

WEBS FEAT WORTH CELEBRATING

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For 60 years volunteer counters have kept tabs on the ups and downs of Britain's waterbirds to aid species and habitat conservation. *Mark Collier* explains the value of this impressive long-term contribution.

CELEBRACION DE UN HITO EN EL PROGRAMA WEBS

Durante 60 años los censadores voluntarios han registrado las subidas y bajadas de las aves acuáticas del Reino Unido para promover la conservación de especies y sus hábitats. *Mark Collier* explica el valor de esta impresionante contribución de largo plazo.

If you visit the Norfolk coast on a regular basis, you will be aware that once-rare species such as Little Egret and Avocet are becoming increasingly abundant. That's not headline news and is the type of information that we often take for granted, but what about a much more numerous species such as Dunlin? Is it doing better or worse than ten years ago?

To answer such questions we must have figures to substantiate our observations – not just for the present, but historically. For the last 60 years, this is what the BTO/WWT/RSPB/JNCC Wetland Bird Survey, better known as WeBS, has been doing.

DEDICATED VOLUNTEERS

A dedicated army of up to 3,000 volunteers, including many BTO members, covers more than 2,000 sites nationwide, though in January 2006 half of the 3.5 million waterbirds counted were recorded at just 20 key sites. In addition, almost 200 sites throughout the UK held internationally important numbers of at least one waterbird species.

ESSENTIAL WATERBIRD INFORMATION

WeBS data from key areas, such as The Wash and Morecambe Bay, are used to assess any changes in waterbird numbers at these and other designated sites and highlight cases of severe declines for further investigation.

Author Mark Collier says; "Continued monitoring helps us understand the impact of habitat loss and climate change on wetland birds." To answer the question about Dunlin posed earlier, WeBS data indicates an eastward shift in the wintering population, following a decline in southwest England since the mid-1980s (see Fig.1). In 2005/06 this decline was reflected throughout Britain and nationally numbers of wintering Dunlin fell to the lowest-ever level.

"There is some good news though. Following a ten-year decline, Dark-bellied Brent Goose numbers have risen in the past two years with numbers at the principal site, The Wash, currently the second highest for 15 years."

However, WeBS is more than simply

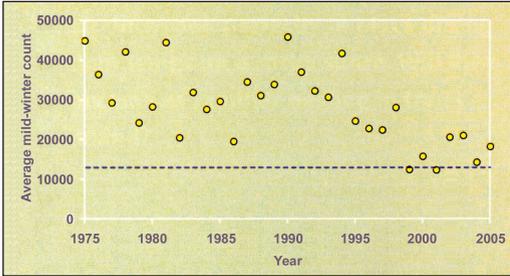


FIGURE 1. Average winter numbers of Dunlin on the Severn Estuary. The international importance threshold (1% of the flyway population) for this species is 13,300 (dashed line).

monitoring the UK’s most important sites. By counting at numerous smaller sites, WeBS can detect changes in widespread species such as Mallard, which were recorded on more than 90% of sites counted during 2005/06. Nationally WeBS data can reveal patterns such as the increases in Gadwall, Teal and Shoveler and the declines of both Red-breasted Merganser and Goosander.

In addition, regional differences can be uncovered: a recent decline of Tufted Duck in Northern Ireland is being mirrored by increasing numbers in Britain (Fig. 2).

VOLUNTEERS COMMENT

For Muriel Cadwallender in Northumberland, WeBS surveys have been a way of life since 1979. For most of that time she has counted birds along the beautiful coastline between Bamburgh and Beadnell Bay. “It’s a great excuse to get out of the house and enjoy some guilt-free birding,” she explains. “By checking on a monthly basis, I become aware of the gradual changes in the bird

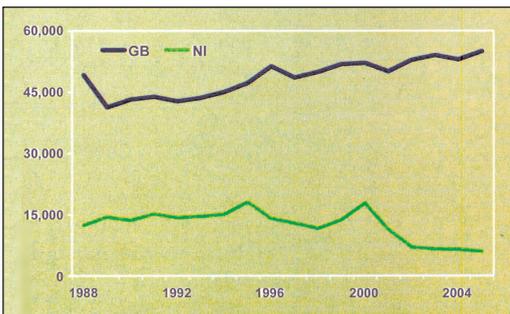
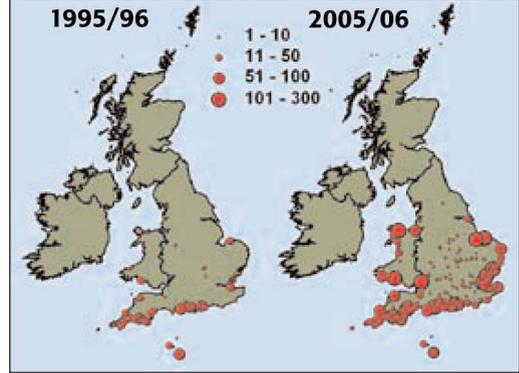


FIGURE 2. Tufted duck numbers in GB and Northern Ireland.



The number of Little Egrets recorded on WeBS sites.

populations – for most waders, numbers have been fairly static though it is clear Purple Sandpipers have been declining here.”

As well as the glow of satisfaction that comes by contributing to a nationwide survey, the extra activity means there is always the chance of an unusual sighting. During a May count in 1983, Muriel says she saw a wader showing white trailing edges to its wings. Having seen no Redshanks that day, she looked harder and was rewarded with the record of Collared Pratincole, a species that lives in the Mediterranean region.

Tim Appleton, the reserve manager at Rutland Water, is another long-serving volunteer. “We’ve been conducting WeBS counts here since the reserve opened in 1975 and the dozen or so of us who participate regularly still get a buzz from it. There is a shared sense of camaraderie and excitement every time we do a count.

“Speaking in a professional capacity, the WeBS data were critical to Rutland Water getting its Ramsar and Special Protection Area designations, which in turn underpins the investment in conservation that has been made here over many years. I would urge all birdwatchers to get involved and ensure the next 60 years of monitoring are just as productive,” he said.

HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED

Contrary to popular belief, you don’t have to live near the coast or even a large water body to participate in WeBS. Small wetland sites – gravel pits, lakes, sewage works, rivers or canals – are vital for waterbirds and need monitoring. For further information visit www.bto.org/webs or

e-mail webs@bto.org. Every year WeBS results are published in *Waterbirds in the UK* and this report is sent to all volunteers in appreciation for

their hard work. It can also be accessed online at www.bto.org/webs – the report for 2005/06 will be available later this year.

THE WETLAND BIRD SURVEY

– MONITORING THE UK'S WATERBIRDS FOR 60 YEARS

The Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS), the monitoring scheme for non-breeding waterbirds in the UK, aims to provide the principal data for the conservation of their populations and wetland habitats. The data are used to assess the size of waterbird populations, determine trends in numbers and distribution, and assess the importance of individual sites for waterbirds, in line with the requirements of international conservation conventions and directives.

Continuing a tradition begun in 1947, around 3,000 volunteer counters participate in synchronised monthly counts at wetlands of all habitat types, mainly during the winter period. The importance of counts at smaller sites cannot be overstated and are essential for monitoring widespread species such as Little Grebe and Teal.

WeBS is a partnership between the British Trust for Ornithology, the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee.