

## BREEDING WADERS OF THE OUTER HEBRIDES

by G. H. Green

In WSG Bulletin 31:2 we drew attention to the proposed EEC-funded agricultural improvement of the machair in the Western Isles. At that time we expressed concern about the likely fate of waders breeding there if the scheme went ahead without allowance for wildlife conservation. The scheme is gathering momentum and we are most alarmed to hear that the importance of the area as a wader breeding ground is, apparently, not being taken into account by the agricultural improvers. It should be. The density of breeding waders is high: in places even higher than expected as revealed by fieldwork this year. For example, there appear to be more breeding Dunlin, *Calidris alpina* at higher densities, than elsewhere in Europe (R.Fuller, pers. comm.). The populations are so important that the proposed changes in land management cannot go unquestioned. It may well be necessary for WSG to help organise a comprehensive survey next spring so that the full facts of numbers and distribution become known. Some work has of course been done (references in WSG Bull 31:2 and 32:29-33). The following papers in this issue give some details of the proposed scheme and further data on the waders.

## OUTER HEBRIDES - THREAT TO BREEDING WADERS

by C. J. Cadbury and S. Housden

The Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for Scotland (DAFS) has recently received EEC approval for a five year Integrated Development Programme (IDP) to support the communities in the Outer Hebrides. The total estimated cost is £56 million. The £20 million allocated to agriculture and fisheries will be split on a 60 : 40 basis between the British Government and the EEC. The other £36 million is largely ear-marked for improvement of roads, piers and ferries but with £4 million for tourism and craft industries. DAFS is confident that work can begin on the agricultural side of the IDP this autumn (Caufield 1982).

As yet we do not know which areas within the Western Isles will receive support but the following sums have been allocated: £1,600,000 for improving 13,000 ha of inbye land (the more peaty blackland inland of the machair), £1,000,000 for 10,000 ha of common grazing and £300,000 for 1000 ha of machair. It is assumed that much of this will be directed towards the improvement of grass quality for grazing, hay or silage on the crofts near the west coast, particularly on the Uists and Benbecula.

Machair is almost peculiar to Britain and Ireland. There is only c.6000 ha of machair in the Western Isles but this represents a large proportion of the total and includes some of the best examples of the transition from exposed shell-sand beach through machair plain, marsh and alkaline loch to blackland. The rich variety (at least 6 species) and high densities of breeding waders which this range of habitats supports is exceptional, even in European terms (Fuller 1978, Wilson 1978, Fuller et al 1979). Moreover, the marshes and meadows on the inbye land provide one of the last strongholds of the corncrake in Western Europe (Cadbury 1980).

Shortly a DAFS project team will be encouraging islanders to submit proposals for improvements that qualify for grants. The agricultural programme is bound to affect wildlife. Further drainage of the machair marshes will damage or destroy not only the breeding sites of many Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* and Redshank *Tringa totanus* but those of a remnant population of Red-necked Phalaropes *Phalaropus lobatus* and the most outstanding coastal breeding concentration of Dunlin *Calidris alpina* in Britain (Fuller 1978 pers. comm.). The present system of cultivation on the dry machair in which small sandy spots are 'rested' as fallow after a few years is much favoured by strikingly high numbers of breeding Oystercatchers *Haematopus ostralegus*, Ringed Plovers *Charadrius hiaticula*, Lapwings *Vanellus vanellus* and even Little *Sterna albifrons* and Arctic Terns *Sterna parasidaea*. Intensive cultivation of more permanent and larger arable fields is likely to be to the detriment of these birds. The Corncrake *Crex crex* population will almost certainly suffer, as it has done elsewhere, as a result of the drainage, reseeding and fertilizing of meadows. The tall sward of leys provide attractive nesting cover but the grass is mown earlier than the 'natural', herb-rich meadows, while the Corncrakes are still incubating or have small chicks.

Only four of the 39 SSSIs in the Outer Hebrides give some protection to certain good machair areas for waders, but a number of the best sites remain outside the SSSI series and therefore are most vulnerable. NCC must take prompt action to schedule these and some meadowland for Corncrakes.

There is no time to waste. Wader Study Group members can indeed help by:

- a) supplying information on wader populations and important ornithological sites in the Outer Hebrides;
- b) drawing attention to developments damaging to bird populations;
- c) writing to Stuart Housden (at RSPB) if you feel you could assist in other ways.

### References

- Cadbury, C.J. 1980. The status and habitats of the Corncrake in Britain 1978-79. Bird Study 27: 203-218.  
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Fuller, R.J., Wilson, J.R. & Coxon, P. 1979. Birds of the Outer Hebrides: the waders. Proc. Roy. Soc. Edinburgh 77B:419-430.  
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