

SOS Save our Curlews Campaign

Report 2024

(Strettons area)

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Birds of Shropshire* estimated that the Curlew population declined by 77% between 1990 and 2010, down to around only 160 pairs, and had disappeared from 62% of the Bird Atlas survey squares that they occupied in 1990. They have continued to decline since, down to below 120 pairs. At the current rate of loss, the population will halve in 12 years, and virtually disappear within 24. There is a real danger that Curlew will become extinct in the County, unless urgent and effective action is taken to save them.

The Curlew population in southern England (south of a line from the Dee to the Wash) is estimated at 500 breeding pairs. The Shropshire population is more than 20% of this, and is therefore regionally and nationally important. The Shropshire Hills National Landscape (SHNL) holds about two-thirds of the County Population.



The Shropshire Ornithological Society (SOS) *Save our Curlews* Campaign started in 2018, and includes project work to find out what is happening to the local population, and campaign work based on the project results to attempt to stem and then reverse the decline.

2. PROJECT WORK

Curlew territories are located by volunteers, mainly members of the Strettons area Community Wildlife Group and the Church Stretton Branch of SOS, through conducting a bird survey. Project work involves nest finding, protecting nests with electric fencing, and radio-tagging and tracking chicks to find out how they use the landscape, and what happens to them. Understanding the reasons for low levels of chick survival is the key to an effective conservation plan.

The project work requires particular skills, and is very time-consuming, so professional workers are employed. Other costs have been the purchase of electric fences, and radio tags and tracking equipment, but no new equipment was needed in 2024.

Project work started in 2018, and has operated in six of the last seven years (the exception being 2020, due to covid-19 restrictions). It was undertaken for four years in the Upper Clun and Clee Hill areas 2018-22, and in four years (2021-24) in the Strettons area. These areas are all within the SHNL (In 2023, Project work also started around Oswestry, to ascertain if predation levels are fairly uniform in different parts of the County).

Strettons Area Project Results 2024

SACWG members located seven pairs, shown on the attached map. Forty-six volunteers spent at least 314 hours on the surveys.

The Project found six nests. Two were predated within a day, 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 radio-tagged and tracked, but three lived only for a couple of days, and the other six lived for no more than nine days. This is only one-quarter of the 35 days or so that a Curlew chick has to survive to be able to fly.

Field signs suggest that one nest was probably predated by a fox, but the other nests, and the chicks, could have been taken by a fox, or an avian predator. Potential avian predators of small chicks include Buzzard, Kite, Carrion Crow and Raven, and Curlews have been seen frequently driving away these species. Kestrel is also a possible predator, but no defensive action against Kestrel has been observed. While the predator cannot be known in all cases with 100% certainty, it is certain that all the potential predators, mammalian and avian, have higher populations than their naturally sustainable level because of the large amount of food available from the release of millions of gamebirds each year for shooting, only around 35% of which are actually shot. The others are easy prey for the whole range of predators and scavengers.

Project Results 2018 - 22

A full report, detailing project results since 2018 in the Clee Hill and Upper Clun Community Wildlife Group areas, and in the Strettons area since 2021, has been published and widely disseminated. It shows in much more detail the evidence that the main cause of Curlew decline is predation, driven by the large increase in predators fuelled by massive gamebird release. It can be found on the SOS website www.shropshirebirds.com/save_our_curlews/

Project Results 2023-24

Results in the Strettons area and Oswestry area in 2023 and 2024 have also been published on the SOS website, and those for the Strettons area only have been published in Stretton Focus.

3. FUNDING OF WORK IN THE STRETTONS AREA 2024

The SHNL Conservation Fund awarded a grant of £2,000. This financial contribution is gratefully acknowledged. The remainder of the costs were funded by a local Curlew Appeal, organised by SACWG, and SOS organised a county-wide Appeal, and contributed from its own funds.

4. DISSEMINATION

The results and Annual Report have been sent to the South of England Curlew Forum, the UK and Ireland Curlew Action Group (led by RSPB) and the Curlew Recovery Partnership for England, so the work is an integral part of the case to Government for effective Curlew conservation measures.

The locations of nests and territories of breeding pairs are submitted to the Shropshire Environmental Data Network (SEDN), which submits them to the National Biodiversity Network (NBN)..

The results up until that time were presented to the SHNL Partnership meeting in July 2023, concluding with a recommendation to include action to safeguard Curlews in both the SHNL Nature Recovery Plan and SHNL Management plan, by limiting pheasant release, and also reverting silage crops to single late-cut grass / hay crops.

5. CONCLUSION

The SOS Save our Curlews project will continue in future years, in the Strettons area, and around Oswestry. This will be our contribution, to keep producing more evidence for the need for immediate action to reduce predation pressures at the landscape scale by limiting gamebird release.

Project results and a full set of references can be found on our website

www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/

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