

# WSG INTERNATIONAL PROJECT ON BLACK-WINGED STILTS: FIRST PROGRESS REPORT

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## INTRODUCTION

A description of the main aims of this international project was published in *WSG Bulletin* 42: 10-11. During spring 1985 some studies were carried out in Greece, Italy and France, and a meeting of the major participants at the WSG Annual Meeting in La Rochelle, France, in October 1985 proved useful in organising the future of the project.

## PROGRESS

We present below the main results from each country. During this first year the major aim was to develop contacts between the European countries where the Black-winged Stilts breed. Without previously meeting, it was difficult to get homogeneous results, since some people being already involved in their own research.

**GREECE** (co-ordinator: Vassilis Goutner, Dept. of Zoology, Univ. of Thessaloniki)

Due to a mail delay, it was impossible to organize a national census of the breeding population in 1985. Some important sites for Black-winged Stilts, such as Evros delta, were deserted in spring 1985 because of the lack of suitable habitats. A study on the breeding biology in Greece was carried out in an abandoned salt marsh in the Gulf of Thessaloniki. 34 nests were followed during the breeding period and some data on nest site selection, egg laying, hatching and breeding success were collected. A total of 14 chicks were ringed - 8 with colour rings - but colour-ringing of these birds ceased, to avoid confusion with other national programmes in France and Italy.

**ITALY** (co-ordinator: Roberto Tinarelli, Bologna)

The C.I.S.O. (Centro Italiano Studi Ornitologici) joined with the project of a coordinated study on Black-winged Stilt and organized for 1985 a national census of breeding population, co-ordinated by Roberto Tinarelli.

In the first year the most important aim was to census the breeding population. Data also on breeding chronology, nest descriptions, breeding success, threats and measures of protection for each colony have been collected. Details will be published in a report of the research.

To standardize collection of data, both a card and a booklet have been prepared regarding census techniques. During the 1985 census Black-winged Stilts were found in 50 of the around 80 breeding sites known for 1980-83 years. Nest-site visits were made from the last week of April to the second week of July and the census techniques used were direct nest-counting and counts of displaying adults.

Breeding pairs censused were 673-768, plus an estimated 60-120 pairs in Puglia in the same year. The total number was 733-888 breeding pairs. In previous years, we estimate the following total numbers of breeding pairs:

1350-1550 in 1978-82; 1444-1671 (average 1510) in 1983; 784-954 (870) in 1984. It is not yet possible at the moment to give an explanation of the large fluctuations of the Italian population in the last few years. The strong decrease of the population in 1984 was mainly in the Emilia-Romagna region (- 47%), in Toscana and in Piemonte. A probable explanation of this decrease in northern and central Italy in 1984 is the heavy spring rainfall, because the fluctuation was especially in coastal wetlands, where water level rose most. In contrast, Black-winged Stilts breeding in the settling ponds of sugar refineries (between 13-22% of the Italian population), where water level does not change notably in response to rainfall, did not show any marked change in the same year (197-211 breeding pairs in 1983 and 191-211 in 1984). The size and distribution of the population in Italy are shown in Figures 1 and 2. Habitats used by breeding Black-winged Stilts are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of pairs of Black-winged Stilts breeding in each habitat in 1985.

Ricefields	20	2.5 %
Settling ponds of sugar refineries and piggeries	152	18.8 %
Fish farms and canals	6	0.7 %
Salines	249	30.7 %
Dammed pools	85	10.5 %
Lagoons and coastal pools	298	36.8 %



Figure 1. Distribution of Black-winged Stilts in Italy in 1985.

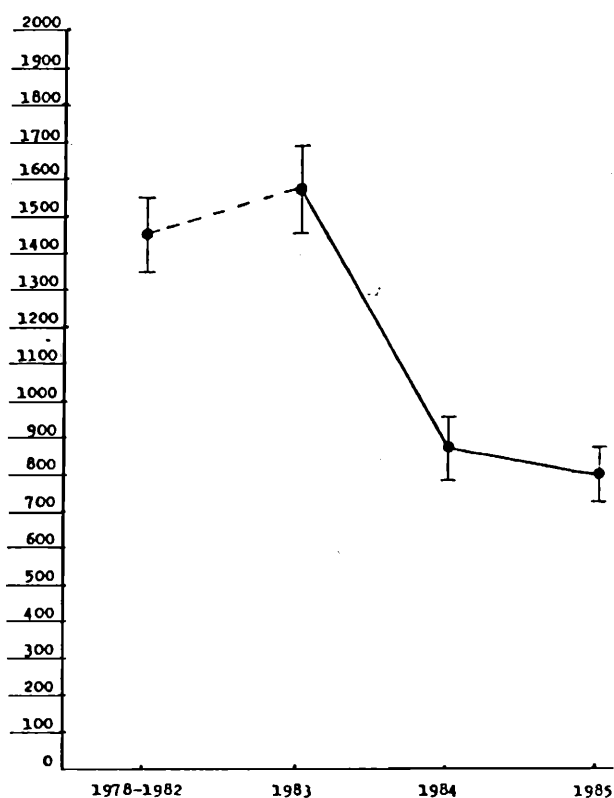


Figure 2. Annual changes in the size of the Italian population of Black-winged Stilts.

The 1985 census was made by a group of 30 researchers who also collected the data for the previous years. In addition, a colour-ringing programme began in 1984 as part of a study on the population dynamics, migration routes and wintering sites of Black-winged Stilts.

FRANCE (co-ordinator: Philippe J. Dubois, LPO, Rochefort)

In spring 1985, a LPO team (Ch. Bavoux, J.-J. Blanchon, Ph. J. Dubois, H. Robreau and J. Seriot) was set up to follow the breeding of Black-winged Stilts in 2 different localities in France: one on the Atlantic coast (in Charente-Maritime and Vendée départements) and another on the Mediterranean coast (Aude and Hérault départements). The aims were the same as in past years:

1. to get more information on the breeding biology (egg-laying, hatching, fledging, breeding success, and also clutch size, methods of determining the age of eggs, the role of both sexes in the breeding chronology);
2. to ring chicks (and adults if possible) on the breeding grounds;
3. to search for birds which were ringed in past years; and
4. to document more about post-breeding dispersal.

More than 80 nests were followed during the breeding period, bringing much valuable information. A total of 136 chicks were ringed during spring 1985, 114 of them with colour-rings, on both the west and south coasts. Only 5 adults were ringed at the nest. 3 ringed birds were found during the spring on

the west Atlantic coast, 2 were ringed in 1983, the other in 1984, all in the same region! The 2 birds ringed in 1983 were paired, but they apparently did not breed, suggesting that the birds can not breed before they are 3 years old. For the first time, polygamy in Black-winged Stilts was proved (twice).

Attempts to catch birds during their post-breeding dispersal failed, and we have yet to perfect methods of catching adults at the nest.

#### THE FUTURE

During the WSG meeting at La Rochelle the 3 co-ordinators, along with A.J. Alberto from Spain, discussed plans for 1986. The following work is planned.

1. If possible, a national census in Greece and an estimate of the Spanish population;
2. The major objective is to organize a co-ordinated international colour-ringing programme in Greece, Italy, France and Spain, and perhaps also in Portugal. Each country will use a specific colour-ring to identify the origins of ringed birds;
3. To intensify research on breeding biology, especially in Spain;
4. To ring as many birds (chicks as well as adults) as possible in each country; and
5. To organize surveys in north-western and western Africa to establish more about the wintering of Black-winged Stilts, and their migration flyway from Europe to Africa.

We hope to meet again at the beginning of spring 1986 (in March) to plan for the breeding season.

Information about the project should be sent to

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