

Wash Oystercatchers starving

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Increased numbers of ringing recoveries of dead Oystercatchers *Haematopus ostralegus* during autumn 1992 and early winter from the Wash in eastern England gave early warning of potential problems. The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) was host to a meeting in February 1993 to discuss the long-term implications for Oystercatcher populations. Nigel Clark reported on the preliminary conclusions of the meeting in BTO News 185, from which this note is reprinted with acknowledgement.

The Birds of Estuaries Enquiry, organised by the BTO, has shown that the number of Oystercatchers on the Wash has been steadily increasing. Figure 1 shows the pattern for the last 21 years.

The wintering population rose from around 15,000–20,000 in the 1970s to around 30,000 in the mid 1980s, with a more dramatic increase to a peak of over 45,000 in 1988. The numbers then declined to less than 30,000 in the winter of 1991/92. Last autumn there were 25,000–30,000 until November, declining during December so that by January 1993 only 12,000 remained on the Wash.

Throughout autumn 1992 unusually large numbers of Oystercatchers were being found dead around the Wash. The BTO received a steady trickle of ringing

recoveries, many of which were juvenile birds, and it was not until late autumn and early winter that ringing recoveries of adults started to arrive.

Just after Christmas there was a spate of ringing recoveries which coincided with the period of cold weather over Christmas. This continued with over 60 recoveries of Oystercatchers from the Wash in January alone – over ten times the number of Oystercatchers that are normally found dead around the Wash in a whole year.

Many of the recoveries from the Wash had been ringed many years before, so it was not just very young birds that died. Three birds had been ringed as long ago as 1967 and 1968, and are some of the oldest ringed birds to be found on the Wash. By January, most juveniles had left the Wash to go elsewhere, and there were very few recoveries of juveniles.

The Wash Wader Ringing Group made regular catches throughout the winter to assess Oystercatcher condition. They found that the condition of birds was consistently slightly below levels that would be expected for the time of year. In addition, many birds were still moulting their flight feathers in mid-January when they would normally have completed moulting by the end of November, suggesting that most individuals were finding it difficult to survive.

Oystercatchers had been showing some unusual habits too, with large numbers moving onto inland fields around the Wash. Whilst it is normal to see one or two Oystercatchers feeding on fields, large flocks are an unusual sight. In other parts of Britain, especially in Scotland and north-west England, inland feeding by Oystercatchers is very common, but not on the Wash.

Field feeding birds were not feeding on the inter-tidal area of the Wash at all during daylight hours, and some of them were obviously in poor condition. Others were

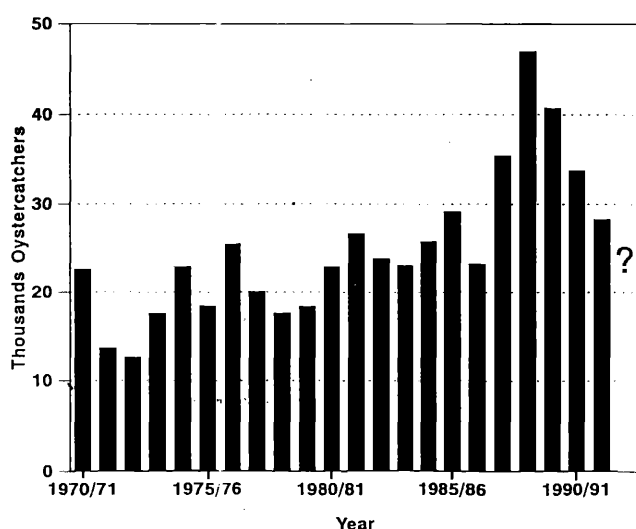


Figure 1. Peak numbers of Oystercatchers now show a rapid decline from their 1989/90 peak.

