



Shropshire Community Wildlife Groups

www.ShropsCWGs.org.uk

Curlew Survey Results 2020

There are 10 Community Wildlife Groups undertaking bird surveys which include monitoring their local Curlew populations. The County population is about 120 breeding pairs, and the groups collectively monitor more than three-quarters of them.

In 2020, the survey effort in some areas was severely affected by coronavirus restrictions, but in others the Curlew monitoring was enhanced, because members were working and exercising from home.

An estimated 93 – 111 breeding pairs were located, perhaps 30% of the total in the area covered by the South of England Curlew Forum.

There was an unconfirmed report that one pair raised a brood, but all the other pairs went quiet well before fledging could have occurred. Virtually the whole breeding population failed again.

On 1 June a post-breeding flock of about 20 Curlews was seen near The Stiperstones. This number represents about one-third of the total number of breeding birds in the area, but little grass-cutting or other agricultural activities had occurred by that date. Some nests still active on that date were subsequently predated.

In another area, a post-breeding flock of 10-12 was seen several times in June, more than half the breeding birds in that area, again before grass-cutting or other agricultural activities had occurred.

Although surveyors do not actively look for nests, four were found (and two were fenced), and the field containing the nest was identified in about a dozen other cases. Habitat was recorded at these sites, which had additional monitoring. Again, no young fledged from them.

These observations all suggest a continuing very high nest failure rate due to predation

BTO has published research showing a disproportionate increase in the Buzzard and Crow population in areas with a high number of released Pheasants (Pringle *et al* 2019). Unfortunately there is no similar research on the growth of the fox population due to pheasant release, but the GWCT website shows a three-fold increase since 1961 in foxes reported killed in the national Gamebag census, and ironically acknowledges that “The widespread rearing and releasing of gamebirds has probably improved fox food supply in autumn and winter.”

In Shropshire, 726,000 Pheasants were released in 2018 alone, so predation of Curlews (collateral damage from foxes hunting Pheasants) is very high, and the Curlew population is heading for extinction (down 80% since 1990). Conversely, the feral breeding population of Pheasants increased by 62% between 1997 and 2014 (County BBS results), and it is now the tenth most common breeding species in the County (and far and away the biggest in terms of biomass). They have spread from the release sites to virtually every part of the County now.

In 2014 there were an estimated 44,000 pairs of breeding pheasants, all descended from previous releases (Pheasant is an introduced species), compared to 160 pairs of Curlew

The total survey effort was not quantified in 2020, because many members did not participate, but in 2019 320 people contributed over 2350 hours surveying 267 tetrads (2x2 kilometre squares, about 1050 square kilometres - some border tetrads are not the full four square kilometres). In 2019, 94 - 115 pairs of Curlews were located, but again there was little evidence that any young fledged.