

LATEST NEWS FROM THE WEBS FRONT

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Mark Collier, Steve Holloway and Andy Musgrove, from the BTO's WeBS team, review the findings for winter 2003/04.

ULTIMAS NOTICIAS DEL PROGRAMA WEBS

Mark Collier, Steve Holloway y Andy Musgrove, del equipo WeBS del BTO, revisan los resultados del invierno 2003-04.

The 2003/04 season was a very successful one for the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) core counts, with counts carried out at around 2,000 sites within the UK during the crucial 'winter' period of September to March. At least 1,500 sites were counted in each of these months, with almost 1,200 covered every month throughout this period. Altogether around 3,000 counters were involved at some time or other. We highlight some of the main findings.

DIVERS AND GREBES

Both Black-throated and Great Northern Divers were recorded in similar numbers to those of the previous winter, whilst the totals of Red-throated Diver were somewhat lower than recent years. Interestingly, very large numbers were recorded flying past Thorpeness, on the Suffolk coast, including an incredible peak of 4,710 on 4 January 2004. The numbers of both Little and Great Crested Grebe continued at their current high levels, having increased most years since their inclusion as WeBS species in 1982/83. In contrast, the counts of two of our rarer wintering grebes — Red-necked and Black-necked — were both at their lowest ever and the maximum count of the latter was just

under half that of winter 2002/03.

CORMORANTS, HERONS AND EGRETS

Numbers of Cormorant, Grey Heron and Little Egret all continued their recent increase, albeit on a small scale for the first two species.

SWANS AND GEESE

There were mixed fortunes among the swans with no change for Mute Swan, an increase for Whooper Swan and a slight decline for Bewick's Swan. However, Bewick's recorded the highest single site total ever in the UK with 6,330 individuals on the Ouse Washes in early January; although this was not an official WeBS count. The numbers of Whooper Swan showed an increase of 35% over the previous winter, with the Ouse Washes, Martin Mere and the Ribble Estuary the most important sites. Fewer European and Greenland White-fronted Geese were recorded than during 2002/03, both totals falling by around 20%. In contrast, counts of Pink-footed Geese remained high and totals of Icelandic Greylag, Canada and Barnacle Geese did not differ greatly from the previous winter.

During recent years there has been concern expressed over the apparent decline in the numbers of Darkbellied Brent Goose around our shores, and this trend continued during the 2003/ 04 winter, and resulted in the lowest total for over 20 years. The most serious declines were evident from the North Norfolk Coast, Blackwater Estuary, Pagham Harbour, the Beaulieu Estuary and the Medway Estuary. Although the reasons for this decline are not entirely understood, fledging success over recent years has fallen below the 15% level needed to maintain the population. However, there was better news regarding the 2003 breeding season, and this was reflected in a greater number of family parties sighted during winter 2003/04.

Lindisfarne and Strangford Lough recorded an increase of around 10% in both the Svalbard and East Canadian High Arctic populations of Pale-bellied Brent Geese respectively, with a site record of over 21,000 geese at the latter wetland in October.

DUCKS

The winter populations of Shelduck, Teal, Mallard and Pintail recorded by WeBS were each similar to those of the previous winter. This is in contrast to Gadwall, which continued its long-term increase and reached record levels at

over 16,800 individuals in December. The Gadwall is a widespread and increasing species throughout much of the UK, although the stronghold remains central and southern England. The wintering population includes birds from north and east Europe, whilst some of the UK breeding population, which is currently estimated at less than 1,000 breeding pairs, winter in southern Europe. Despite some fluctuation in recent years there has been an approximate doubling of the numbers in this species recorded by WeBS during the last 10 years (Figure 1). Similar population growth has been reported across Europe. Numbers recorded in Northern Ireland were slightly higher than the previous winter, although the species is still scarcer here than in much of the rest of the UK.

Over the past couple of years similar patterns have been evident in the peak counts of Tufted Duck, Scaup, Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser and Goosander. Following unusually low totals of these species in 2002/03, numbers recovered in 2003/04, although all remain below their average of recent years. Shoveler numbers fell by around 20% from their record peak of 2002/03 whilst, conversely, Wigeon rose by a similar amount to reach 497,000, their highest total to date. On the minus side, declines were recorded in several other duck species, most notably Pochard, Common Scoter and Velvet Scoter. The government's Ruddy Duck control

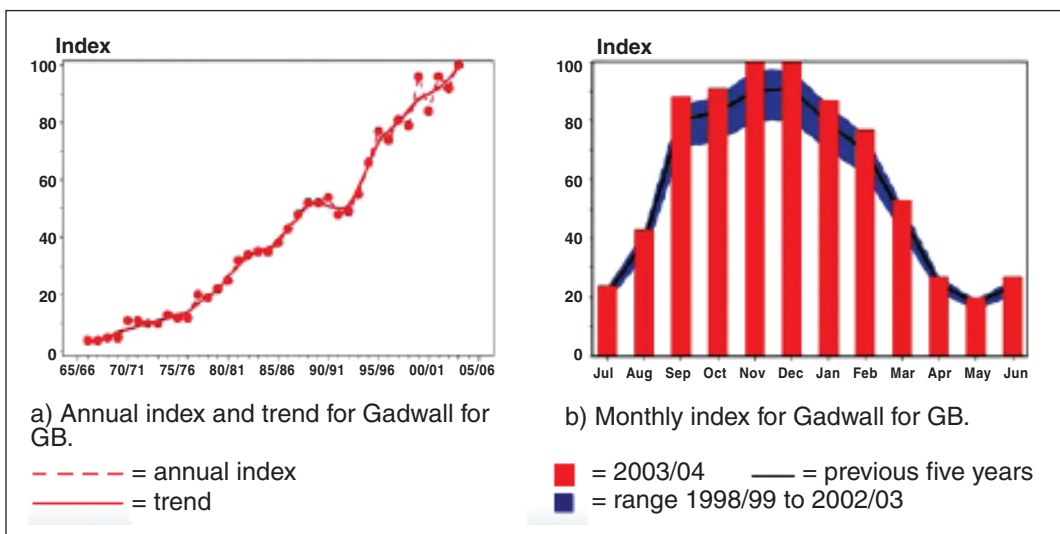


FIGURE 1. Annual and monthly indices for Gadwall.

programme may have contributed to WeBS counters recording its lowest total for eight years.

WADERS

Following a Europe-wide trend, Avocet numbers continued to increase in the UK, both as a breeding species and as a wintering one. Many of the British breeding birds winter between southern Europe and West Africa, whilst our wintering population comprises both remaining breeders and birds from the nearby continent. Britain has experienced a dramatic increase in Avocet numbers over the past 15 years, with nearly 6,000 recorded in December. With this rise, annual indices have more than doubled in the last decade, with 2003/04 seeing a 12% increase on the preceding year. Of the 18 sites that held numbers exceeding the national 1% threshold, 14 were in eastern England, underlining this region's status as the heart of the UK range.

Other species of wader exhibited varying fortunes. Counts of both Oystercatcher and Ringed Plover were slightly below those of the previous year and Grey Plover continued its recent downward trend to a population level more akin to that of 1989/90. More encouragingly, Golden Plover and Lapwing totals both rose by a quarter, although, as ever, large numbers of both these plovers regularly occur on nonwetland habitats that are not covered by WeBS. Knot numbers remained similar to those of 2002/03. The British index for Sanderling fell to its lowest level for over half a decade. Notably, although the overall British Turnstone index has been in steady decline since

the high point in 1987/88, there has been an increase over the past two winters in Northern Ireland. Dunlin, Curlew and Redshank counts remained fairly stable, and similar to recent winters, whilst a fall in Bar-tailed Godwit numbers was well within the variability exhibited by the species over recent years. By way of a contrast, Black-tailed Godwit continued its 20-year increase in numbers. The majority of non-breeding Black-tailed Godwits recorded in Great Britain and Northern Ireland are of Icelandic origin (*islandica*). However, a small proportion of passage birds are of the nominate race, occurring mainly in the east and south of England, where small numbers also breed. The species has shown a less consistent increase in Northern Ireland, although index values have risen consecutively for the past three years, and the current value represents the highest ever reported. Peak counts were recorded during autumn passage (August to October) in Great Britain and during November in Northern Ireland.

The forthcoming *Wildfowl and Wader Counts* will cover the fortunes of all species in more detail, and is sent free to all participating counters. In the future, these reports will also be available on the BTO website at www.bto.org/survey/webs/index.htm. The WeBS Office can be contacted by e-mail at webs@bto.org.

The Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) is entirely dependent on the many thousands of dedicated volunteer ornithologists who supply the data and to whom we are extremely grateful. The Local Organisers who coordinate these counts deserve special thanks for their contribution. WeBS is a joint scheme of the BTO, Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, RSPB and JNCC.