

## Survey of breeding Curlews in Gloucestershire and Worcestershire 2016

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### Summary

Coordinated surveys were carried out in the Severn and Avon Vales in both Gloucestershire and Worcestershire, and (by the North Cotswolds Ornithological Society) in areas of the Cotswolds in Gloucestershire where there were historic records of breeding Curlews. These studies led to records of breeding Curlews in other outlying areas of the two counties, which are listed below.

### 1. Severn and Avon Vales

Coverage was fairly good, with multiple visits to several sites in Gloucestershire (notably Coombe Hill and Ashleworth/Hasfield Hams) and Worcestershire (notably sites along the Avon). This concentration at some sites gave a valuable insight into details of the breeding behaviour, which could be extrapolated to other sites; visits only once a month risk overlooking nesting birds, especially later in the season. There were one or two sites where coverage was lacking, including the traditional area near St Briavels in the Forest of Dean (linked here with the Severn Vale birds) and some traditional sites such as Powick Meadows and Upton Ham (both Worcs), where it is likely that Curlews attempted to nest.

Overall, a likely figure of 30-35 pairs of breeding Curlews was found. Many pairs were obviously territorial and very vocal in March and April; in many sites flooding or very wet ground conditions extended well into April this year (later than in most recent years), so that laying was probably delayed. The one nest found probably had eggs laid from the first few days in May, with a complete clutch by 10 May. By May the birds were more difficult to observe, partly because the grass had grown up, partly because the birds were less much less vocal when they had eggs; indeed on some occasions pairs known to be present proved difficult to find and were thought to have failed, only to be found on a later visit. Breeding birds with small young were often discreet in early June, but as the young grew, they became much more vocal, and in many cases presence of young was assumed from the agitated behaviour of parent birds.

Of the 30-35 pairs present six definitely brought young to the flying stage, and two further pairs very probably did; on the whole this seems an encouragingly high figure, given the pessimistic statements made in many quarters on productivity. Failures probably occurred with 18-22 pairs (some at a very early stage in the breeding cycle, probably because of predation); in four to five cases the outcome is unknown. The flying young were seen between 9 and 23 July, invariably accompanied by an adult (in all cases believed to be a male); at one site, young birds remained unaccompanied until early August; these were thought to have been locally bred birds; young birds considered to be en route to the coast were definitely seen at one site (Minsterworth Ham on 28 July), another at Coombe Hill on 16 July was also thought to be a passing juvenile.

In all cases the birds nested on meadows; none were found on arable land. In many cases the nests were in ancient hay meadows, and an initial attempt was made to judge the botanical value of nesting fields. Many of them have been well known as nesting sites for many years, and are well known to the farmers and land owners. In all cases, the farmers and landowners welcomed the nesting Curlews on their land, and some delayed hay making in order to allow the curlews to raise their young. It is notable that the successful pairs were on fields where hay is cut late, and where disturbance is minimal.

### 2. Upland sites in the Cotswolds

No successful breeding pairs were found over a wide area of the Cotswold dip slope, where traditionally Curlews bred in days when sheep grazing was the main activity, and where the occasional successful pair has been found in the last ten years. Six principal

areas were covered quite intensively, and singles or pairs were found on four of them; it seems likely that at three sites, birds at least held territory, and seem likely to have attempted to nest at one site at least, maybe two. A residual population is clearly still present, but predation (foxes) and early silage cutting seem to be problematic.

### 3. Outlying sites in Gloucestershire and Worcestershire

In Gloucestershire, near Dymock, on the Herefordshire border, another traditional site, birds were present this year and may have bred, but no precise data are at present available.

In Worcestershire birds were recorded at four sites outside the Severn and Avon Vales, and appear to have bred successfully in at least one of them. The traditional mid-Worcestershire breeding populations thus seem (just) still to be surviving, though the familiar problems of disturbance, predation and early hay-cutting seem to affect the birds. The wintering flock which roosted at Upton Warren and has declined sharply in recent years, may well have been made up of this breeding population. The area would clearly merit more detailed investigation in future.

### 4. Postscript

Much has recently been written about the decline of the Eurasian Curlew; one of the reasons for this decline is the very poor production of chicks by breeding birds. UK has a special responsibility for conservation of the species, given the number that breed in Britain (mainly on upland moorland in northern England and Scotland) and the number that come to winter in UK from continental breeding sites, as far off as Finland. There has been a catastrophic decline in the Republic of Ireland, where it was stated at a Curlew workshop in November 2016 that probably only 120 pairs survive, suggesting that without major efforts Curlew could disappear as a breeding species within seven years. As a result of this workshop, an Irish governmental task force has been set up to confront the crisis.

In England, little attention had hitherto been devoted to Curlews breeding in southern England generally in lowland sites. It transpired during the summer, as the survey was being carried out, that similar surveys were being carried out in other areas of lowland Britain, notably Shropshire, the Upper Thames valley in Oxfordshire, Salisbury Plain, the New Forest and the Somerset Levels. It therefore seemed a good idea to bring all these active fieldworkers together in a workshop, to compare results, and discuss future action. The workshop - entitled "the Call of the Curlew" - was held at the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust on 2 February 2017 (World Wetlands Day), under the sponsorship of WWT, RSPB and the Gloucestershire Wildfowl Trust, with the participation of many Curlew experts, field-workers, as well as a number of farmers on whose land the Curlews nest.

The conclusions of the workshop were that it is crucial to maintain breeding Curlew populations across the whole of their range, i.e. not only in the uplands but in the southern lowlands as well. Equally important, it was emphasized that strong, local, cultural connections are vital for conservation of this iconic species. So, not only is more research and monitoring required (to determine the success of breeding Curlews, and what prevents them from succeeding - habitat loss and fragmentation; predation, early hay-cutting; disturbance, notably by ramblers, joggers and dog walkers). But solutions must also be sought within communities, including farmers, landowners and local people; Curlew, a much-loved bird, provides unique outreach potential, has rich cultural connections, which can be re-discovered and re-invigorated; public awareness needs to be increased.

So, another survey will be held in all the same areas in 2017 (including of course Gloucestershire), and in some new areas like Herefordshire and North Wiltshire. New efforts will be made to create public awareness of the plight of the Curlew in its heartlands, and to conserve both Curlews and the habitats where they nest - in

hay meadows equally important for their botany, their invertebrates, and even as habitats for eels. Any records of Curlews in the coming breeding season will be welcomed by the author (Mike Smart:

[smartmike@btinternet.com](mailto:smartmike@btinternet.com)); he would be particularly interested in details of their habitat and of how they are behaving. Watch this space for developments.

**5. Detailed record of results of the 2016 survey**

**1. Severn and Avon Vales**

<b>Severn (Worcs) area</b>		
Site name	Number of pairs attempting to nest	Result
Holt Heath (Worcs)	?	Probably no attempt
Grimley Gravel Pits	?	Probably no attempt
Powick Meadows	1(?)	No data may have attempted
Kempsey Ham	?	No data probably no attempt
Northfield Farm	?	No data probably no attempt
Ryalls Court	?	No data probably no attempt
Upton Ham	1-2(?)	No data probably tried.
Longdon Marsh	1	Failed
Uckingham Meadows	?	No data probably no attempt
Queenshill Rough/Ripple	1 (?)	Failed?
Total Worcs	4-5 pairs	None successful 2 failed unknown 2-3

<b>Severn (Glos) area</b>		
Site name	Number of pairs attempting to nest	Result
Mythe Hook	1(?)	No data may have attempted
Severn Ham Tewkesbury	2	Failed
Lower Lode/Chaceley	1+	One successful 3 flying chicks 21.07
Chaceley/Haw Bridge	1+	One failed
Haw Bridge east	1	Failed
Staunton	?	Probably no attempt
Ashleworth/Hasfield Hams	2 maybe 3	One successful 2 flying chicks 09.07 1-2 probably failed
Coombe Hill north	1 maybe 2	Nest found failed
Coombe Hill south	1 maybe 2	Failed
Leigh/Cobney Meadows	2	Failed
Sandhurst	?	Probably no attempt
Cox's Brook	?	Probably no attempt
Leadon Valley	0	Probably no attempt
Minsterworth Ham and Corn Ham	0	Probably no attempt
Elmore Back	0	Probably no attempt
Walmore Common	0	Probably no attempt
St Briavels Dean Glos (SO 5704)	?	Traditional site no data this year
Total Glos	12- 15 pairs	Two succeeded; 9-12 failed; unknown

<b>Avon (Worcs/Glos) area</b>		
Site name	Number of pairs attempting to nest	Result
Wood Norton/Craycombe Fladbury (Worcs)	1(?)	May have attempted but failed
Lower Moor/Wick (Worcs)	1	Failed in mid April
Asham Meadow (Worcs) (including John Bennett & Gwen Finch)	1	Successful 2 flying chicks on 14.07
Eckington Meadows and Marshes(Worcs)	1	Probably attempted but failed
Rectory Farm Meadows (Worcs)	1	Probably attempted outcome unknown
Upham Meadow and Summer Leasow (Glos)	6	One pair apparently with small chicks on 02.07 another pair with 2 flying young on 15.07 perhaps a third pair succeeded (6 unaccompanied young on 02.08) at least three probably failed
Avon Meadows Fleet Lane (Worcs)	2-3pairs	One successful with two chicks just flying on 23.07 Second pair perhaps successful
Bredon's Hardwick Pits (Worcs)	1	Successful one just flying young on 16.07.
Avon Meadows West (Glos)	?	Probably the Bredon's Hardwick pair.
Carrant Brook catchment (Glos/Worcs)	?	May possibly have nested along the Carrant Brook but did not attempt to nest at Kemerton Lake.
River Isborne catchment (Glos/Worcs)	?	Traditional nesting site no records this year
Total	14-15 pairs	4 pairs definitely successful 2 pairs perhaps successful 7-8 failed 1 outcome unknown.

**Summary**

Worcestershire 8-9 pairs. Gloucestershire 6 pairs  
 Overall total Maximum of 30-35 pairs.  
 6 pairs definitely successful  
 2 pairs perhaps successful  
 18-22 pairs failed  
 4-5 pairs result uncertain  
 Worcestershire 12-14 pairs  
 Gloucestershire 18-21 pairs

**2. Cotswolds, Gloucestershire area**

Site name	Number of pairs attempting to nest	Result
Hawling SP 0622	1	One heard March to May at least holding territory
Little Rissington Airfield SP 2117	1	Pair displaying in April not found later may have attempted
Great Rissington SP 1818	0	None found but farmers report presence
Bledington SP 2222	1	Pair present until June probably attempted
Cleeve Hill SP 0124	?	Single observation in early April
Total	3 pairs	No pairs successful; one pair probably attempted but failed; two others at least held territory.

**3. Other areas in Worcestershire and Gloucestershire**

Site name	Number of pairs attempting to nest	Result
Dymock	Glos (SO 7029)	1?
Traditional site	birds recorded this year	
Arley Wood Worcs SO 7982	?	Traditional site much disturbed birds present probably moved on.
Stock Green Inkberrow SO 9858	?	Traditional site pair early on but did not breed
Beoley near Redditch Worcs SP 0472	0	Traditional but not recorded for many years
Upton Snodsbury Worcs SO 9454	1	Present in traditional site thought to have bred successfully.