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Your regional stone-curlew project newsletter

Issue no 08 Winter 2015/2016

Chalk Country

Ian Grier

Another bumper year for stone-curlews!

2015 was another highly productive year for stone-curlew, building on the success recorded in 2014.

The number of pairs and chicks recorded was up again this year, with 91 young confirmed fledging from 130 pairs. It appears that last year's bumper productivity may have added to the population, and another mild summer presented suitable breeding conditions for the birds, who found plenty of insect food to feed their chicks.

As ever, habitat management by farmers and landowners was crucial in providing a network of fallow plots across the Wessex area, and we carried out some further research into how management of these plots could be enhanced in the future. This work continues, with the same techniques being trialled to give us a more robust data set on which to base our conclusions.

In addition, we will be looking at how the survey work may change going forward. As the population increases it becomes harder to continue with intensive monitoring, and there may be different ways to assess the size and health of the population, such as co-ordinated roost counts or national surveys every few years instead of annual monitoring. These need to be fully investigated and tested, in the hope that we can make the UK stone-curlew population more sustainable without such dependence on intervention.

Our roost counts in 2015 recorded a number of individuals staying in the UK much later than usual, with a flock of 16 at our reserve at Winterbourne Downs on 10 November. The final sighting came on 20 November, which is an exceptional record given that the 2007 'Birds of Wiltshire' cites the 13 November 1954 as the latest recorded observation of the stone-curlew in Wiltshire.

For more information please contact Nick Tomalin, Wessex Farmland Projects Manager on 01722 333019 or nick.tomalin@rspb.org.uk



Nick Tomalin

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Wiltshire reserves

Patrick Cashman



Two new fallow plots for ground nesting birds were created at RSPB Winterbourne Downs in 2015, meaning that there is now enough nesting habitat for up to nine pairs of stone-curlew.

Five pairs nested - although we had some double brooding - there was an unfortunate number of nest failures resulting in fledging success below the Wessex average. 10 pairs of lapwing also had a disappointing fledging success. Monitoring is planned for the coming season to assess whether local predation or disturbance are affecting this performance.

Corn buntings held at least eight territories, and we have regular observations of grey partridge in four locations. We have had a good year for small tortoiseshells and marbled white butterflies and even hummingbird hawkmoths nectaring in our new chalk grasslands. Most notable has been the hundreds of small blue butterflies on the wing,

with some over 2km away from the original colony. It has especially rewarding to see them on the new chalk butterfly banks. Orchids too have been on the march with green-winged, common-spotted and pyramidal orchid seen this year in four fields that were previously in crop production.

The Save Our Magnificent Meadows "Presenting Chalk Grasslands to the Public" project has proved successful with Magnificent Meadows tours at Winterbourne Downs and a Wildflower Folklore event to help celebrate National Meadows day. We also held a training event about chalk grassland wildflowers and management facilitated by *Flora Locale* entitled "Foraging for Wildflowers".

Over 80 children from two local schools were truly inspired by their encounters with wildlife during Magnificent Meadows tours of Winterbourne Downs in July. These events were rightly named 'Meadow Mayhem' and were highly successful.

New warden

Nicky Quinn joins the Wiltshire reserves team.

It has been all change on the wardening front with Keeley Spate, our Wiltshire reserves warden for the last four years leaving in April to move to Gloucestershire. We had the good services of Toby Branston, the Dorset Reserves Ecology Manager, who kept the wheels turning on secondment during the summer. We now start 2016 welcoming Nicky Quinn as our new warden for the RSPB Wiltshire reserves. Nicky has been a warden with the Malvern Hills Conservators in Worcestershire, and is excited to join us in contributing to the management of this beautiful part of the country.



Patrick Cashman

In late August, 15 acres of semi-improved permanent pasture was enriched with green hay. This was cut and harvested from one of the new flower-rich chalk grasslands and transported via muck spreaders which then fired the green hay out onto the receptor field to be rolled in.

An amended HLS agreement is helping fund the final phase of chalk grasslands over the next two years at Winterbourne Downs, with an extra 25 acres of new chalk grassland sown in mid-October on former arable land. The majority of the seed was collected using the RSPB combine harvester from existing species-rich grasslands at Winterbourne Downs, topped up by key species such as glaucous sedge, saw-wort, dropwort and orchids collected by volunteers, and brush-harvested seed from Salisbury Plain.

For more information please contact Patrick Cashman, Site Manager- Wiltshire Reserves on 01980 629845 or patrick.cashman@rspb.org.uk

Patrick Cashman



Farming for lapwing

Case study

Farmer Henry Edmunds explains why he helps protect lapwing on his land.

When I question fellow agriculturalists concerning the status of lapwings on their farm, the usual response is “we used to have them but...”. The simple fact is that the demise of mixed farming as the arbiter of the English landscape has been catastrophic for these ground nesting birds, with little pasture and few spring crops. They are now seeking to survive in an alien habitat. Many farmers are trying to help them with the provision of nesting plots in the new arable landscape; but this is not enough on its own. These are just one element in a management strategy that must be planned and applied with all the care that many lavish on that four tonnes per acre crop of wheat.

Over the past 30 years, I have honed a scheme for lapwings that can be very successful. The first priority is to identify where your birds are nesting and then provide electric fencing protection around the nesting area. A single wire, run around the nest, about 40 yards away and about eight inches off the ground, using a

powerful electric fence, will generally keep predators like badgers and foxes out. Upon hatching, the parents will walk their chicks to the nearest suitable feeding habitat. This will be cattle or sheep grazed pasture. Long unkempt grass or cereal crops are of no use. I have known chicks walked over a mile across cereal fields to reach a suitable area. Therefore I always ensure that grazed pasture is placed next to the area where I anticipate birds will nest.

Electric fencing is also provided around the margin of the grazed field. It is crucial that this field is not topped or sprayed whilst young birds are present. The chicks will shelter in rough grass or clumps of nettles and thistles, in or around the margin of the field. Chicks are very difficult to see but the attendance of an adult bird during the breeding season, guarantees their presence. Chicks do not fledge until just after 40 days so they are very vulnerable to agricultural machinery, foxes and badgers. Adult lapwings are brilliant at protecting their chicks and will drive away buzzards, red kites and even foxes during the day.

However, foxes have the advantage at night and will keep returning to the nesting area until all the chicks have been collected, taking two chicks at a time if feeding cubs.

Few things give me more pleasure than finding my gathering of newly fledged young. After flying for the first time, they assemble in a flock, maybe a couple of miles from where they fledged. There they feed and practice flying manoeuvres, often under the supervision of just one or two adults. This flock will build, attracting other juveniles from around the area until they join with the adults in late summer.

Electric fencing together with fox control and grazed pasture are the essentials in getting lapwing chicks through to adulthood. Many may balk at this regime; “where is the profit”, “can’t be bothered”, “what’s in it for me”. Such statements fill me with pity; pity for the birds struggling to survive where they are deemed irrelevant, and pity for the individual who is unable to appreciate the character and beauty of this amazing bird and its indispensable contribution to a living, exhilarating countryside.

Lapwing on fallow plots



Nick Tomalin

The GWCT have been studying lapwings on fallow plots as part of a 4-year DEFRA-funded project.

The first part of the study compared lapwing productivity on fallow plots and conventional crop fields. Results indicate that nest survival is higher on plots than on conventional crop fields. However, no difference was found in chick survival, with less

than 9% of chicks surviving to fledging on both plots and crop fields. This is considerably lower than the 22% needed to maintain a stable population. Chicks were lost mainly to predation, with 5% killed by farm machinery or drowned, 13% starved and 82% predated. Both mammals and birds were identified as predators of lapwing chicks.

The second part of the study focused on the effectiveness of

electric fences to protect breeding lapwings on fallow plots. Preliminary results indicate that electric fencing increased nest survival but not chick survival, as broods tended to leave fallow plots (and hence the safety of the electric fence) shortly after hatching.

Therefore, chick survival is considered to be the most important factor preventing lapwing populations from fledging sufficient young on arable land. To address this, additional agri-environment options may be needed, possibly in combination with fallow plots. For example, the provision of high quality foraging habitat adjacent to fallow plots.

For more information please contact Kaat Brulez, Research Ecologist on 01425 651054 or kbrulez@gwct.org.uk

Please help us to help the 'other' curlew

Curlew by Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



The wonderful 'bubbling' summer song of the common curlew is one of the iconic sounds of the countryside.

Sadly it is heard less and less; the UK's breeding population is estimated to have fallen by 43% in 20 years. Curlew has very recently been added to the "Red List", and is now considered by many to be the UK's highest conservation priority bird species, because of the high proportion of the international population that breeds in UK.

Curlews are not raising enough chicks to sustain their population; predation, habitat change, and modern farming practices seem to be the main reasons.

Although most British curlews breed in upland habitats, there are also some important lowland populations, mostly in hay-meadows and other habitats where there is some rough grassland. In Wiltshire we still have a few pairs that nest across the county and there are things farmers and landowners could do help; for example it may be possible to delay cutting hay in some fields by a few days to enable young birds to fledge. If you see or hear curlews on your land between 1 March and 31 July we would be keen to hear from you!

Please report sightings to Phil Sheldrake, Conservation Officer on 01722 421973 or phil.sheldrake@rspb.org.uk

Achieving stone-curlew sustainability

As more wildlife needs our help, we need to reduce the dependency on our resources of those we have already brought back from the brink.

This edition of Chalk Country highlights the breadth of species we can and need to help in the coming years. In the fourth and final year of the Stone-curlew LIFE+ project to secure a more sustainable population we're gearing up to reduce fieldwork on the species. Farmers have stepped up to provide more safe habitat, and we're well on our way to reducing the need for interventions. Our end of project conference will reflect on what we've achieved and learned, and look at how to maintain success long term.



Lindsey Death

Stone-curlew plots in the Wiltshire landscape providing the bare ground needed for nesting, so less nest protection is now needed within crops.

Working together to give nature a home



The RSPB is the country's largest nature conservation charity, inspiring everyone to give nature a home.



The RSPB is a member of BirdLife International, a partnership of conservation organisations working to give nature a home around the world.



LIFE+ is the EU's financial instrument supporting nature conservation, environmental, and similar communication projects throughout the EU, which contribute to implementing the Birds and Habitats Directives, and Natura 2000 network of protected sites.

