

NORFOLK BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN

STONE-CURLEW

(Burhinus oedicnemus)

A long-legged bird of sparsely vegetated and stony places. In Norfolk, such habitat was provided by extensive heathland. Since the 1960s, it has taken to breeding on arable fields as heathland declined. Another Norfolk name, the 'wailing heath chicken', derives from the far-carrying nocturnal calls of the stone-curlew.

Ref 1/S7	Tranche 1	Species Action Plan 7
Plan Author:	RSPB	
Plan Co-ordinator:	RSPB	
Plan Leader:		
Date:	Stage:	
31 December 1998	Final Draft	
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1. CURRENT STATUS

National Status

- Rare and localised in the UK, stone-curlew numbers have fallen by some 85% since the 1940s and the species is now largely confined to Wessex and The Brecks.
- Stone-curlew is a Red List species (British Trust for Ornithology *et al*, 1996), having declined by over 50% in the last 25 years, as well as being a rare breeder and a species with an unfavourable conservation status in Europe (SPEC 3). It is protected under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, Annex 1 of 1979 EC Birds Directive and Appendix II of the Bern Convention.

Norfolk Status

- Norfolk and Suffolk together held 183 pairs in 2000 (72% of UK breeding stone-curlews). In Norfolk, these are largely confined to the Brecks, although a small population also exists in North Norfolk.

2. CURRENT FACTORS CAUSING LOSS OR DECLINE AND INHIBITING RECOVERY IN NORFOLK

- Loss of semi-natural grasslands. The conversion to arable farmland or forestry of suitable short-grazed, sparsely vegetated grasslands, particularly chalk and heath grasslands, is thought to be the main reason for the decline in breeding stone-curlews in England.
- The reduction or loss of grazing pressure by both rabbits and livestock has resulted in areas becoming unsuitable for breeding stone-curlews as a result of the growth of tall grass and scrub.
- Changes in farming systems. Breeding can occur on arable land, mostly spring-sown field crops since these retain their open structure (and therefore suitability as a breeding habitat) until June or July. The reduction in spring-sown crops and the general trend of agricultural intensification have led to a reduction in availability and suitability of this habitat. This is a less serious problem in Breckland than elsewhere in the UK.
- Agricultural operations, such as mechanical hoeing, can destroy eggs and young where nesting occurs on agricultural land.
- Indirect impacts from the increasing use and efficiency of pesticides (including herbicides, fungicides and insecticides), which are reducing food supplies for wildlife higher up the food chain.
- Fox, crow and possibly stoat predation, particularly on grasslands.

- Disturbance, perhaps including traffic (impact of noise and lights from roads), prevents the species using some areas that are otherwise suitable.
- Egg collecting. The eggs of UK stone-curlews are one of the top targets of those participating in this criminal activity.
- Other factors, including collisions with fences and utility lines.

3. CURRENT ACTION IN NORFOLK AND SUFFOLK

- Most semi-natural heathlands supporting stone-curlew are SSSIs and are positively managed. EN and NWT also manage heathland nature reserves in the Brecks.
- The Breckland Environmentally Sensitive Area Scheme has encouraged grazing of heathlands for stone-curlew and contained prescriptions for arable reversion. Over 400ha of arable reversion has taken place. The Breckland ESA is now closed for new entries and has been replaced by the Environmental Stewardship HLS Scheme which contains similar options.
- Stone-curlew is one of a suite of farmland species targeted by arable options introduced in 2002 under Countryside Stewardship. The OS3 option (over-wintered stubbles followed by spring fallow) should benefit this species if appropriately located. Management options appropriate to this species are included under the Environmental Stewardship HLS scheme.
- The RSPB/EN stone-curlew Recovery Project has been operating in Breckland and north Norfolk since the mid-1980s. The project locates and monitors breeding birds and where necessary liaises with farmers and landowners to protect nests from destruction by agricultural operations. Intervention on arable land has been the single most important factor behind the increase of the stone-curlew population. The Stone-curlew Recovery project is funded by the EN/RSPB Action for Birds in England Programme.
- Liaison with Ministry of Defence by English Nature and Royal Society for the Protection of Birds; awareness raising/advisory work by Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.
- Management to benefit stone-curlew is carried out and plans have been prepared for many Breckland heath nature reserves by Norfolk Wildlife Trust.
- Set-aside has been beneficial for stone-curlews. Derogations are available from Defra to permit the creation of bare ground for breeding stone-curlews in set-aside.
- The Brecks Heathland Heritage five year project commenced in 2001, with the aim of re-creating 300ha of heath from forestry and carrying out management work on a further 6,000ha of Breck heath.
- The Brecks Farmland SSSI has been notified. Wildlife Enhancement Scheme for stone-curlew plots is being taken up by farmers.

4. ACTION PLAN OBJECTIVES AND TARGETS

National

- Increase the breeding population in the present UK range to 200 pairs by 2000 and 300 pairs by 2010.
- Encourage recolonisation of the past breeding range.
- Increase the population breeding on semi-natural grassland to 120 pairs by 2000.

Norfolk

- Maintain the breeding population in Breckland (Norfolk as well as Suffolk) at no fewer than 172 pairs.
- Increase the breeding population in Norfolk and Suffolk to at least 225 pairs by 2010.
- Maintain a minimum of 7 breeding pairs in North Norfolk with a target of 15 breeding pairs by 2010.
- Consolidate and increase the protection, range and numbers of birds in the north-west Norfolk population.
- Encourage the re-colonisation of the past breeding range in Norfolk and Suffolk.
- Increase the proportion of population nesting on semi-natural grasslands and grass heaths to 20% where they would be less reliant on intervention and less susceptible to any future changes in farming practice.
- Maintain a minimum productivity of 0.70 fledged chick per pair by intervention on arable and reserve management where appropriate.

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.1	Policy and Legislation			
5.1.1	Ensure that agri-environment schemes and Environmentally Sensitive Areas contain prescriptions meeting stone-curlew requirements.	Consider the needs of stone-curlew when targeting the Environmental Stewardship HLS scheme.	NE	
5.1.2	Encourage arable reversion to heathland in Environmentally Sensitive Area and Countryside Stewardship schemes.	Encourage arable reversion to heathland in Brecks and north-west Norfolk.	NE	
5.2	Site Safeguard and Management			
5.2.1	Encourage favourable management plan for all Ministry of Defence and Forest Enterprise land.	Support the favourable management of Ministry of Defence land supporting stone-curlews.	NE, RSPB	MoD
5.2.2	Consider designating a Breckland Special Protection Area.	Encourage favourable Forest Design Plans for Thetford Forests.	FC, FE, NE, NWT, RSPB	
		Designate a Breckland SPA which includes all key stone-curlew breeding areas.	NE	
		Seek to ensure that sites designated for their stone-curlew interest are safeguarded from development.	NE	
		Ensure that all sites designated for their stone-curlew interest are maintained in favourable conservation status for the species.	NE	
		Ensure that the current and future needs of stone-curlew in Norfolk are taken into account in relation to the provision of new access under CROW.	NE	Norfolk Local Access Forum

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.3	Species Management and Protection			
5.3.1	Seek to protect nests and chicks on arable land.	Continue the current stone-curlew protection work in the Brecks and north-west Norfolk. Promote management of set-aside for stone-curlews. Promote HLS options in the Brecks. Promote appropriate agri-environment options.	RSPB, NE FWAG, RSPB, NE NE, RSPB NE, RSPB	Farmers and Landowners
5.3.2	Monitor the effects of fox predation on nesting and control if necessary.	Determine, through remote monitoring, the causes of predation of stone-curlew nests and implement necessary control measures where feasible.	RSPB, NE	Landowners and Game-keepers
5.3.3	Discourage illegal egg-collecting and seek to ensure offenders are prosecuted.	Discourage egg collecting and seek to ensure offenders are prosecuted.	NE, RSPB, NWT, Norfolk Constabulary	Landowners and Game-keepers
5.4	Advisory			
5.4.2	Ensure landowners and managers are aware of the presence, legal status and conservation requirements of stone-curlews.	Advise major landowners, farmers and government bodies on land management for stone-curlew.	RSPB, NE, FWAG	
5.5	Future Research and Monitoring			
5.5.1	Investigate survival data on birds on arable sites compared with semi-natural sites.	Monitor the condition of SSSI heaths for stone-curlew with particular attention to sward height and grazing levels and adjust management as necessary.	NE, RSPB	

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
		Investigate mechanisms determining the avoidance of major roads by stone-curlew and make recommendations for the mitigation of these effects.	RSPB	
5.5.2	Monitor the UK stone-curlew breeding population regularly.	Monitor stone-curlew breeding population to assess whether the action plan is attaining its objectives.	RSPB, NE	
5.5.3	Pass information gathered during survey and monitoring of this species to Joint Nature Conservation Committee or Biological Records Centre so that it can be incorporated in national databases.	Pass information gathered during survey and monitoring to Norfolk Biological Records Centre.	RSPB, NE	
5.6	Communications and Publicity			
5.6.1	Encourage birdwatchers to visit Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve at Weeting Heath to see stone-curlew to highlight the decline and importance of the species and minimise disturbance elsewhere.	Encourage people to visit Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve at Weeting Heath to see stone-curlew and to highlight the decline and importance of the species and its Breckland habitat. Discourage birdwatchers from visiting sites elsewhere.	NWT, N E RSPB	

NORFOLK DISTRIBUTION

Largely confined to the Brecks, although a small population also exists in North Norfolk.

MANAGEMENT GUIDANCE

(This guidance is a general summary; for more detailed information or advice, please consult the references or contacts below.)

How can I encourage stone-curlews?

On arable fields:

- The Higher Level Stewardship Scheme contains an option to provide cultivated plots for ground-nesting birds. For stone-curlews, this involves cultivating an area of two hectares or more within either set-aside or an arable crop and keeping it bare during the breeding season by cultivating or spraying.
- Apply to Defra for a derogation to cultivate set-aside in February or early March to create bare areas for nesting stone-curlews. Keep the area bare throughout the breeding season by cultivating or spraying.
- Increase the amount of spring cropping, as this provides nesting areas for stone-curlews.

In grassland:

- By keeping livestock on your farm, you will provide an important invertebrate food supply for stone-curlews.
- Create new areas of acid or calcareous grassland on arable farms to provide nesting and feeding habitat for stone-curlews. HLS has options for creating, restoring and maintaining grassland.
- Allow at least some grassland areas to be tightly grazed to produce a short sward (<2cm), which will provide nesting and feeding areas for stone-curlews.
- Ensure grassland areas have enough bare ground for stone-curlews to nest by creating cultivated areas within existing or new areas of grassland. (Note that if the grassland is an SSSI, you will need consent from Natural England.)

Management and locations of cultivated plots:

- Site plots away from major roads, occupied buildings and public rights of way.
- Plots should be in fields with an all-round open aspect and should be positioned not too close to trees and hedgerows, and ideally at the top of a ridge, slope or hill. They should not be positioned in areas close to sources of predation (eg near a fox earth or badger sett, or near areas that attract large numbers of crows).

- Ideally, the plot will remain in a fixed location. A 2ha plot is the minimum recommended area, being divided into two adjacent 1ha plots, which are then managed independently. The first of the plots should be prepared by discing in February to create a bare earth surface in time for the breeding season. The second half is then prepared in late May or early June, and subsequently, the first half again in August. Cultivation of each 1ha plot can then continue in rotation.
- The timing of plot management may need to be adjusted to suit local conditions or nesting birds, and there may be situations where spraying with herbicide is preferable to cultivation.

(Extracted from the RSPB/EN leaflet, Farming for Wildlife: Stone-curlew.)

REFERENCES

Farming for Wildlife: Stone-curlew. Leaflet produced by RSPB and English Nature.

CONTACTS

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