



giving  
nature  
a home



Securing the future of the  
stone-curlew in the UK

## Setting the stone-curlew scene

The stone-curlew *Burhinus oedichnemus* is certainly an unusual looking bird and its bright yellow eyes, knobbly yellow legs and eerie call have earned it the names 'thick knees', 'goggle eyed plover', 'wailing heath chicken' and 'bull nosed swollen knee'.

The only member of the *Burhinidae* family in the UK, the stone-curlew is one of Britain's rarest birds, restricted to a few places in Southern and Eastern England. Almost all of the UK's breeding stone-curlews are now found in the Brecks on the Norfolk and Suffolk border, and around Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, where they spend most of the year, before migrating to southern Spain and North Africa for the winter.

People used to think that looking a stone-curlew in the eye could cure jaundice. They would catch them and hire them out to treat the ill. In reality, the huge yellow eyes help them to see at night as they catch their prey, which includes insects, earthworms and occasionally small rodents.



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

## What happened to stone-curlews?

Stone-curlews were once widespread in England, from Dorset to Yorkshire. In the 1930s there were up to two thousand pairs. However, numbers declined dramatically over the next 50 years when changes in land use resulted in catastrophic habitat loss. By 1991, only 168 pairs remained.

The RSPB and Natural England have been working with landowners, farmers and conservationists in Wessex and the Brecks over the last 30 years to help bring the population up to its current 400 pairs. Stone-curlews are still threatened, but as a result of this recovery, in 2009, they were downgraded from a species of Red Conservation Concern to Amber. However, stone-curlews remain vulnerable, and without intervention from conservationists, the population would decline by about four per cent per year.

In Europe, they are listed on Annex 1 of the EU Birds Directive as a species requiring 'special conservation measures'. They are also a priority species on the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. Stone-curlews are protected by three internationally important Special Protection Areas, which are also Sites of Special Scientific Interest, and include the Brecks farmland.

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)



Research shows that without the hands-on work to identify and protect nests, the population of stone-curlews in the UK would drop by four per cent each year. (Johnston 2009).

## Between a rock and a hard place

Stone-curlews are found on light soils and nest on dry stony grassland, heathland and farmland with low vegetation so they can clearly see any danger. They lay their eggs on patches of bare soil in amongst scattered stones for camouflage. They are very easily disturbed by people and farming operations and prefer quiet areas well away from people.

## The challenge ahead

With such limited suitable heathland and downland sites, a large proportion of stone-curlews now nest on arable farmland, which means they are dependant on hands-on nest protection work. It is a labour-intensive approach, with fieldworkers finding nests and marking them, or lifting nests and chicks, to allow farmers to work the fields without destroying them.

Having achieved the recovery of stone-curlews, we now need to make the population more self sustaining, and less dependent on costly, hands on intervention. To secure the future of the stone-curlew in the UK, it is necessary to get more of the population on to safer nesting habitat such as semi-natural grasslands and managed plots on farmland.

We also need to find a more efficient way to monitor the population, so we know where they are, and can protect them without employing field staff to find every nest, every summer. In addition, we need to be able to gauge the effectiveness of stone-curlew land management to ensure public money is well spent.

In 2012, the RSPB secured funding for a four year LIFE+ information and communications project: *Securing the future of the stone-curlew throughout its range in the UK to promote sustainable habitat management for the species.*





Andrew Holland (RSPB)

Creating nest plots on or near farmland will help to keep chicks safe from agricultural activities without hands-on intervention to mark nests or move chicks.

## Making a home for nature together

Stone-curlew conservation is a partnership between land managers and conservation organisations. Many organisations are coming together to fulfil a common vision of a more sustainable stone-curlew population.

The new RSPB EU LIFE+ funded project *Securing the stone-curlew* is providing an integrated programme of help and advice. The key aims of the project are to:

- improve the management and siting of fallow plots created under Higher Level Stewardship
- restore 400 hectares of short grass heathland and downland as suitable stone-curlew nesting habitat
- improve the management of grassland to give bare stony patches which will improve nesting success on semi-natural habitat
- ensure future agri-environment schemes benefit stone-curlews
- get more volunteers involved, reducing the resources needed for monitoring and rescuing
- increase the number of stone-curlews nesting on safe nesting habitat to over 75%.

For the foreseeable future, we won't be able to stop sending conservationists into the field, but by working with volunteers and other organisations, we hope to be able to reduce the financial cost.

## Self-sustaining population

We're aiming to maintain a stable population of stone-curlews by providing more and better managed habitat for them. Research has shown that to maintain the current population of stone-curlews without people going out to protect their nests, would require at least twice the amount of well-managed semi natural habitat as there is at present. The more species we can get to a sustainable position, the more species we'll be able to help.



Emily Field (RSPB)





Areas of bare ground for nesting within grassland foraging habitat, are also crucial to the future of stone-curlews.

## Getting the conditions right for the future

Well-managed grass heaths, acid grassland and chalk grassland/downland are the best and safest habitat for nesting stone-curlews. Ideally they would be rabbit grazed or have their topsoil removed to give bare patches of earth with stones.

Future agri-environment schemes will be crucial in enabling farmers to create safe habitat and we need to ensure that fallow plots for stone-curlew breeding are effective. *Securing the stone-curlew* is funding three advisers to help farmers and landowners to create more safe nesting habitat.

Existing nest sites need protection and suitable habitat needs to be effectively managed alongside other land uses, such as military training, recreation, sensitive development and agriculture. We recognise the need for both farms and towns to develop and prosper and can advise on minimising the impact of development on stone-curlews. These birds are very easily disturbed and are unlikely to nest within 1.5 km of built up areas.

**Natural England:** “We are delighted to be involved in this exciting project. This is just the sort of life-line stone-curlews need and we will help to ensure that the relevant designated sites, currently supporting about half of stone-curlews, each support their target populations and work hard to agree stone-curlew friendly management across their range.”



## It's not good just for stone-curlews

The two main stone-curlew breeding areas in the UK are the Brecks and Wiltshire chalk country. These places are not only internationally important for the stone-curlew, but are essential for myriad rare plants and invertebrates, many of which are unique to these special habitats.

Management of these landscapes benefits many other species, such as the brush-thighed seed-eater beetle, the marsh fritillary and the grizzled skipper. Stone-curlews also benefit the local economy, bringing in funding for farmers and encouraging conservation management which enriches the local environment. This in turn encourages tourism, particularly around Brecks nature reserves.



## A sensitive approach for stone-curlews

Stone-curlews can easily be disturbed, by people, especially with dogs, up to 500 metres away. They are also a Schedule 1 species, which means they have the highest level of legal protection in the UK and it is illegal to disturb them whilst on their breeding grounds. The best place to see stone-curlews is at the Norfolk Wildlife Trust's Weeting Heath Nature Reserve, or call an RSPB office and ask for details of guided tours. It can be easier to see them in the autumn, when they gather in huge roosts before flying south for the winter.

### For more information about the project, contact:

RSPB Headquarters (Nature Recovery)  
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[rspb.org.uk/securingthestonecurlew](https://rspb.org.uk/securingthestonecurlew)

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The RSPB is a registered charity: England and Wales no. 207076, Scotland no. SC037654. 020-1-0223-13-14

### For land management advice:

Wessex Team, Salisbury Office  
Tel: 01722 427232

Brecks Team, Thetford Office

Tel: 01842 753732  
thebrecks@rspb.org.uk

### For details of guided walks and seeing stone-curlews:

RSPB Minsmere nature reserve,  
Suffolk. Tel: 01728 648281  
minsmere@rspb.org.uk

RSPB Winterbourne Downs nature  
reserve, Wiltshire. Tel: 01980 629835

RSPB in the Brecks. Tel: 01842 753732  
thebrecks@rspb.org.uk

Weeting Heath Norfolk Wildlife Trust.

Tel: 01842 827615  
norfolkwildlifetrust.org/weeting

Securing the future of the stone-curlew in the UK with financial support from the EU Life+ programme.

Working together to give nature a home



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