



Curlew recovery programme

With their amazing curved bills, long legs and resonating calls, curlews are one of our most charismatic birds - and also one of our most important.



Overview

Easily spotted at coastal sites during the winter, Europe's largest wading bird feeds in groups on tidal mudflats, saltmarshes and nearby farmland.

During the spring and summer, curlews migrate to their breeding grounds – mostly in upland areas – raising their chicks in areas of rough pasture, heather moorland and wetlands.

Though formerly widespread across the UK, breeding populations are increasingly concentrated in upland areas – former breeding haunts in lowland areas have largely been lost due to changing farming practices.

During the breeding season, males deliver a loud and impressive 'bubbling' song to attract mates and defend their territories. This atmospheric song is surely one of the most evocative sounds of the British countryside.

International importance of UK population

There are around 68,000 pairs of breeding curlews in the UK – between 19 and 27 per cent of the global breeding population.

Whilst some of 'our' birds spend the winter in Ireland and France, we receive an influx of Scandinavian-breeding curlews, here taking advantage of our relatively mild winter. This means there are around 150,000 birds during the winter.

This means the UK is arguably the most important country for curlews in the world.

Curlews are in trouble

Curlews breed across northern Europe and Russia, as far east as Lake Baikal.

Unfortunately, national bird monitoring schemes show breeding populations are declining sharply across much of their range.

In 2008, curlews were deemed of global conservation concern and became listed as Near Threatened on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Steep declines have been particularly evident in the UK. Between 1995 and 2012, the breeding populations declined by 55 per cent in Scotland and 30 per cent in England.

Elsewhere in the UK, the population has declined by 81 per cent in Wales (between 1993 and 2006) and by 82 per cent in Northern Ireland (between 1985-87 and 2013).

The results of the latest Breeding Bird Atlas produced by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) found the breeding range has declined by 17 per cent in mainland Britain and a staggering 78 per cent in Ireland.

Curlews are in real trouble. Regional and possibly even country-level extinctions are now a possibility.

While curlews are declining across the countryside as a whole, it is of note that they are faring better within some upland areas where management for grouse shooting is practised.

What's the problem?

A significant amount of research has gone into investigating curlew populations and reasons behind their declining numbers.

The evidence to date suggests declines are largely due to poor breeding success alongside the loss of breeding grounds.

Like many wading birds, curlews lay their eggs in a nest on the ground – known as a 'scrape'. The parents incubate the eggs for about four weeks, before the young leave the nest and roam around with their parents for a further four weeks, until fledging.

Studies from across Europe have found that in most cases breeding pairs are failing to raise enough young to maintain stable populations.

Egg predation by mammals and birds has emerged as a key factor behind poor breeding success. However, this abundance of predation is in itself associated with changes in land-use and management.

Farming is essential to maintain the mosaic of grassland and wetland habitats curlews need, but large-scale grassland improvement ultimately leads to the degradation and eventual loss of breeding habitat. Changes in grazing pressure can also have a more direct impact in the form of nest trampling by livestock.

Other changes in land use can lead to loss and fragmentation of breeding habitat, especially forestry. Whilst predation may not be the only factor driving the decline, it is clear that in some areas where predators are controlled, curlew populations are faring better.

The RSPB, along with the UK's statutory nature conservation agencies, believe the curlew should now be considered the UK's highest conservation priority bird species and a recovery programme is urgently required.

Efforts made to save our curlew population will play a critical role in the global conservation efforts. Conserving and managing the mosaic of habitats required by breeding curlews is likely to benefit a wide range of other flora and fauna.

Objectives

- Raise awareness of the curlew's plight and build support for conservation
- Develop an understanding of the management practices required to reverse curlew population declines across the landscape through the implementation of a trial management study
- Work with others, especially land managers and statutory nature conservation bodies to target conservation efforts across the curlew's range.

Progress

- In spring 2013, the RSPB held a cross-UK summit to review the curlew's status, consider the available research and think how we improve their conservation status.
- In spring 2014, we convened a meeting with UK and Irish nature conservation organisations to develop and agree on a conservation programme for the UK and Ireland. Attendees included BirdWatch Ireland, SNH, Natural England, Natural Resources Wales, Northern Ireland Environment Agency and JNCC.
- In parallel to work at home, the RSPB coordinated an international conservation plan. Developed under the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA), it provides a framework for conservation action across the curlew's range - including northern Europe and Russia as well as important non-breeding countries in Africa and the Middle East. The plan was published in November 2015.
- The Trial Management Project is a key part of the Curlew Recovery Programme. A total of six sites have been identified across Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland where we will test the habitat management and predator control interventions required to inform the development of 'curlew-friendly' land management options. In addition to monitoring how curlew respond to the changes we make on these trial sites, we will monitor how curlew are doing on linked 'control' sites which do not have the enhanced management. Baseline monitoring at the sites was undertaken during the breeding season in 2015.
- In spring 2016, an Ireland and UK curlew action group was established to shape, drive and integrate a co-ordinated conservation programme of work with the aim of improving the conservation status of the curlew. Participants include BirdWatch Ireland, BTO, SNH, Natural England, Natural Resources Wales, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Northern Ireland and JNCC.

Planned Work

- The Trial Management Project will continue to deliver habitat management and predator control across the six sites. The curlew response will be monitored annually.
- The recovery programme will develop best practice management advice to support advisors and nature reserve managers. This includes hosting a series of open days on each of the trial management sites. These will showcase our aims for the programme.

Results

The project has just started, so results will be available further into the project.

Funding

The programme will trial and develop a package of measures to improve the breeding performance of curlew and will cost in excess of one million pounds over five years with costs covered by RSPB core funds, donations and grants.

Contacts



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Further reading

- [Bird guide: curlew](#)