

Please help us to help the Curlew

Gordon Kirk & Mike Smart

For many people the wonderful "bubbling" summer song of the Curlew is one of the iconic sounds of the countryside, but sadly it is heard less and less; the UK's breeding population is estimated to have fallen by 43% in 20 years. Curlew has very recently been added to the "Red List", and is now considered by many to be the UK's highest conservation priority bird species, because of the high proportion of the international population that breeds in UK (Brown et al 2015). Curlews are not raising enough chicks to sustain their population; predation, habitat change in upland breeding areas, and modern farming practices seem to be the main reasons. Although most British Curlews breed in upland habitats, there are also important lowland populations, mostly in hay-meadows but also in various habitats where there is rough grassland. In Gloucestershire and Worcestershire Curlews still breed in the Severn and Avon Vales, and there are a few pairs on the Cotswolds. These birds can often be helped by involving farmers and other landowners and working with them; for example it may be possible to delay the hay harvest in some fields for a few days to enable young birds to fledge.

To try to help Curlews, a local project is aiming to find all our breeding birds in 2016 and see what help can be offered to them and the landowners on whose land they are nesting. The area involved is Gloucestershire, Worcestershire and Wiltshire and the partnership includes the Wildlife Trusts, Natural England, RSPB and the Gloucestershire Ornithological Co-ordinating Committee. A small team of experienced volunteers will be studying the well-known sites, but because Curlews can be quite catholic in their choice of habitat we are also asking people to report any Curlew seen or heard in potential breeding habitat between 1 March and 31 July so it can be followed up. We are particularly keen to hear from you if you are a farmer or landowner with Curlews on your land.

Please report your sightings to Mike Smart, either by email smartmike@btinternet.com or by phone (landline 01452.421131, mobile 07816.140513) or to Steve Bloomfield at Worcestershire Wildlife Trust stevnb@worcestershirowildlifetrust.org. on 01905 754919.

Brown, D., Wilson, J., Douglas, D., Thompson, P., Foster, S., McCulloch, N., Phillips, J., Stroud, D., Whitehead, S., Crockford, N & Sheldon, R. 2015. The Eurasian Curlew – the most pressing bird conservation priority in the UK? *British Birds* 108:660-668.

Curlews in Worcestershire - a little history

Harry Green

Tomes writing in the *Victoria County History for Worcestershire* 1901 regarded Curlew as occasional visitors.

The summary of changes in Curlew populations in Worcestershire written by Harthan (1946) is worth quoting: "There has been an increase since 1920 when a few pairs appeared on the large river meadows around Tewkesbury about that year. The colonisation of the hilly north-western part of the county began at about the same time. It has nested in the Bockleton-Tenbury district since 1917. The curlew was first seen in the Powick Meadows near Worcester in 1929 and has bred there since 1933. By 1942 there were six pairs between Upton and Worcester on the Severn, and three pairs between Cotheridge and Ham Bridge on the river Teme. Along the river Avon there were eight pairs between Tewkesbury and Evesham in 1936 and at least four more further upstream by 1940. Isolated pairs began to appear on farmland away from the rivers in 1939, and breeding was reported from Chaddesley Corbett, Crowle and Honeybourne in 1943. Curlew have also nested at Cradley, Witley, Longdon Marsh and near Malvern. On March 23rd

1942 I watched a flock of ten birds courting in a river meadow near Pershore. They arrive in early March and depart at the end of June.

In his 1961 update Harthan added "and now breeds on farmland throughout the southern half of the county ... grass fields left undisturbed for hay are preferred".

Harrison et al (1982) write in the first *Birds of the West Midlands* : "Prior to 1920 the Curlew was restricted as a breeding bird to the moorlands of north Staffordshire. Between 1917 and 1960 however the species underwent a sensational expansion in breeding range, first colonising lowland meadows, especially along river valleys, and later arable land ... By 1947 birds had spread further into central Worcestershire and up the Avon as far as Stratford. During the 1950s many agricultural areas of Worcestershire and Staffordshire were colonised ... A further spread appears to have occurred in the early 1960s although agricultural intensification and urban growth caused some local declines. These declines have accelerated in the past decade [1970s] because of earlier cutting and grazing of traditional hay meadows and the drainage and improvement of damp pastures."

The *New Birds of the West Midlands* (Harrison & Harrison 2005) adds "Now they have largely retreated as this newly claimed territory has been rendered unsuitable by progressive land drainage and changing agricultural practices."

The 1944 Worcestershire report on the land utilization survey (LUS) of Britain undertaken in 1932-33 (Buchanan 1944) also included information on the state of farmland after the survey. The comments on mid Worcestershire make interesting reading:

"Formerly an important arable farming area as suggested by the ridge and furrow in many grass fields and by the evidence of the tithe maps, the greater part of the region was at the outbreak of the present war [WW2] under permanent pasture with livestock, and especially cattle, as the chief source of income on the majority of farms. Over much of the region the permanent pastures were poor in quality – acid, starved and poorly drained, and unkempt hedges, broken fences and choked drains told of long years of neglect during the inter-war period. During the last three years [war time 1941-1943] many hundreds of acres of old grassland have been broken up." When surveyed in the early 1930s over 80% was grassland. Most of the ploughed land (about 5%) was on lighter soils, usually terrace gravels deposited on the heavy clay soils.

Harthan wrote (1961), and the LUS (Buchanan 1945) reported, shortly before intensive cereal growing swept through the county supported by 'intervention' (fixed prices and food mountains) and accompanied by massive land drainage, removal of hedges, and ploughing of grassland that had survived WW2. Study of the 1945 aerial photographs available on Google Earth show many parts of central Worcestershire were then still ancient ridge and furrow. Despite the difficulties presented to farmers by ridge and furrow most of the grassland was worked for hay and grazing and some cultivated as arable. Eventually the development of more powerful machinery ploughed-out and drained the old ridge and furrow causing the loss of variability in the sward (wet and dry with many different plant species) and many areas became unsuitable for breeding Curlews.

When most of central Worcestershire became unsuitable for Curlews they hung on as breeding birds in the flood plain meadows of the rivers Severn Avon and Teme. However these meadows were soon drained and cultivated even though still prone to flooding. Most have now been returned to grass leys rather than permanent pasture and most are now harvested for silage early in summer rather than for hay harvested in late summer so creating a landscape that has little to support Curlews. My own personal notes made in 1953 and 1954 record 12-14 calling pairs of Curlews by the river Avon between Bredon village and Great Comberton.

Curlews are long-lived birds making their disappearance from particular sites a long drawn-out affair. The oldest ringed bird reached 32 years although the average lifespan may be around five years (BTO web site). The breeding season is long. Birds establish territory in March and April. First clutches of four eggs are laid around 2nd May. Incubation is for about 28 days and although the young birds soon leave the nest and move about it is 32-40 days before they can fly. All this adds up to around 70 days: usually most of May, June and July.. During this period they are vulnerable to disturbance, agricultural practices and predators.

Having established a territory most Curlews return to the same site in subsequent years even if annual breeding attempts fail. Hence birds may return, take territory and fail to breed but return in the following years until they die. So spring song may be heard followed by – nothing.

What of the future for Curlews in Worcestershire? One hope is that when currently used sites are found (even if breeding fails) landowners can be persuaded to delay grass cutting (hay or silage) to give time for the Curlew breeding season to reach completion. However, suitable breeding areas need to provide an ample food supply - earthworms and invertebrates (Berg 1993) and research in Northern Ireland highlights that high levels of predators – mainly foxes and crows – can cause problems (Grant et al 1999). Modern research in Britain is needed hence the call by BTO for funding - see BTO main web site.

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