

# Current distribution and population trends of some rare waders in Belarus

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Breeding by Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*, Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus* and Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* has been proved in Belarus only during the last two decades. The first Oystercatcher nests were found in the early 1970s on the Prypiat river and several lakes in north-western Belarus. The population size was estimated in the mid 1980s to be at least 200 breeding pairs in the southern part of the country (the Prypiat, Dnieper, Sozh and lower Berezina rivers) and about 30 pairs in northern Belarus. Some population growth has probably continued into the 1990s. Breeding by Ringed Plovers has been noted only in the middle reaches of the Prypiat river. About 20 pairs were counted here in the mid 1980s and 35-40 pairs in the early 1990s. In 1926, breeding of Terek Sandpipers was proved in the Ukraine near the Belarussian border. Since then the species has colonised Belarus along the Prypiat river from Chernobyl' in the east, and the border of Brest and Gomel regions in the west. No obvious changes in the size of Terek Sandpiper populations have been noted during the last five years. A decrease in the numbers and range of Stone Curlew *Burhinus oedichnemus* has been recorded since the late 19th century. In the mid 1930s this species bred in the Mozyrsky, Khoynikskiy, Svetlogorskiy and Bargin districts of Gomel region. There was only one place in Bargin district where birds bred in 1980-91. Three pairs were censused there in 1983 but only one pair in 1991.

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Гнездование кулика-сороки *Haematopus ostralegus*, мородунки *Xenus cinereus* и галстучника *Charadrius hiaticula* впервые было доказано в Беларуси только в течение последних двух десятилетий. Первые гнезда кулика-сороки были найдены в начале 1970-х гг. на р. Припять и на нескольких озерах в северо-западной Беларуси. Численность популяции в середине 1980-х гг. оценивалась не менее, чем в 200 гнездящихся пар в южной части страны (реки Припять, Днепр, Сож и нижняя Березина) и примерно 30 пар на севере Беларуси. Некоторый рост популяции продолжался, наверное, и в 1990-е гг. Гнездование галстучников было отмечено только по среднему течению р. Припять, где около 20 пар было учтено в середине 1980-х и 35-40 пар в начале 1990-х гг. В 1926 г. гнездование мородунки впервые было доказано на Украине, недалеко от границы с Беларусью. С тех пор вид заселил Беларусь по реке Припять, от Чернобыля на востоке и от границы Брестской и Гомельской областей на западе. За последние пять лет ярких изменений численности популяций мородунки не было отмечено. Снижение численности и сокращение ареала авдотки *Burhinus oedichnemus* регистрируются уже с конца 19-ого века. В середине 1930-х гг. этот вид гнезвился в Мозырском, Хойникском, Светлогорском и Брагинском районах Гомельской области. В 1980-91 гг. авдотки гнездились только в одном месте в Брагинском районе. Там были учтены три пары в 1983 г., а лишь одна пара в 1991 г.

## Introduction

Twelve wader species are included in the Belarus Red Data Book, published in 1993. All these species are rare, endangered, or under threat of national extinction. Among them are Stone Curlew *Burhinus oedichnemus*, Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*,

Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* and Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*. A common feature of the distribution of these species is that they can be found locally in Belarus, where they breed at the limit of their range.

Stone Curlew seems to be a relict species which is declining steadily towards extinction, whereas the other three species have only been recorded breeding in Belarus in the last two decades and seem to be expanding their breeding range and increasing in numbers.

**Methods**

Data on the distribution of these species were collected in 1986-1992 over the Poles'e (southern Belarus). Some fragmentary data from earlier observations and publications are also summarised.

**Results and Discussion**

**Stone Curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus***

According to published distribution data, the views of local people and records from recent years, the breeding range in Belarus is steadily contracting (Figure 1) and this is confirmed by the numerical data. Data for the end of the 19th century show that breeding was centred on two main areas in the Poles'e (Shnitnikov 1913). In the 1930s, Stone Curlew were still fairly common in the Bargin and Khoynikskiy districts and were also recorded in other parts of Poles'e (Fedyushin & Dolbik 1967). After the 1950s, the negative trend became stronger. A pair of Stone Curlews was recorded for the last time in 1950 in the Kamenetskiy district, and in 1964 in the Svetlogorskiy district. By 1983, the only

Curlews, such as abandoned fields and waste-land, was either recultivated or used for pine plantations during the second half of the last century. Currently, the birds only occupy sand dunes in river valleys, or the edges of former bogs, some of which still remain in Poles'e after drainage. On the majority of sand dunes, measures to prevent sand movement, involving planting of pine and willow trees, have meant that as the trees colonise the dunes, the area of available breeding habitat for Stone Curlews is gradually decreasing.

After the accident at the Chernobyl' nuclear power station in 1986, Stone Curlews were found breeding in the evacuated area. By 1992 there had, however, been no noticeable increase in the population.

**Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus***

At the Braslavskiye lakes in the northern part of Belarus (Poozerie, or the northern lake region), according to unverified data (Dolbik & Dorofeev 1978) Oystercatchers began breeding in the 1970s, or even a little earlier. The breeding population recently reached about 30 pairs and is still increasing (Kozlov 1988). Since 1977, breeding has taken place on the islands of one of the largest artificial lakes, the Vileyskoye water reservoir, in the north-west of the Minsk region.



Figure 1. Stone Curlew breeding distribution in Belarus.

known Stone Curlew breeding location in Belarus was in the Bargin district, where three pairs were recorded although only one nest was found. In 1992, a possible new breeding site was found in the neighbouring Khoynikskiy district near Krasnosel'ye village where one bird exhibiting breeding behaviour was recorded.

Almost all the potential breeding habitat for Stone



Figure 2. Oystercatcher breeding distribution in Belarus.

Oystercatchers were first recorded breeding at the Pripyat river, southern Belarus in 1971 (Dolbik 1985). Numbers in southern Belarus have increased during the last two decades, with birds occupying new territories along the large rivers (the Dnieper, the Sozh, the Berezina, the Pripyat) further north and east (Figure 2). In 1982, according to counts conducted from a motor boat, the total number of Oystercatchers on 300 km of the Pripyat river banks

from Pinsk town to Kiev water reservoir was about 90 pairs. In 1986, 115 pairs were counted along the same river segment and 70 more pairs were nesting in the lower Dnieper (within Belarus), the lower Sozh and the lower Berezina rivers.

Along the Pripyat river, Oystercatchers breed on rather small, sparsely vegetated, sandy spits. On rare occasions, nests are situated on dry, sandy ridges with xerophytic vegetation at the edges of flood-plain meadows. In all cases, the nests are not far from water.

### Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

Information on the possible occurrence of this species in the Pripyat river flood-plain has existed since the mid-1970s, although breeding was only proved there in 1986. The most recently recorded breeding areas are located mainly in the middle reaches of the Pripyat river (Figure 3) on dry, sandy ridges covered with sparse xerophytic vegetation in the open flood-plain meadows. In the second half of the 1980s, about 20 pairs were nesting at the main breeding locality near the town of Turov, whilst at the beginning of the 1990s, 35-40 pairs were counted in



Figure 3. Ringed Plover breeding distribution in Belarus.

the same area.

Ringed Plovers form loose colonies with other wader species (Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*, Redshank *Tringa totanus*, Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*, Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*) and also with Little and Common Terns *Sterna albifrons* and *S. hirundo*. Local breeding density in optimal places exceeds 3.5 pairs.ha<sup>-1</sup>. This species is an early breeder. In 1990, the first eggs were laid on 4-6 April, i.e. the same time as the first Lapwing clutches, and three weeks earlier than those of the Little Ringed Plovers, which would have only just returned in early April.

### Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*

This species has been recorded breeding in the Ukrainian Poles'e (the northernmost part of western Ukraine) since 1926. Since that time, it has spread along the Pripyat river from Chernobyl' up to the boundaries of the Gomel and Brest regions (Figure 4). The highest numbers are found in Zhitkovichskiy district (near Turov), where 20-25 pairs were recorded at the beginning of the 1990s. No noticeable changes in numbers have been recorded during the last five years.

Breeding Terek Sandpipers favour the overgrazed flood-plain pastures with sparse vegetation on sandy soils and also islands and river banks. They prefer to nest within loose colonies of numerous wader species or close to the nests of Little and Common Terns. Nests are situated mainly on plant material deposited by the river during spring floods, in flood-plain meadows, or on river banks.



Figure 4. Terek Sandpiper breeding distribution in Belarus.

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