**Curlews in Shropshire**

**Introduction**

The status of Curlews in Shropshire was described in *Curlew Forum Newsletter No. 5* (April 2018), which summarised the results of the Shropshire Bird Atlas 2008-13 for Curlew, the population monitoring carried out by several Community Wildlife Groups (CWGs), the earliest since 2004, and the start of the *Save our Curlews* campaign, funded by a joint appeal organized by Shropshire Wildlife Trust (SWT) and Shropshire Ornithological Society (SOS), and overseen by the Shropshire Curlew Group. This article summarises campaign activities in 2018.

**Nest Finding and Protection**

This was initiated in two areas, Upper Clun and Clee Hill. In 2017, the CWGs estimated a population of 8-9 pairs in the former, and 7-8 in the latter. In 2018 the estimates were 8-9 again in the former, and 7-10 in the latter.

Three nests were found in each area. All were fenced, and no nests were predated, although two eggs were lost from one nest, almost certainly to Carrion Crows.

At one site, two eggs didn’t hatch, and the two chicks that did hatch were deformed, and died very quickly. A post-mortem on these chicks by a vet found signs of retarded bone development due to a rickets-type disease, and possible vitamin B deficiency, attributed to poor nutrition or health of the female at the time of egg laying, and perhaps the low availability of the right kind of food during the hot, dry weather.

At a second site, enclosed by a rabbit-proof fence which has helped successful breeding in previous years, all four chicks starved to death in 2018, as a result of spraying off vegetation (reducing invertebrate food) and very hot weather drying out the ground (again reducing invertebrate food).

Two other eggs didn’t hatch, but the remaining 17 did, and all chicks except one were ringed and radio tagged. Most were lost to predation within 2-3 weeks, but definitely one, probably two, chicks fledged near Clee Hill. Both chicks were colour-ringed. Foxes are shot at the farm where the chick(s) fledged, but it is not known whether this has a significant impact on the local population.

In the Upper Clun, the three chicks whose remains were found had been predated; based on field signs, it is likely that a Buzzard, an unknown avian predator and a fox each accounted for one of the three. The other four were probably predated, but the tags were carried out of range or underground, and not found.

In Clee Hill, one chick definitely fledged and one probably fledged. Four perished due to dehydration or starvation in the rabbit-proof enclosure which contained the nest, one was definitely predated by a Buzzard, and two were probably predated, but the tags were carried out of range or underground, and not found.

In both areas, it is likely that the tags were carried underground, as the tags are reliable, and they were searched for extensively. Foxes are therefore the most likely culprit. No chicks were lost to agricultural operations.

Another pair was located at a regularly used site just outside the Clee Hill area. However, Curlew egg shells were found within a tractor rut before the nest could be found. It is not clear if the nest was destroyed by a vehicle, or the egg shell fragment had been moved from the location of the failed nest.

The CWGs have not attempted to find nests in previous years, and the largely upland terrain is difficult to work, so finding and protecting more than a third of the nests in the first year is a good result. Valuable lessons have been learnt for next year.

**Other Pairs in These Two Areas**

Curlew activity was depressed in April, because of the continuous cold east wind, and some pairs arrived back late, and others may not have got into breeding condition. However, in the Upper Clun, territorial activity was observed at four further nests into mid- or late June, suggesting that eggs hatched, and there was evidence of hatched young at one further site in Clee Hill.

Analysis of winter Timed Tetrad Visits for the Bird Atlas 2007-11 shows that the Upper Clun area has a relatively low density of Pheasants (only one-fifth of that in the Curlew Country area), suggesting that the fox population is also lower there, perhaps accounting for the relatively low level of nest predation. In Clee Hill, there is only one area of high Pheasant density, which is not part of the area where Curlews are found.

**Monitoring by Community Wildlife Groups**

Analysis shown in the April *Newsletter* identified the need to establish two new CWGs to ensure that all the Curlew hotspots identified on the Bird Atlas 2008-13 map are being monitored, and groups covering both areas were established by the SWT/SOS Campaign in the early spring. The Tanat to Perry CWG, with 70 participants, is covering 43 tetrads to the south of Oswestry, and the Severn-Vyrnwy Confluence CWG, with 22 participants, is covering 27 tetrads near the Confluence.

In addition, the Abdon Wildlife Group was set up by a local resident with 11 participants to cover 9 tetrads at the north of Brown Clee. These three groups found 11-15, 7 and 5-8 pairs of Curlews respectively. Experience has shown that it takes several years to establish how many pairs are producing the widespread and overlapping records.

There are now 10 CWGs, which between them cover 137 of Shropshire’s 870 tetrads, and monitor well over half of the tetrads with evidence of breeding Curlews in the 2008-13 Atlas. Over 270 participants spent over 2,200 hours on these surveys in 2018, very clear evidence of concern in the local community about the decline of Curlews here, and their support for Curlew conservation. This total does not include the time that participants spent in planning meetings or undergoing training, or the time spent organising the surveys or analysing the results from somewhere around 700 survey maps, or the many individuals submitting casual records.

Between them the groups located around 80-100 Curlew territories (including about 40 in the area covered by “Curlew Country”), the vast majority of the County population. Note that these figures are provisional, and need to be confirmed at CWG meetings between now and next March.

**Other pairs**

There is a breeding population of four pairs on Fenns / Whixall Moss NNR (three in Wales and one in Shropshire), which is monitored by Natural England. It is believed the pair from Shropshire failed at egg stage, as Corvid predated egg fragments were found near to the centre of the territory. There are also two pairs on the National Trust’s Long Mynd property, but no evidence of successful breeding. Information is also collected about the location and outcomes of several other isolated pairs.

An estate in the north of the County has fenced a large field regularly used by one pair.

**Future Plans**

The Appeal is intended to raise funds to continue the nest finding and protection project next year, and extend it to other CWG areas when Curlew territories there have been located sufficiently to give a nest-finder a realistic chance of locating most of them. The CWGs will continue to monitor the vast majority of the County population, and population trends

**Continued decline since 2010**

The County population was estimated at 160 breeding pairs in 2010 (see April *Newsletter*). The three CWGs that have established population trends shown in the graphs in that *Newsletter* had an estimated 54 Curlew pairs in 2010. Eleven (20%) have been lost since. If this rate of loss applied to the whole population, estimated at 160 pairs in 2010, the population in 2018 was less than 130 pairs.

**Further Information**

The Community Wildlife Groups have a joint website, [www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk](http://www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk).

Full details of the SWT/SOS *Save our Curlews* campaign, including the Strategy, can be found on the SOS website [www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/](http://www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/) The full reports of the two Nest Finding and Protection projects can be found on the website.

Curlew Country has its own website, www.[curlewcountry.org/](https://curlewcountry.org/)

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