

STRANGFORD LOUGH

Internationally important: Mute Swan, Light-bellied Brent Goose, Shelduck, Golden Plover, Knot, Bar-tailed Godwit, Redshank
**Nationally important:
(All-Ireland importance)** Great Crested Grebe, Whooper Swan, Wigeon, Teal, Mallard, Pintail, Shoveler, Eider, Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser, Coot, Oystercatcher, Ringed Plover, Grey Plover, Lapwing, Dunlin, Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew, Greenshank, Turnstone

Site description

Strangford Lough is a large shallow sea lough on the east coast of Northern Ireland, protected as a SPA, a Marine Nature Reserve, and a Ramsar Site. The site includes the Narrows, a deep rocky channel to the Irish Sea. The main body of the lough is sheltered to the east by the Ards Peninsula, and is fed by various rivers and tributaries. Downpatrick and Newtownards are the largest human habitations nearby. Within the lough there are numerous rocky outcrops and small islands. The north of the lough in particular holds extensive intertidal mud and sand flats and there are countless other bays and inlets, and large expanses of open water, providing a wide diversity of habitat. Since 2001, mobile gear fishing has been banned in Strangford Lough to allow populations of the Horse Mussel *Modiolus modiolus* to recover. Static fishing and catching of crustaceans still occurs. There is some recreational activity within the lough, including sailing. Despite the enormity of Strangford Lough, dedicated counters are able to count along the majority of its shoreline, and do so at low tide annually - an impressive achievement.

Bird distribution

Both Little and Great Crested Grebes were found around the mouth of the Narrows and in the southwest corner near Castle Island; additional concentrations of Great Crested were found off the Comber River, whilst Little Grebe was more frequent in Ardmillan Bay at low tide. Most Cormorants were distributed within the Strangford Narrows, with other aggregations further north into the lough. Shag were also present in the Narrows, with further birds along the southeastern shore and around the western islands. A single Little Egret again appeared at Strangford Lough. Grey Herons were patchily distributed around the shallows of the lough.

The greatest concentration of Mute Swans was found in Ardmillan Bay. Canada Geese were confined largely to the areas off the western islands, whilst re-established Greylags were most densely distributed west of Chapel Island. Light-bellied Brent Geese peaked at 13,502 in November, a high count in line with

record numbers recorded by the dedicated census this autumn. Numbers dwindled throughout the winter as birds moved away from this key arrival site to winter more widely around the Irish coast. Within Strangford Lough, the species is fairly abundant throughout but especially on the northern intertidal flats.

Shelduck numbers also declined through the winter; the species was distributed across most of the flats within the lough, although once more the very north was most heavily exploited. Pockets of dense Wigeon distribution around the lough were notable at Castleward Bay, south of Gores Island, between the Comber River and Mahee Island, and near Greyabbey. Gadwall were confined largely to Castleward Bay. Teal distribution was patchy, with some flocks in the Narrows, and others in bays and shallows around the lough, especially near Mahee Island and the Comber River outflow. Mallard densities were highest in the traditionally favoured locations of Castleward Bay and the area around Danes Point. Pintails were restricted to Ardmillan Bay, the north near Ballyreagh, and the areas around Greyabbey. Shovelers were similarly restricted, the majority of birds recorded around the mouth of the Comber River. Eider and Goldeneye were concentrated along the northwest shore, around Mahee Island and at the Yellow Rocks area in the east. Red-breasted Mergansers were concentrated at Castleward Bay and Ballymorran Bay, with scattered groups elsewhere including from Danes Point to Gores Island in the southwest corner (Figure 67).

Oystercatchers were ubiquitous, with dense concentrations in the north of the lough and along the mid-shore. Ringed Plovers typically favoured Ringcreevy and the Narrows. The majority of Golden Plovers were present in dense flocks on the extensive intertidal zone in the far north of the lough, as well as flats near Ballymorran Bay, Chapel Island, Yellow Rocks and the Narrows. The much scarcer Grey Plovers were around the Greyabbey islands and near the Comber mouth. Lapwings were ubiquitous around the lough. Knot distribution was similar to that seen recently, most birds being concentrated on the flats

between Paddy's Point and Ballyreagh, although numbers were relatively low this year. Dunlin occurred on most intertidal habitat within the lough (Figure 67), with notable exceptions at Ardmillan Bay and along the south shore. Black-tailed Godwits were found mostly at the mouth of the Comber, with a few in Ballymorran Bay. The more abundant Bar-tailed Godwit was found in greatest concentrations at Castle Espie and Butterlump Stone. Curlew and Redshank were evenly

spread around the lough. Greenshank were found in isolated patches, notably Ardmillan Bay and out to Mahee Island. Turnstones were recorded on the rocky shores of the Narrows, and also on sectors of intertidal habitat in the north of the lough. Additional species seen throughout the winter in small numbers included Black-necked Grebe, Great Northern Diver, Whooper Swan, Pochard, Scaup, Snipe, Jack Snipe, Purple Sandpiper and Common Sandpiper.

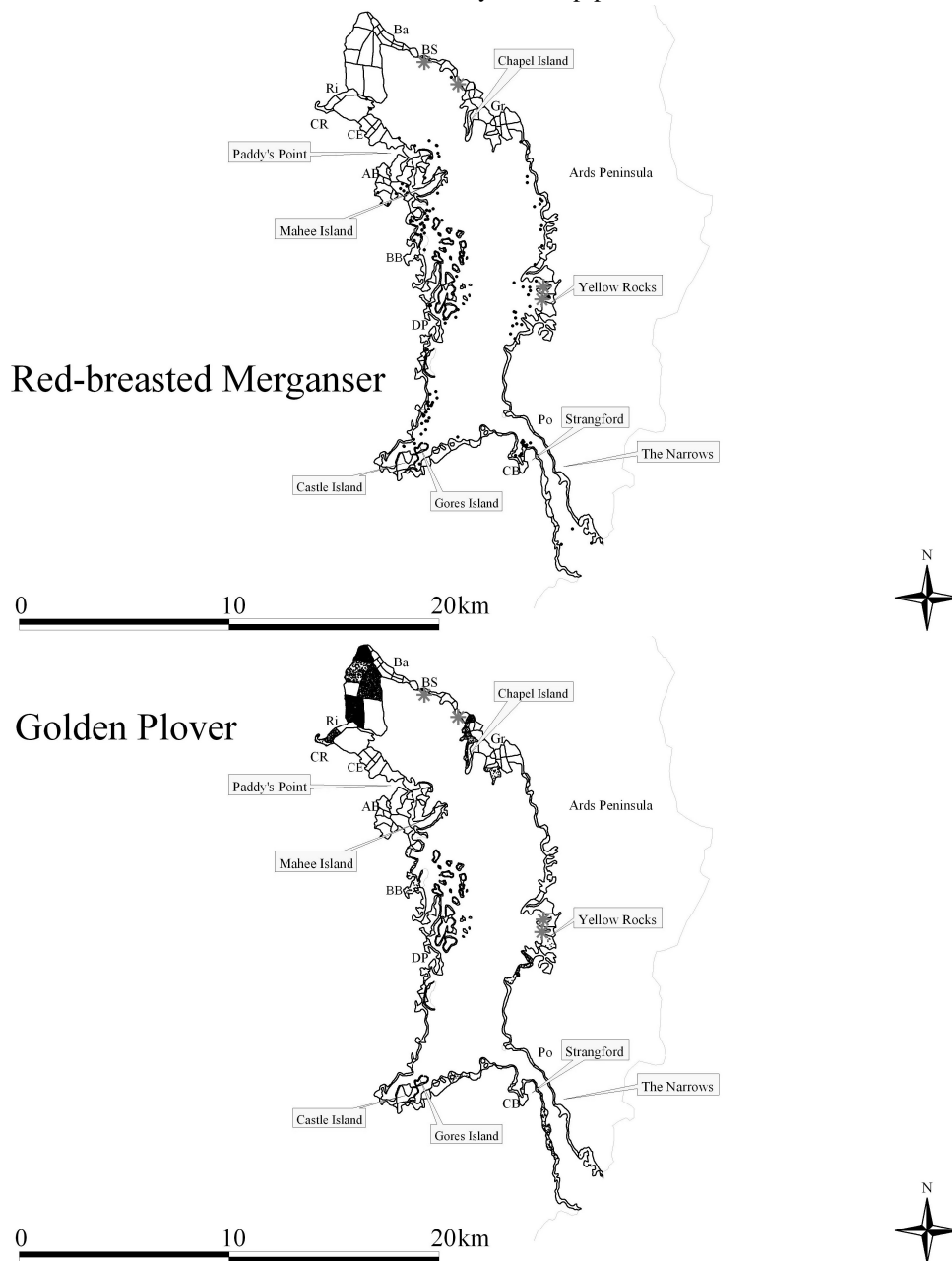


Figure 67. WeBS Low Tide Count distributions of Red-breasted Merganser and Golden Plover at Strangford Lough, winter 2003/04 (AB=Ardmillan Bay, Ba=Ballyreagh, BB=Ballymorran Bay, BS=Butterlump Stone, CB=Castleward Bay, CE=Castle Espie, CR=Comber River, DP=Danes Point, Gr=Greyabbey, Po=Portaferry, Ri=Ringcreevy).