

Shropshire Ornithological Society

Save our Curlews Campaign

Project results 2024



The Shropshire Ornithological Society (SOS) Save our Curlews Campaign worked with Community Wildlife groups in the Strettons and Oswestry areas (two groups: Tanat to Perry and Three Parishes – Weston Rhyn, St Martins and Gobowen) in 2024.

We aim to find as many Curlew nests as possible, and put an electric fence around them to protect the eggs from predators, then radio-tag the chicks that hatch, and track them, to find out how they use the landscape, and what

happens to them.

In the Strettons area, six nests were found. Two were predated before they could be fenced, but one of these pairs laid a second clutch, which was found and fenced. There was a delay in obtaining landowners permission to fence another nest, during which time the nest was partially predated, and the interference was probably responsible for the remaining eggs not hatching. Three other nests were found and fenced (including the re-lay), and a total of 10 eggs hatched. Nine of the chicks were tagged, but three lived only for a couple of days, and the other six (and the untagged chick) lived for no more than nine days.

In the Oswestry area, seven nests were found, an excellent result, and much better than the one nest found last year. Two of the nests were replacement clutches by pairs that had their first nest predated after finding. Two nests were predated before they could be fenced (probably one each by corvid and Badger), and the other five were fenced. One was partially predated prior to fencing, probably by a fox, two were predated a few days after fencing, probably by corvids, one was abandoned, and two out of four eggs hatched at the last nest (a re-laid clutch by one of the pairs whose first nest was predated). Abandonment is believed to be caused by a fox approaching the fence, scaring the sitting bird away. In summary, six of the seven nests were lost, three to corvids, two to fox and one to Badger.

Two chicks hatched from one of the relay nests. Unfortunately, both these chicks were predated, one about two weeks old and the other about three weeks (no more than 25 days old). No remains of the first one, or its tag, were found, so the predator is unknown, but the legs, feathers and tag of the second one were found, near a fox den, indicating predation by fox.

Predation of fenced nests was mainly due to corvids. All the chicks that hatched were predated. None died of natural causes (they would have been found, with the tags still transmitting, if that had happened).



Remains of ringed and tagged Curlew chick, predated by fox

Although some of them were potentially threatened by silage cutting, they were actually predated before the farming activity had the chance to kill them. Remains of some chicks were found, with the tag still transmitting.

Based on field signs, a stoat was suggested as the possible predator of a clutch of eggs near Oswestry (rather than a corvid), and a chick in the Strettons area.

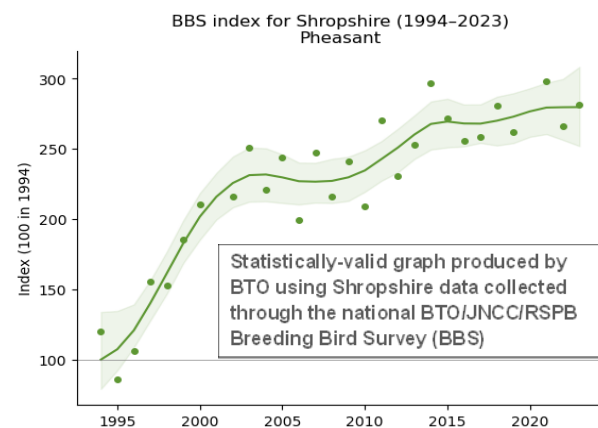
The intensive searching of the Oswestry Racecourse / Baker's Hill area confirmed the presence of four pairs of Curlew, whereas the Wildlife Group survey two years ago was unable to separate the numerous records into more than two pairs.

The project has operated for four years in the Strettons area. During that time 16 nests have been found and fenced, and 28 chicks have been tagged and tracked, but no tagged chicks have fledged. The Community Wildlife Group continued to monitor the other pairs whose nest was not found (a total 32 - 33 over the four years) and there is no evidence that any chicks hatched at all in this area during this period, a very depressing result.

Only two years' work have been carried out in the Oswestry area, and only one nest was found and fenced there last year. All three chicks were tagged then, but none survived. However, at least three chicks fledged from other broods. The project needs to continue for at least one more year in that area before it is possible to draw any reliable conclusions.

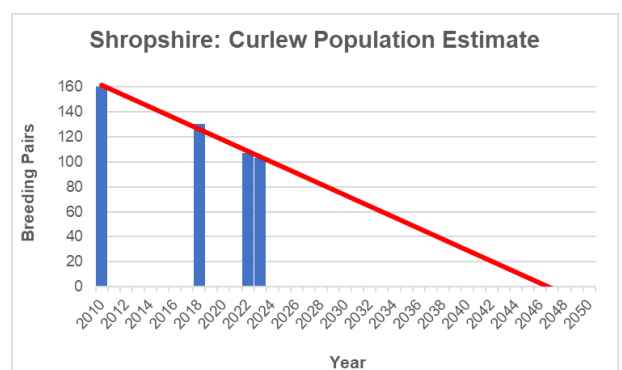
The survival period of all the chicks except one was only a small proportion of the 35 days or so that a Curlew chick has to survive to be able to fly. We believe that the evidence shows that predation pressure on Curlew chicks is far higher than the naturally-sustainable level, because of the masses of additional food put out for predators and scavengers in the UK in the form of 60 million gamebirds (mainly Pheasants, but also partridges and ducks) put out each year for shooting. Only one-third of these gamebirds are actually shot, and most of the

others are easy prey. Stoats, as well as the more frequently encountered foxes, corvids, and birds of prey, all benefit from gamebird release.



It is estimated that more than two million gamebirds were released in Shropshire alone in 2018 alone. Few survive until the following breeding season, but they are sufficient to drive a massive increase in the number of pheasants recorded in Shropshire since 1994 as part of the national Breeding Bird Survey (BBS).

The Shropshire Curlew population is regionally and nationally important (there are only an estimated 500 pairs of Curlew in southern England, south of a line from the Dee estuary to The Wash, and Shropshire holds more the one-fifth (20%) of them). At the current rate of decline, the County Curlew population will halve in 12 years, and virtually disappear in 24.



Almost all the farmers who owned the land on which the Curlews nested or fed were supportive of the project, and gave permission to look for the nests and fence them. Thanks to all of them. The project work was largely financed by donations to the appeal, so thanks to all contributors. In 2024, the Shropshire Hills Protected Landscape Conservation Fund approved a grant of £2,000 for work in the Strettons area, which is gratefully acknowledged.

The project started in 2018, and most work up until 2022 was carried out in the Upper Clun and Clee Hill areas. A full report of results 2018-22 can be found on the SOS website www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/ Over that period, 31 nests were found and fenced, and the fences were found to be 74% effective in protecting the eggs. A total of 61 chicks were tagged and tracked: only 5-6 fledged, less than half the number needed for a sustainable population. The average survival period for these chicks was only 6.13 days. More than half of the chicks were taken by foxes. Eight died of natural causes, and the remainder were taken by avian predators. None were lost to agricultural activity, though one brood from an unfound nest was lost to silage cutting in the Oswestry area in 2023. No chicks hatched at fenced nests in 2023, and none of the 11 chicks tagged at hatching in 2024 survived to fledging, reinforcing the conclusion in the 2022 report that productivity is less than half of that needed for a stable population, and predation is the main driver of decline.

A summary of the results since 2018, in all five of the areas we have worked in, is appended below.

Leo Smith
SOS Save our Curlews project coordinator
leo@leosmith.org.uk
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All Areas									
Year	Pairs Located	Nests Found	Nests Fenced	No. Eggs in Fenced Nests	Unhatched Eggs	Nests producing chicks	Chicks Hatched	Chicks Radio-tagged	Fledged Young
2024	20	13	9	27	4	4	12	11	0
2023	14	5	4	16	1	1	3	3	0
2022	14-16	9	9	33	15	5	18	18	0
2021	23-25	16	12	44	20	8	24	21	3
2019	14-19	5	4	15	8	2	7	6	3
2018	16-18	6	6	25	8	5	17	16	1-2
Total	97-108	54	44	160	56	25	81	75	7-8