AONs) of herons, egrets, cormorants and other colonial waterbirds. 'Apparently occupied' simply means that there is some evidence of an active nest.

It is required that 2–3 visits are carried out to each heronry, between March and May (at any time of day). Nests are counted in the second half of April, with this count being supplemented (if possible) by an earlier and a later visit. Two numbers are collected at each visit:

1. **Count** – this is the number of nests that are apparently occupied, e.g. adults or young seen on/at the nest, droppings or fresh eggshells.
2. **Estimate** - the total number of pairs of each species estimated to be nesting in the colony on each visit. After the final visit, a 'Year's Best Estimate' is then recorded for each species. This final number of apparently occupied nests (AONs) reflects what has been learned about the colony over the course of the survey year and includes the best estimate of the total number of nests judged to be occupied at the colony during the breeding season, including any nests in which nesting was attempted but was unsuccessful.

All this data can be submitted through an online portal similar to WeBS Online. At the beginning of every year, a report is produced for the previous year's survey season and sent around to all supporters and counters.

GETTING INVOLVED

If there is an active heronry on your WeBS site, or local to you and the Heronries Census sounds like something you would like to get involved in, head to www.bto.org/heronries, to find a link to the 'Available Sites' map to see if there are any vacant heronries nearby in need of counting and send a message to the local Regional Organiser about getting involved. Similarly to WeBS, we are keen to hear about any heronries which are not included on the map and set them up as new sites. So please get in touch if you know of a heronry near you that can be counted at herons@bto.org.

No specialised ornithological knowledge or experience is required so this is a really great survey for beginner birders!

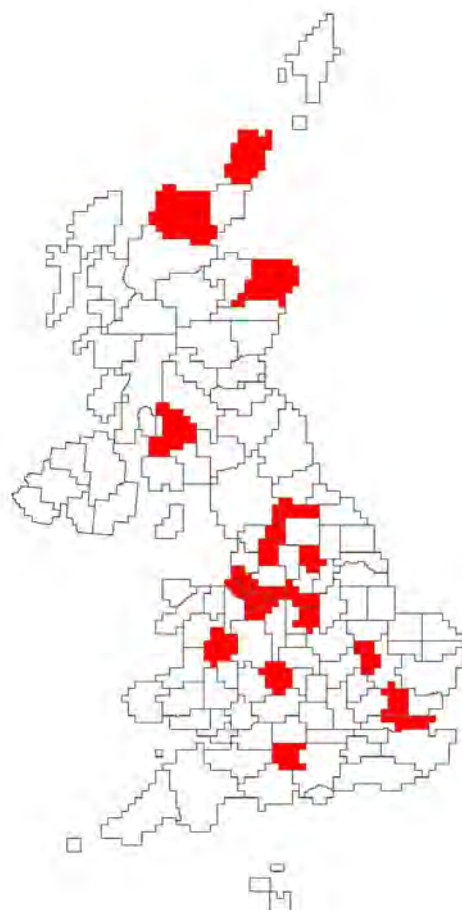


HERONRIES REGIONAL ORGANISER VACANT REGIONS

The survey is organised via the network of voluntary Regional Organisers (ROs) who coordinate coverage across BTO Regions (which cover slightly different areas to WeBS regions). The role of ROs is to match heronries to counters, manage data submissions and validate data each year.

We have a number of vacant RO positions (see map), so if you are interested in learning more about taking on a Heronries Census RO role, please get in touch at herons@bto.org.

Vacant Heronries Census Regional Organiser positions:
Aberdeen, Ayrshire and Cumbrae, Cheshire (Mid), Cheshire (North & East), Cheshire (South), Derbyshire (North), Derbyshire (South), Essex (Northwest), Essex (South), Huntingdon & Peterborough, Lancashire (East), Merseyside, Montgomeryshire, Orkney, Sutherland, The Wirral, Worcestershire, Yorkshire (Leeds & Wakefield), Yorkshire (Northwest), Yorkshire (Richmond) and Wiltshire (South).



Low Tide Counts update

By Neil Calbrade, WeBS Low Tide Organiser

The wetlands of the UK are vitally important for millions of migrant waterbirds which either spend the winter here or use the UK as a staging post on the way to and from wintering grounds further south.

Large numbers of waterbirds come to UK estuaries in the winter because the climate is relatively mild, because there is a large resource of estuarine habitat and because this habitat supports abundant food.

COVERAGE

The winter of 2023/24 saw Low Tide Counts carried out on 20 estuaries around the UK, including Morecambe Bay, Firth of Forth, Exe Estuary, Mersey Estuary and Wigtown Bay.

The counts for the winter of 2024/25 will soon be underway with sites such as the Crouch/Roach Estuaries, Blackwater Estuary, Firth of Clyde and Chichester Harbour among the sites due to be counted under the six-yearly programme.

TAKING PART

We would welcome counts from any estuary, even those that have not yet been counted under the scheme, so please contact the WeBS office (lowtide@bto.org) if you are able to organise a team or be able to count a whole site yourself and would like to take part. The counts are carried out, ideally, once a month between November and February and will allow comparisons of distributions and densities of species across a site with previous years.

Award winning WeBS counters

Congratulations are due for the RAF Ornithological Society (RAFOS) who, on the 2nd November 2023, were awarded the BTO Marsh Award for Local Ornithology for their annual 'Winter Duck' expeditions to Scotland. This award is given to a group that conducts exceptional activity that advances knowledge about birds and RAFOS Chairman Martin Routledge accepted the award on behalf of the society from Juliet Vickery at a special award ceremony at the Mall Galleries, London.

Since 1999, RAFOS have ventured up north every January to carry out single counts at the most challenging WeBS sectors including sea lochs and mountainous lochans. These visits are vital for monitoring the waterbirds in these areas and feeding into the International Waterbird Census.

Over the years they've recorded 65 waterbird species plus 'bycatch' of nine seabird species and eight raptor species. Scarce sightings over the years have included Little Egret, Avocet and White-billed Diver. Their monitoring is incredibly important for some species e.g. the counts from the 2022 expedition accounted for a third of all the Great Northern Divers and more than 70% of the Black-throated Divers recorded in all UK WeBS Core Counts for the month! This is from covering over 250 sectors in one week.

Gill Birtles, the WeBS Counter Network Organiser, had the pleasure of joining Winter Duck in 2023, an experience you can read all about in *Waterbird News Issue 39*.

Congratulations to RAFOS on your award and thank you for all your hard work. Here's to many more successful Winter Duck expeditions!



Richard David Hearn (1971–2024)

The world of waterbird research and conservation is deeply saddened by the loss of Richard “Rich” Hearn following his untimely death from kidney cancer on 15th February 2024 at the age of 52 years. Rich was internationally renowned for his work on the monitoring and conservation of waterbirds, undertaking numerous projects on these species across the globe. Not only did he have great knowledge and passion for these species but made a real difference in helping to secure their future through his ability to enthuse others, with a generosity of spirit and humour that he brought to all aspects of his life.



Rich’s knowledge, expertise and immense personal skills saw him increasingly involved in waterbird monitoring and conservation internationally, and his reputation grew. He became WWT’s Head of Species Monitoring and led the UK’s Goose and Swan Monitoring Programme for many years. Whilst his role required a reasonable amount of desk-work, to ensure that results were reported, he also travelled extensively, with expeditions to Iceland (to work on Pink-footed Geese and Whooper Swans), the Russian arctic (to ring Bewick’s Swans), Bulgaria (for Red-breasted Geese), and to Bangladesh, Kuwait, Dubai and Nigeria (to promote waterbird monitoring capacity building), along with attending and contributing to many meetings of parties and conferences over the years.

Back at his desk, Rich was the lead author of two international single species action plans – for Baer’s Pochard and Long-tailed Duck – and he also contributed to action plans for other European seaduck species such as Velvet Scoter. He took on a number of honorary roles for other organisations, notably becoming Global Chair of the IUCN SSC Duck Specialist Group, an active member of the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) Technical Committee and he sat on the WeBS steering group for many years.

There’s no doubt that Rich’s contribution to waterbird monitoring and conservation in the African-Eurasian and East Asian flyways was immense and wide-ranging, and his absence from these areas is sorely missed. His legacy however continues, not only through the information gained and initiatives put in place, but through the inspiration and guidance provided to those who continue his work into the future. He will be greatly missed, by his partner Becca, his family, and his many friends.

Kane Brides & Eileen Rees

Rodney Bone (1941–2023)

In November 2023, we received the sad news of Rodney Bone’s passing at the age of 82. Rodney was a long-term supporter of WeBS, from way before it was called WeBS, coordinating the National Waterbird Census for the whole of Devon and counting his site on the Avon Estuary for around 60 years.

Rod was dedicated to recording all wildlife in his local area, not just wetland birds, and in 2000, he counted 30 pairs of Spotted Flycatchers within the Aveton Gifford Parish which led to assisting the RSPB with the catching, ringing and habitat management for this species.

Rodney was a prominent figure in both his local and WeBS community who will be sorely missed. Our condolences go out to his friends and family.

Ian Findlay (1928–2023)

We were sad to hear of the passing of Ian Findlay, who counted many sites in Durham for over 50 years, amazingly right up until his retirement from WeBS in 2022 at the age of 86. We want to thank Ian for his many years of dedication to WeBS and send our condolences to all who knew him.

Who wants to be a WeBS Local Organiser?

By Gill Birtles, WeBS Counter Network Organiser

We are all familiar with our Local Organisers (LO), the dependable volunteers who keep the WeBS wheels running in each WeBS region. They are an integral part of the survey and without them, WeBS would not be the success that it is and the conservation of waterbirds in the UK would be far weaker. We are never without vacant regions in need of Local Organisers or regions where the current Local Organiser may like to step down if there was someone to pass the baton to. Therefore, I would like to take this moment to describe the role of the Local Organiser.

THE OBJECTIVE OF A LOCAL ORGANISER

With WeBS involving over 3,000 volunteer counters, carrying out monthly counts at their allocated wetlands this requires specific, localised coordination. The UK is divided into 194 WeBS regions (which can either be counties (or similar) or large complex sites) and WeBS Local Organisers are local leaders within these regions. LOs are the main point of contact for WeBS counters, organising and coordinating WeBS at this local level. They are an integral part of the WeBS operation, working closely with both the WeBS volunteers and WeBS staff to deliver data for this long-running survey.

WHAT DOES IT INVOLVE?

Given the level of variation in the size and nature of WeBS regions, the role of LO is similarly varied, with no two LOs having exactly the same job. The key responsibilities for the role are:

- Act as the first point of contact between the WeBS Office and WeBS volunteers, ensuring good and regular communication.
- Ensure coverage of key sites and ensure counts are synchronised where appropriate e.g. large estuaries, coastal sites or large inland sites.
- Maintain coverage at a wide range of sites within the region and where possible to expand the number of sites covered by WeBS.
- Recruit new volunteers to increase WeBS coverage.
- Ensure counters submit their data either online or on paper forms promptly.
- Check and validate data submissions, contacting the appropriate counter with queries, where necessary.
- Ensure counters receive count forms (where applicable), newsletters and reports (either directly from the WeBS Office or via the LO).
- Regularly inform the WeBS office of any changes to counters' details, retirements and new counters.

Additionally, LOs can spend time publicising and promoting WeBS in their regions, such as periodic newsletters, a social media presence, giving talks, liaising with County Bird Recorders and Bird Clubs.

The expected time commitment is on average 7.5 hrs (one day) per month but this can vary throughout the year and from region to region.

WHAT SKILLS ARE NEEDED?

1. An understanding of WeBS, its partners, aims and the different parts of the scheme (Core and Low Tide Counts (where applicable));
2. Good understanding of WeBS and waterbirds in your local area;
3. Have good written and aural communication skills;
4. Ability to interact well with WeBS volunteers of all abilities and the WeBS Team;
5. Have good organisation skills with the ability to work to deadlines;
6. Be enthusiastic and motivational about monitoring UK waterbirds;
7. Have a basic level of IT ability and a familiarity with WeBS Online.

These are skills that most counters will acquire from carrying out monthly WeBS counts, so if you are confident that you meet the above, then the Local Organiser role could be just the opportunity for you!

We offer a thorough one-to-one induction online for all new LOs, plus a suite of resources, including the Local Organiser Handbook. As the Counter Network Organiser, I am available for questions and enquiries over the phone and email when needed, too. LOs are never without help and support!

HOW TO LEARN MORE

You can see which regions are currently in need of an LO in the Local Organiser News opposite. You can also learn more about these vacant regions on the Become a WeBS Local Organiser page at www.bto.org/our-science/projects/wetland-bird-survey/taking-part/become-webs-local-organiser or contact webs@bto.org for more information about vacancies.

Local Organiser News

Gill Birtles WeBS Counter Network Organiser

We would like to thank Andrew Crory (Dundrum Bay (Down)); John Shillitoe (Hampshire (coastal/estuaries)); Matthew Tickner (Lough Foyle (Londonderry)); and Bob Titman (Lincolnshire - South incl. Peterborough (inland)) for all their hard work as Local Organisers and who have retired from the scheme since the last newsletter.

We would also like to welcome the following new and returning Local Organisers: Allan Brown (Fife (inland)), Geoff Butler (Hampshire (coastal/estuaries)); Jamie Hicken (West Midlands); and Daniel Skeats (Harrogate and Yorkshire Dales).

Special thanks is needed for Julian Rolls, who this year stepped down from counting his site in Wiltshire, which he started counting in 1968 - an impressive 56 years! Also, thanks are needed for Colin Lythgoe, who also retired from WeBS this year, after 25 years of counting in Cheshire.

Additionally, a special mention is needed for Bob Groom, for whom June 2024 marked 40 years of doing WeBS counts at Tabley Mere, Cheshire! Hearing about these achievements is truly inspiring and makes us feel lucky to have dedicated and passionate counters supporting WeBS!

A very special thanks is also needed for Phil Hampson who has recently retired as the Local Organiser for not one, not two, not three but four WeBS regions, plus as the Northern England representative on the Local Organiser Advisory Committee! Phil has always been an expert and dependable LO and our thanks and best wishes go out to him for the future.

Desperately seeking organisers...

We are urgently seeking new Local Organisers for Badenoch and Strathspey; Belfast Lough (Down/Antrim); Buckinghamshire - South; Cheshire - North; Clwyd (coastal); Clwyd (inland); Cotswold Water Park (Gloucestershire/Wiltshire); Derbyshire; Dundrum Bay (Down); Forth Estuary - North (Fife); Greater London (excl. Thames Estuary); Hertfordshire (excl. Lee Valley); Huddersfield/Halifax area; Isle of Cumbrae; Jersey (inland); Kent - West; Lancashire - West; Lincolnshire - South incl. Peterborough (inland); Merseyside (inland); Montgomeryshire; Northamptonshire (excl. Nene Valley); Sutherland (excl. Moray Basin) and Wiltshire.

If you would like to know more about becoming a WeBS Local Organiser please contact us at the WeBS Office webs@bto.org

WeBS Local Organiser Advisory Committee (LOAC) update

The Local Organiser Advisory Committee (LOAC) provides an opportunity for the Local Organiser and Counter networks to improve communication with WeBS staff, providing ideas, feedback and advice. In June 2024, the WeBS team virtually hosted the 14th annual meeting of the LOAC, the agenda and minutes of which are freely viewable on the BTO website.

There are currently two vacancies on the LOAC for the North and West Scotland and Northern England regions. If any Local

Organisers in these areas are interested in serving on the LOAC and would like to learn more about getting involved, please contact Gill at webs@bto.org.

If you have any comments about any aspects of WeBS that you would like to bring to the attention of the LOAC, please get in touch with your Local Organiser or LOAC regional representatives listed below.

WeBS LOAC Representatives

Eastern England

Chris Gunn
donandchris@hotmail.co.uk

Midlands

Brian Moore
b_moore@ntlworld.com

Northern England

VACANT

Wales

Dan Jenkins-Jones
eastglamwebs@gmail.com

South and East Scotland

Andy Riches
slioch69@aol.com

South West England

Eve Tigwell
eve.tigwell@zen.co.uk

North and West Scotland

VACANT

Northern Ireland

Kerry Mackie
kerrymackie9@gmail.com



Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme (GSMP) Update

The GSMP is a suite of species-specific surveys which monitors the different populations of geese and migrant swans throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland, to provide data for the conservation of their populations.

GSMP survey dates for 2024/25

ICELANDIC-BREEDING GOOSE CENSUS (IGC)

Pink-footed Goose: 12–13 October 2024, 9–10 November 2024 and 22–23 March 2025
Greylag Goose: 9–10 November 2024

Ideally all sites supporting Pink-footed Geese should be covered during the October and November counts, whilst those holding Icelandic Greylag Geese should be covered in November. An additional spring count on Pink-footed Geese takes place every three years and is due this coming spring.

We would like to encourage all counters at sites within the wintering range of Icelandic Greylag Geese to also carry out a count during September if the site also supports British Greylag Geese. September counts are not strictly coordinated but ideally should be carried out during the middle of that month, although any counts made during September will be of value.

If you are unable to count on the above dates, please contact either your GSMP Local Organiser or the GSMP Office so that we may try to arrange cover of your site by another counter.

GREENLAND WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE CENSUS

The census is organised by the Greenland White-fronted Goose Study (<https://greenlandwhitefront.org>). Please contact the organiser Tony Fox (tfo@bios.au.dk) for further details about the census.

Count dates for the 2024/25 census are as follows:

Autumn and spring coordinated censuses:

14–18 December 2024 and 15–19 March 2025.

We very much welcome counts from other dates and times but for the monthly counts, we especially appreciate counts in the following periods:

23–27 November 2024, 18–22 January 2025 and 15–19 February 2025.

IGC LOCAL ORGANISERS NEEDED

We are looking for Local Organisers to coordinate the Icelandic-breeding Goose Counts in Moray Firth, Speyside, Northern Ireland, Aberdeenshire, Angus (excluding Montrose Basin), Lancashire & North Merseyside and Clyde regions. If you are interested in taking on a region, please contact Neil Calbrade: gsmpp@bto.org

GOOSE AND SWAN PHOTOGRAPHS SOUGHT

To aid in the carrying out of age assessments, we are looking to produce some guidance on ageing the different migratory goose and swan species. If you have any good photographs of first-winter Brent, White-fronted, Pink-footed, Barnacle or Bean Geese and Whooper and Bewick's Swans, and also mixed aged flocks, we would love to hear from you. Any photos should include the month they were taken to show how young birds moult through their first winter.

Details about all the GSMP surveys, including how to get involved can be found on the GSMP website at: www.bto.org/gsmpp

AGE ASSESSMENTS

Field-based age assessments were initiated in the 1940s, initially for European White-fronted Geese. This was extended to most other populations between the 1960s and 1980s and currently the two migratory swan species and 11 goose populations native to the UK are all assessed. Annual age assessments are reported in *Waterbirds in the UK*. In 2022/23, we didn't receive any age assessments for European White-fronted Geese or Canadian Light-bellied Brent Geese and would particularly welcome age assessments of these, along with any other species.

The aims of the age assessments are to determine the annual reproductive success of each goose or swan population and are mostly carried out at wintering and autumn stop-over sites. Age assessments of geese and swans comprise two measures of annual reproductive success (or productivity): the proportion of young (first-winter) birds in non-breeding flocks and the average brood size.

Due to differences in plumage characteristics, swans and geese in their first winter are usually easily separated from adult birds, at least for part of the non-breeding season. In many swans and geese, young birds remain in family units with their parents throughout their first winter, and thus it is also possible to measure the number of young produced by successful breeding pairs. Counters, therefore, record the number of young birds present in a flock and also identify family groups making a note of the number of young within each family.

The timing of migration and post-juvenile moult differs between species, meaning that the time period in which data can be collected also varies between species (see below). Plumage differences also vary between species and are more subtle for some species than others, meaning that the level of experience required by the observer is greater.

Details on how to submit age assessments into GSMP Online can be found in *Waterbird News* 39.

Survey periods for age assessments:

Bewick's Swan: November–February (focus on December and mid-January)

Whooper Swan: October–January (focus on mid-January)

Taiga Bean Goose: October–mid November

Pink-footed Goose: mid September–mid November

European White-fronted Goose: October–January (focus on January)

Greenland White-fronted Goose: October–January (focus on December)

Icelandic Greylag Goose: October–mid November (care needed with age identification)

British Greylag Goose: August–September

Barnacle Goose (both populations): October–December

Dark-bellied Brent Goose: September–March (focus on October and November)

Light-bellied Brent Goose (both populations): September–March (focus on October and November)



Keeping track of Greenland Barnacle Geese

By Jess Shaw, NatureScot

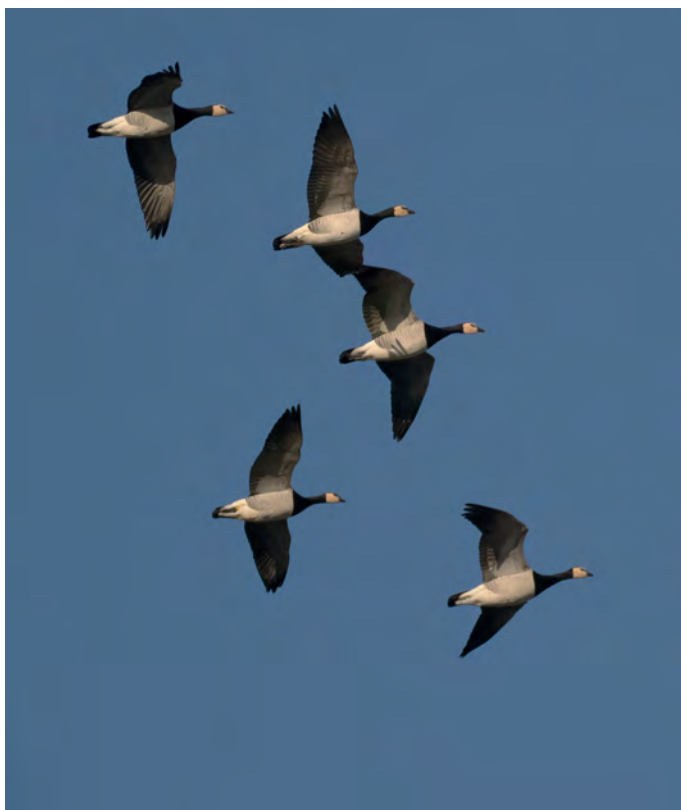
Greenland Barnacle Geese traditionally breed in Greenland, stage in Iceland (although increasing numbers are breeding here too) and spend their winters in western Ireland and northwest Scotland, with the island of Islay the principle wintering resort. Given their affinity for these remote areas, a full population census can only be achieved with a combination of aerial and ground counts – a fairly expensive and logistically intensive undertaking. It involves aerial counts in both Scotland and Ireland (coordinated historically by the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, now by NatureScot, and the National Parks and Wildlife Service respectively), coordinated with ground counts of the main sites, all timed as close to each other as possible – which can be a challenge depending on the changeable spring weather!

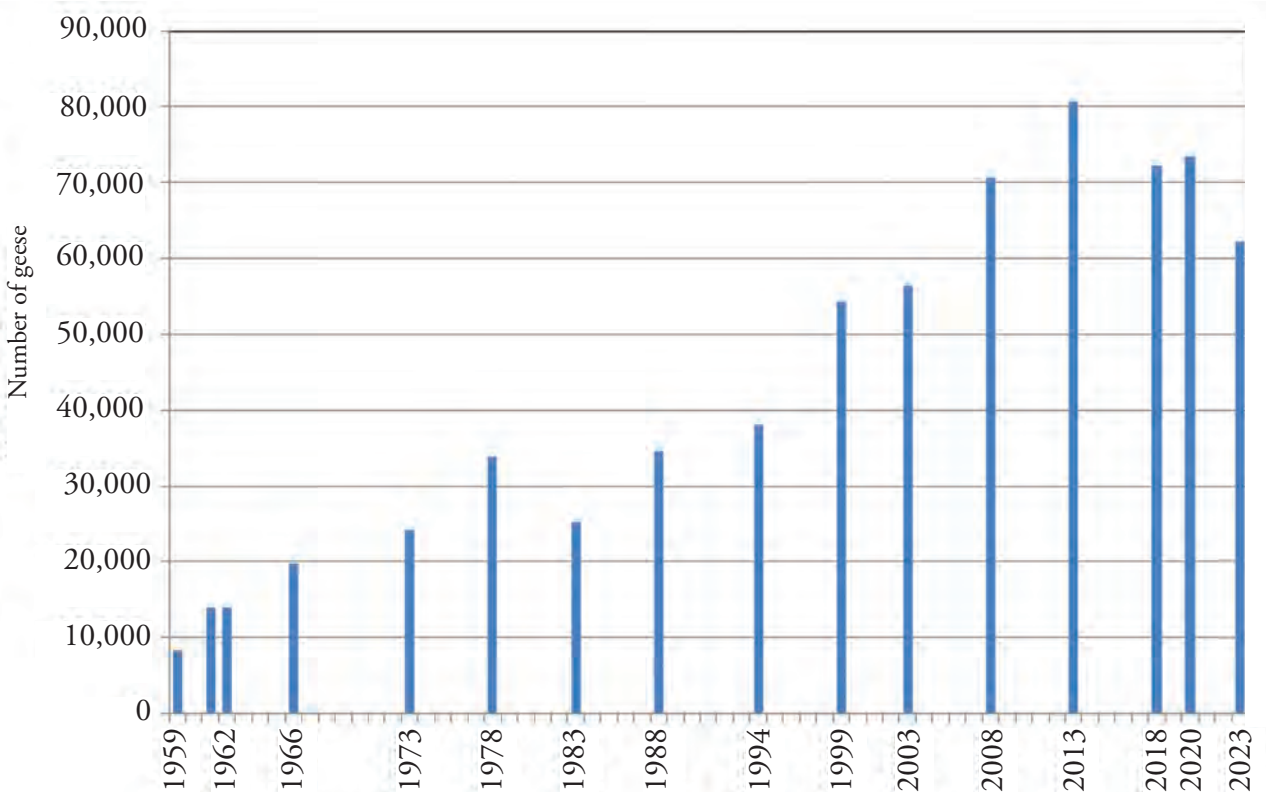
This tried and tested method has been used (generally on a 5 yearly basis) since 1959, and has enabled us to track the increase in the population from a few thousand individuals to a high point of just over 80,000 in 2013, as well as providing valuable information on their distribution and use of protected areas. Different factors have affected these geese over the years, and the census provides critical information to shed light on how these influence the population, and to inform management. For example, with the protection afforded to geese by the introduction of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, as well as an increase

in improved grassland on Islay, the population steadily grew. Conflict with agriculture though also increased, and goose management schemes were implemented to address this problem. Most recently, the Islay Sustainable Goose Management Strategy (2014–2024) was implemented, one aim of which was to reduce damage by reducing the population to a set level on Islay, whilst ensuring conservation objectives were also met. Barnacle Geese are also legal quarry in Iceland, and in recent years, work towards achieving a flyway approach to managing Greenland Barnacle Geese resulted in the development of an AEWA International Single Species Management Plan.

This provided a mandate for developing an Adaptive Flyway Management Programme, including a flyway population model, and through which Range States (particularly the UK and Iceland) are able to coordinate their management actions. The outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza H5N1 in Svalbard Barnacle Geese in October 2021, which subsequently appeared in Greenland birds in January 2022 has also affected the population in recent years. An estimated 2,700 geese died in Ireland and Islay in the 21/22 winter, but the following winter was much worse for the Islay population, with sick and dead birds seen from November 2022 and numbers increasing significantly the following month. Total mortality is unknown, but it could be that around 10,000 birds were lost over the two winters, predominantly on Islay. Given the flyway level coordination now underway, and the recent impact of HPAI, the aim is to conduct the census at 3-yearly intervals to increase the precision of this key data, and so the latest censuses were carried out in 2018, 2020 and 2023.

The most recent data comes from the Greenland Barnacle Goose census of February 2023, towards the end of the HPAI outbreak. While weather conditions made flying difficult, the overall coverage was thought to be good. The flyway total was 62,159 birds, which is a decline of 15.3% compared with the 73,391 birds counted during the previous census in March 2020. The 2023 total in Scotland was 48,332 birds, which is a decline of 16.8% compared with 58,135 birds in March 2020. Over half of the 2023 Scottish population (24,656 birds) was counted on Islay, with other significant numbers counted on the traditional island sites of North Uist (8,737), Tiree & Coll (6,333), Colonsay & Oronsay (2,015) and South Walls (1,419). Thankfully, there was no sign of HPAI in the Greenland birds the following winter, and we hope very much not to see it when the birds return this winter too.





▲ Population estimates of Greenland Barnacle Goose, 1959–2023, derived from the International Barnacle Goose Census.

Backchat...

Wandering sandpiper...

When Caroline Pickett photographed this adult Curlew Sandpiper at the Gann Estuary with black leg flag MAB on 19 June this year, little did she realise just how incredible a sighting this was. Through a large amount of detective work, it was discovered that this bird, a female, was ringed on 27 November 2022 at Puthalam Saltpan - at the southern tip of India! It is amazing that it should end up in Pembrokeshire less than two years later.

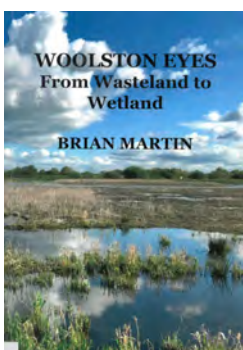


Calling all artists

We are always in need of eye-catching artwork for the cover and inside pages of the annual WeBS/GSMP *Waterbirds in the UK* report. If you have artwork of any WeBS species that you would be happy for us to use, with full credit given of course, please do get in touch.



One for the reading list



If you found the article about Woolston Eyes interesting and want to know more about the development of this amazing site from a neglected wasteland into one of the foremost wetlands in the country, long-time WeBS counter, Brian Martin, has self-published a book 'From Wasteland to Wetland: A History of Woolston Eyes'. This book costs £25 and can be purchased from the Woolston Eyes website www.woolstoneyes.com