

BREEDING WADERS OF LOWLAND PASTURELAND IN BRITAIN

by G.H.Green

Awakening interest and concern about the loss of wader breeding habitat when pastureland is subject to agricultural improvement is leading to intensive survey work. The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) has been working out methodology for surveying the waders of wet meadows. Pilot studies in 1980 are continuing in 1981. Following my note in August 1980 WSG Bulletin (29:5), where I expressed concern about the hastening pace of agricultural change in Scottish Valleys, discussions at the Scottish Ornithologists' Club's Conference in October have led to provisional plans for a survey of breeding waders in Scottish straths and glens starting in 1981. Obviously the two projects are closely related and we hope that some sort of joint enterprise will evolve. The details of the interrelationships between the Wader Study Group, Scottish Ornithologists' Club and British Trust for Ornithology have yet to be worked out but we felt the matter was so urgent that a preliminary announcement in December 1980 WSG Bulletin was desirable. We have therefore gone to press before detailed arrangements could be made. We hope WSG members and other people and societies will participate in the schemes and publicise them. In Scotland, where many valleys easily defined (compared with broad flood plains further south), there is considerable scope for survey work on holidays, special visits or 'expeditions'.

The two items below are (1) the first announcement of the Scottish project and (2) a statement on the BTO survey. If you wish to participate in either scheme please contact the organiser.

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PROPOSED SURVEY OF THE BREEDING WADERS OF SCOTTISH STRATHS AND GLENS

by H. Galbraith and R.W.Furness

In a recent WSG Bulletin (August 1980 29:5) Harry Green expressed his concern over continuing drainage and reclamation schemes in the Scottish straths and glens. Prior to reclamation many of these areas were known to hold important breeding populations of waders, many of which rely on the existence of damp or boggy areas for their food supply. Once ploughed or afforested these areas support few waders. With grants currently available from the EEC for the improvement of marginal land this disturbing tendency may well accelerate.

It is important that we find out now, before it is too late, just what the effects may be on our breeding wader populations and for this reason this enquiry has been suggested. We hope it will be organised jointly by the Wader Study Group, the Scottish Ornithologists' Club and the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO). It will be closely associated with the BTO's survey of waders breeding on wet meadows (see below). The details of contributions from the various societies are still being discussed but we hope that a pilot study will start in 1981.

The ultimate aims of the enquiry are:

1. To establish a baseline for continuing monitoring, against which the effects of agricultural change may be assessed.
2. To provide estimates of abundance and distribution of inland wader breeding populations.
3. To investigate the habitat requirements of our breeding waders.
4. To pinpoint areas worthy of conservation.

The enquiry will have two phases which will probably need to be spread over several years. The initial phase will establish estimates of species abundance, indicate areas worthy of conservation and examine habitat requirements. While we want to get the project under way as soon as possible, 1981 may prove to be a pilot-study year. Nonetheless we are keen that as many people as possible should take part. The second phase will consist of a monitoring programme to determine rates of loss of wader numbers and habitat.

For the enquiry to be representative it is essential that a reasonable cross-section of agricultural habitats and perhaps other areas are examined. Detailed studies of the effects of afforestation on moorland breeding waders are being carried out for the NCC and RSPB, so we want to concentrate on wader populations likely to be affected by agricultural changes at lower altitudes. For this reason, pasture, hay meadows, bogs, rough grazing, cereal fields, plough land, etc should all be considered suitable study areas. We would also be pleased to receive contributions from observers who wish to work in other habitats, e.g. machair. We are particularly anxious that areas of proven worth (eg east coast straths) are covered, but many areas (eg west coast glens) are still unknown quantities, and may prove particularly rewarding.

Participants will be provided with a set of recommendations in time for the 1981 field season. The size of study area will depend on topography, water density and habitat type and the time available to the observer. Many areas could be worked from a public road by car or bicycle. Visits will be required between April and early July. Where possible thorough coverage by foot to locate pairs of Snipe Gallinago gallinago, Curlew Numenius arquata etc. would be ideal, but less thorough surveys would also be valuable as the presence of breeding Oystercatchers Haematopus ostralegus, Lapwings Vanellus vanellus, Redshank Tringa totanus etc. can be reasonably assessed from the roadside. Volunteers will be asked to complete a record card for each study site.

The results of this enquiry will have consequences extending beyond the summer season as they may allow us to assess our current assumptions concerning the racial origin and wintering areas of local estuarine wader populations during the nonbreeding season. We hope that ornithologists resident in Scotland will take part in the pilot survey for this enquiry, but important work can also be carried out on a short holiday in suitable areas and we hope visiting birdwatchers will make a contribution. If you would like to take part and census waders in your local area or if you are planning a holiday in Scotland or are willing to make special visits please fill in the form accompanying this Bulletin and return it to Hector Galbraith, 96 Neilston Road, Paisley PA2 6EL, Strathclyde, Scotland.

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