

MILDER WINTERS DRIVE CHANGE

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WeBS Research Officer, *Mark Collier*, describes the 2006/2007 winter for waterbirds, with results from the WeBS Annual Report hot off the press.

INVIERNOS SUAVES GENERAN CAMBIOS

Mark Collier, oficial de investigación de WeBS, describe el invierno 2006/2007 para aves acuáticas, con los resultados del informe anual de WeBS recién salidos de la imprenta.

Autumn may mean the end of summer signalled by the departure of migrants such as Swallow and Whitethroat for many, but as these species are starting their journey south thousands of other birds are doing the same, although instead of heading for the African sun are travelling towards Britain for the winter. The majority of these species are waterbirds and, every year BTO/WWT/RSPB/JNCC Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) volunteers carefully monitor their numbers at a variety of wetland sites across the UK.

MILD WEATHER AFFECTS NUMBERS

On the whole, the 2006/07 winter was fairly mild across much of Britain and this is likely to have contributed to the low numbers of Bewick's and Whooper Swans in the country during this period. Bewick's Swan numbers in Britain were around half those of the previous year and the lowest for thirty years. Much of this decline was due to low numbers at the country's key site, the Ouse Washes, but evidence was also seen further afield. Information from the Dutch waterbird monitoring scheme revealed that fewer birds were present in The Netherlands as well and that many of these had started leaving

eastwards by the end of December; a whole month earlier than twenty years ago.

The numbers of several goose species counted were also lower than in recent years, although for differing reasons. Peak numbers of Pink-footed Geese fell considerably, as fewer birds used some of the main winter roosts in north Norfolk and eastern Scotland. Numbers of European White-fronted Geese also fell but this was due to fewer birds wintering in Britain and whilst lower breeding success will have had an influence on the low numbers seen in 2006/07, it is likely that a continuing shift in the wintering range eastwards onto the continent, due to milder winters, is the most important factor driving this change. Greenland White-fronted Geese, which winter predominantly on Islay, declined by over 10% compared to the previous year and reflects a genuine population decline. A few increases were noted, however; in Greenland Barnacle Geese at several key sites, including the principal site for this population on Islay, and in Dark-bellied Brent Geese.

MORE WATER - FEWER DUCKS

Following several years of steady growth, numbers of wintering Wigeon fell in Britain by over 20% with numbers at several key sites,

most notably the Ouse Washes, lower than usual. As for several other species of wildfowl, such as Gadwall, Teal, Pintail and Shoveler, high water levels at the Ouse Washes during 2006/07 proved unfavourable and are thought to explain the dramatic changes in wildfowl numbers at this key site. The long-term decline of Mallard continued in 2006/07 and although the reasons for this are unclear may include fewer winter immigrants, poor breeding success, fewer released birds and fewer cold weather aggregations.

Despite the general fall in wildfowl numbers not all species were in decline nationally, numbers of most diving duck were similar to those of recent years. Also, in August 2006 the number of Little Egret counted by WeBS outnumbered those of Grey Heron for the first time with almost 3,500 birds being recorded. Peak numbers at both the Thames Estuary and The Wash exceeded 300 birds and up to 133 were counted at Lavan Sands in North Wales. Avocet continued their long-term increase and in February 2007 reached record levels (Fig 1). Other waders on the increase included Sanderling, Greenshank and Black-tailed Godwit, the latter reaching a new all-time high. Declines were noted in Grey Plover, Lapwing, Knot, Dunlin, Bar-tailed Godwit and Redshank. In common with several of the goose species the reasons for these declines could include a change in bias in the wintering range, both locally and at the flyway level as well as population decline.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Counts from an incredible 3,825 count sectors across Great Britain and Northern Ireland are included in 'Waterbirds in the UK 2006/07'. This represents a tremendous effort by WeBS volunteers who between them counted over 3.2 million waterbirds in December alone. It is only through this hard work and dedication that WeBS is able to provide the firm background of data that is used for a whole variety of applications including site protection, species conservation and climate change research.

BTO/WWT/RSPB/JNCC 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 -the last on behalf of Natural England, Scottish Natural Heritage, the Countryside Council for Wales and the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside (Northern Ireland), and the Environment and Heritage Service (Northern Ireland).

FIND OUT MORE

For further information about WeBS and to download the complete Waterbirds in the UK 2006/07 visit www.bto.org/webs or E-mail webs@bto.org

Austin, G.E., Collier, M.P., Calbrade, N.A., Hall, C. & Musgrove, A.J. 2008. Waterbirds in the UK 2006/07: The Wetland Bird Survey. BTO/WWT/RSPB/JNCC, Thetford.

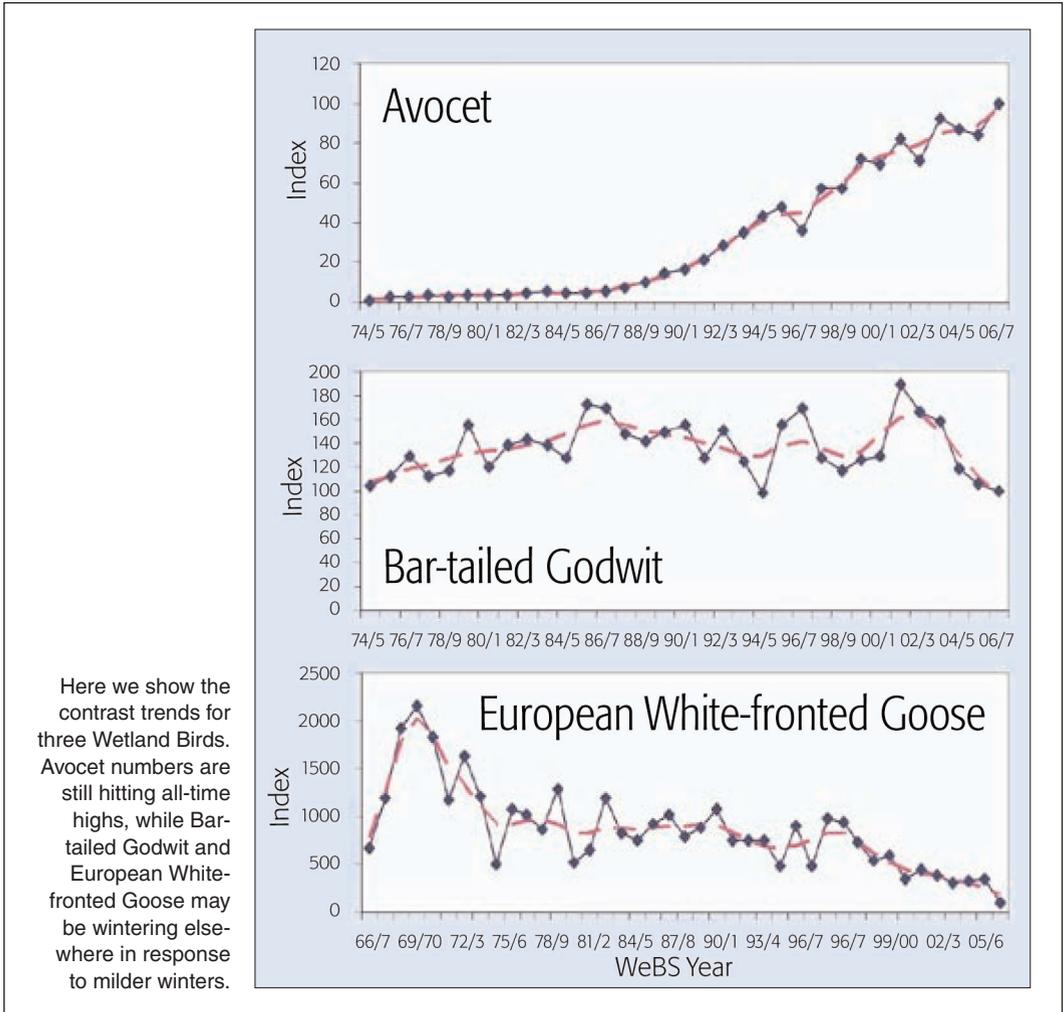


Figure 1. Wetland Bird Trends in Focus.