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nature
a home

Your regional stone-curlew project newsletter

Issue no 07 winter 2014/ 2015



Chalk Country



Ian Grier

Stone-curlews bounce back!

84 stone-curlew chicks were recorded as fledged in 2014 making productivity the highest recorded since 2006.

After such a poor year for stone-curlews in 2013, we did not expect an increase in the population. However, numbers were actually slightly up. The fine weather and resulting availability of invertebrate food created ideal breeding conditions. This high productivity bodes well for a population increase in the next year or two.

Continued habitat management by farmers and landowners certainly helped, particularly the creation and management of nest plots. This is the main mechanism to deliver a sustainable stone-curlew population in Wessex. We are therefore always looking for ways to make plot management more effective for the birds, and more straightforward for those managing the land.

Research to date has been used to produce plot management guidelines, and we're continuing our studies in 2015 with another trial.

This will test three management techniques, developed in consultation with local farmers. It is designed to encourage nesting without the need for intensive monitoring. The results will help us to produce improved guidelines for plot management in the new Countryside Stewardship scheme. Ultimately we hope this will improve the sustainability of the Wessex stone-curlew population.

For more information contact Nick Tomalin on 01722333019 or nick.tomalin@rspb.org.uk

Also in this issue...

- Being an RSPB volunteer
- The EU Birds Directive and you
- Down on the reserve at Winterbourne Downs
- The Big Farmland Bird Count
- Getting involved with Wessex's wildlife

Being an RSPB volunteer

My interest in stone-curlews began with my first chance sighting of a bird and its chicks - in the middle of nowhere on the Salisbury Plain Military Training Area.

Monitoring the progress of these two chicks eventually led to a voluntary role working with the RSPB Wessex stone-curlew team and fellow volunteer Ian Grier. The work involves finding and observing birds, recognising breeding behaviour, and then monitoring and recording nesting attempts. Biometric data on eggs can be extrapolated to give a hatching date. Once hatched, the development of the chicks is studied, and if necessary action is taken to increase their chances of survival. When the chicks are large enough, they are BTO and colour-ringed which helps with monitoring movement patterns, and survival rates.

Most of this is achieved by many hours of simply watching the birds and their behaviour. It is fascinating, at times frustrating, but also

rewarding, especially when chicks are proved to have fledged. What a privilege to be working with a Schedule 1 bird in a restricted access area facilitated by the RSPB.

My most memorable experience to date was the first time we ringed a chick. We had been watching both parents and the youngster for some time, and had good views of all three, but although one of us kept a "line of sight" from the vehicle, and guided the others, in the time it took us to walk the 100m or so, the chick had vanished. It was a very tense few minutes searching the vegetation, watching where you put every step, before we found the chick.

Stone-curlew numbers in the UK are still not at a self-sustaining level. When you are lucky enough to witness their day-to-day struggles with the British weather, land management and natural predators, this is not surprising. Every fledged chick is a real success, and a step in the right direction. My experiences as a volunteer have been very

rewarding and I would strongly recommend that if you are at all interested in birds or wildlife in general – give it a go!



Ian Grier

Andy enjoying a cuddle with a chick, whilst out ringing.

Andy Palmer has been volunteering with the team for a year now. If you would like more information about volunteering, contact Nick Tomalin on 01722333019 or nick.tomalin@rspb.org.uk

GWCT's Big Farmland Bird Count

Farmers from Wessex and around the country took part in the second annual Big Farmland Bird Count, 7 to 15 February 2015.

The initiative aims to help farmers to recognise and cherish the birds they have and show how wildlife friendly management on their farm has a positive impact for birds. This year's result have yet to be compiled, but more than 500 farmers, representing nearly half a million acres of UK farmland, took part in the inaugural count in 2014. In total, 116 different species were recorded, of which 11 were red list species – corn bunting, fieldfare, grey partridge, house sparrow, lapwing, linnets, skylark, song thrush, tree sparrow and yellowhammer.

The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) are leading the initiative and have put on several Farmland ID events around the country to help farmers improve their identification skills in preparation for the count. These events proved very popular with many booking up quickly with farmers keen to learn about the birds on their farms. The RSPB and GWCT have also jointly produced a free farmland bird ID guide which was used by farmers while out and about on the farm during the count.

To access the ID guide, and for more information on this year's results and how you can get involved next year, go to www.gwct.org.uk/bfbcguide



A corn bunting; one of the 11 red list species recorded in 2014.

For more information on farm wildlife or advice on habitat management for stone-curlew and other farmland birds, contact Charlotte on 07540 013152 or charlotte.bruce-white@rspb.org.uk

Furry friends

Ben Andrew (rsps-images.com)



A number of harvest mouse nests have been discovered on the reserve while carrying out management work, mainly in longer grass in arable field margins.

Further surveys will be carried out to see how wide spread they are across the reserve, but recent research indicates that harvest mice benefit from wild bird seed mixes, especially those containing millet. So we will use this information when choosing mixtures in the future so we can help our furry, as well as our feathered friends.

Half way highlights

At the half way point of the EU LIFE+ funded project to secure future habitat for stone-curlews across the UK - how have we done?

1. 50 new &/or improved arable nest plots created through Higher Level Stewardship.
2. 82ha private grassland being restored for stone-curlews.
3. Over 2000ha public grassland being restored over 10 years.
4. New anti-predator fencing options secured in Countryside Stewardship
5. Over 20,000 people involved

There's more to do, but a huge thank you for helping to achieve these fantastic results so far!

Down on the reserve

Winterbourne Downs attracted five pairs of stone-curlews in 2014, fledging three chicks between them.

Sadly quite a few nests failed at egg stage, leading us to think we suffered from high predation this year. Although this is frustrating for us, we hope to install nest cams next season, to see if we can work out who the culprits are and how best to protect the nests in the future.

This autumn, reserve staff and volunteers were busy delivering the Save our Magnificent Meadows project. This involved collecting wildflower seeds from local down land areas such as Beacon Hill and Boscombe Down. We specifically collected species currently missing from our swards, and seeds which are difficult to buy, such as wild thyme and horseshoe vetch. Some of these were later planted on the reserve by volunteers, while others were sent off to be grown and planted at a later date.

Funding from Biffa has allowed us to construct a second butterfly bank. Situated close to neighbouring Porton Down; a hot spot for chalk butterfly species such as Adonis and chalkhill blue.



Patrick Cashman

The bank will provide an important ecological link allowing butterflies to travel to the Northern end of the reserve. It has been sown with a variety of butterfly food plants, so hopefully it is only a matter of time before we start seeing results.

For more information contact Keeley Spate on 01980 629835 or keeley.spate@rspb.org.uk

Natura 2000 day: 21 May

Celebrating the best protected sites for threatened wildlife in Europe.

Without the European Birds and Habitats Directives and their 'Natura 2000' network of protected sites, we might not still have stone-curlews in the UK, or indeed agri-environment funding for wildlife friendly farming. The Salisbury Plain and Porton Down SPAs and their surrounding areas are internationally important, which is why we want to celebrate them on international Natura 2000 day- 21 May- hold the date!



Natura 2000 DAY

For more information contact: Emily Field, Project Manager on 07867 537419 emily.field@rspb.org.uk



Nick Tomalin



Lindsey Death

Larger than life: ATM mural of a stone-curlew on the public toilet block at Queen Elizabeth gardens, next to Lush House car park.

Rocky, knitted by the Salisbury group 'Knit 'n' Knatter'.

Getting involved with wildlife in Wessex

2014 was a busy year for events and a great one for engaging with the public.

Beginning with a new addition to the team; 'Rocky' the knitted stone-curlew has been out and about, promoting the work of the RSPB stone-curlew project.

To celebrate a successful year for the project, the RSPB and Salisbury City Council teamed up with street artist ATM to bring a larger than life stone-curlew to the heart of the city. The mural now brightens up the place, as well as drawing attention to this quirky and relatively unheard of bird and the importance of its conservation in the local area.

If you wanted to see a real life stone-curlew, the safaris at

Winterbourne Downs were the place to be! These were held in August and September, where a stroll across the reserve led to a viewing area to see the elusive birds whilst roosting. Some days the stone-curlews were harder to spot than others, but up to 16 birds were seen across four events and everyone left happy!

Winterbourne Downs also held a butterfly and bumblebee walk, moth morning and several bug hunts throughout the summer. This was great to see families engaging with nature together; as adults and children alike spent the day looking for insects and creating insect hotels before tucking into a well earned picnic. Another popular event was 'wildflower folklore', aimed at not only discovering the different flowers on the reserve, but

also the stories behind them. In 2014 we also saw the first successful nesting of peregrine falcons at Salisbury Cathedral for 61 years! To celebrate and share this historic event, a camera and TV monitor was installed, along with RSPB volunteers armed with telescopes. This allowed visitors a fascinating insight to the growing chicks, especially seeing the parents bringing in plenty of prey to feed their voracious appetites!

2015 should see further stone-curlew safaris, bug hunts and more, so keep an eye on the RSPB website for upcoming events.

For more information contact Keeley Spate on 01980 629835 or keeley.spate@rspb.org.uk

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.

