

# Status and future of Curlew in Wales

Builth Wells, 24 January 2018

A conference, organised by: Mary Colwell, Natural Resources Wales, Welsh Ornithological Society, Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, RSPB Cymru, Ecology Matters, Mike Smart.

## Conclusions and recommendations

*A message to influence the role and direction of Curlew conservation action in Wales*

### Background

Due to its adverse global conservation status, the global importance but chronic decline of the UK's breeding population, and the large numbers of breeding birds from north-west Europe that winter in the UK, the Eurasian Curlew is now considered to be the most pressing bird conservation priority in the UK. The Welsh Curlew conference was the third UK and Ireland Conference to be held for this species and was attended by 120 participants from across the conservation, farming, game and rural policy sectors. The conference, organised by six partners involved in bird research and conservation in the UK, addressed the issue of reversing Curlew declines in Wales (for the agenda see Annex 1). The primary objective of the conference was to identify and build a consensus on the priorities for Curlew conservation action in Wales.

During the conference, a committee drafted the conclusions, recommendations and associated actions presented here. This document aims to:

1. Provide a statement of the role of Welsh Curlew conservation in global biodiversity conservation
2. Identify Curlew conservation priorities in Wales
3. Contribute to the setting of Curlew conservation action in Wales.

The recommendations are centred on Wales. However, there were many participants from across the UK and Ireland; and many of the recommendations have UK and Ireland implications. The conference would welcome their consideration and use as a model in any other UK and Ireland regions.

These conclusions and recommendations are addressed to governmental and non-governmental organisations at local, national and international levels that are working to promote the species' recovery, as well as to all agencies, including policy-makers, funding agencies and academic institutions, both within and out-with Wales, whose decisions will have an impact on the effectiveness of Curlew conservation action.

### Recommendations

The recommendations were identified during an afternoon workshop session where 11 groups (each consisting of 10 delegates) were asked the question – “What do we need to initiate a Curlew programme for recovery in Wales?” Contributions from these groups were collated to identify the top five themes, here ranked in terms of importance. The delegate groups were then asked, “What are the solutions/recommendations for each theme?” As for the first question, the main actions suggested across all groups were collated and summarised. The key Curlew recommendations and associated actions were:

### **1. Establish an All-Wales Curlew Action Group**

- Identify a lead organisation to drive the formation of the Action Group.
- Develop a Wales Curlew Action Plan.
- Develop Welsh regional Curlew working groups (eg North, mid and South Wales)
- Consider the Irish Curlew model as a fit for Wales.
- Build stronger collaborative working both with biologists, landowners/occupiers and decision-makers across the range of land-use and economic policy.
- Include local champions/co-coordinators to ensure collaboration with professionals.
- Develop an All Wales Curlew Working Group website and email forum.

### **2. Implement a monitoring programme of key Curlew populations**

- Establish an inventory of Curlew “hot spots” from the Bird Atlas (2007-2011) and other data sources eg RSPB Cymru.
- Circulate an open request to all stakeholders and farming communities for Curlew records within and out-with key Curlew areas.
- Establish a network of bespoke Curlew recorders.
- Establish a network of community-led groups to monitor, engage with research initiatives (GPS tagging, mobile predator fences), fundraise and take ownership of breeding Curlew in their area.
- Standardise monitoring approaches to ensure repeatability and comparability (i.e. 3/5 visits).
- Promote the concept of a national Curlew co-ordinator.

### **3. Research and recommended improvements to Curlew agri-environment prescriptions.**

- Evidence-based review of Curlew prescriptions within existing agri-environment schemes (AES). Have they worked? Are they suitable?
- Pro-Curlew policies embedded within AES ie outcome-led prescriptive management.
- Effective, transparent monitoring of Curlew AES outcome(s).
- Review and publish existing work on Curlew-specific AES prescriptions, uptake, spatial matching (is it happening in the right places?) and Curlew response (impact) from Tir Gofal and Glastir monitoring programmes.
- Analyse habitat where Atlas/BirdTrack report territorial Curlew and critically review habitat prescriptions for AES.
- Support research on ecological requirements of breeding Curlew in upland and lowland Wales (tracking, invertebrate sampling, nest protection etc).
- Develop recommendations on AES prescriptions including spatial scale and habitat extent/quality.
- Advocate the concept of cross-boundary farm agreements at a landscape level ie farm clusters to deliver all components of Curlew breeding ecology.
- Pilot demonstration scheme for Curlew prescriptive measures.
- Use a strong lobbying voice from NGO sector to encourage political will.

#### **4. Engage farmers and landowners**

- Develop a network of local coordinators in each Curlew hotspot to liaise and undertake monitoring.
- Co-ordinated media campaign across all stakeholders to raise the plight of Curlew.
- Identify local farming Curlew champions within each Curlew key area to raise the awareness within farming communities.
- Develop anti-predator measures (ie predator control, regional network of electric fences).
- Targeted, but consistent messages advocated by landowning representative organisations (FWAG Cymru, NFUW, FUW, Grazing Associations, BASC, GWCT, Countryside Alliance) to raise Curlew conservation with their members.
- Create a 'Curlew friendly farm' premium for farm products.
- Develop an All Wales Curlew Working Group website accessible to all.

#### **5. Create public awareness about the decline of Curlews.**

- Co-ordinated media campaign across all stakeholders to raise the plight of Curlew.
- Co-ordinated presentations to local groups eg Young Farmers, Girl Guides.
- All Wales Curlew Working Group website and forum, social media etc.
- Targeted Curlew TV programme (ie Iolo Williams).

## **Conclusions**

The Irish Curlew experience teaches us that the universal commitment to species recovery or action planning with specific objectives can be a valuable catalyst in ensuring the efficient and effective channelling of conservation action. Scientific rapid-evaluation approaches have proved effective in several high-profile UK recovery projects that have reversed population declines in species such as Bittern, Crane, Black Grouse, Chough and Red Kite.

A range of striking features emerged throughout the day by both speakers, chairs and other participants, these are captured below.

### **Cultural icon**

Curlew are an iconic species of upland heath and lowland grasslands and are a hugely popular species that embody wild places; they provoke a range of emotions that many have expressed in poetry, art and music and the public will demand their conservation. The great Welsh poets have used the evocative call of the Curlew to capture a range of sentiments – R S Thomas, Vernon Watkins and Dylan Thomas have all used Curlews in their work, and much of Welsh folklore refers to the power of Curlews calling over the moors. To lose the Curlew from Wales is to lose more than just a species, it is the loss of a creature that has inspired generations of thinkers, writers, artists and musicians.

### **Collaborative working**

Steve Redpath articulated the need for collaborative working and suggested that biologists, conservationists and ornithologists in Wales and elsewhere need to build stronger partnerships both with other biologists, farmers and with decision-makers across land-use and economic policy. This will be facilitated by better communication built on clear but simple messages for non-biologists. There are many examples where Action Plans have been shelved because they were written by species specialists with little or no input from other stakeholders, particularly from across other relevant sectors and local community participation. Clearly, the relevant conservation specialists must be

involved in developing the framework for Curlew conservation action. However, a key message from this conference was that it is vital that local stakeholders are involved in this process with the need for a flexible interplay between a 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' approach.

### **Monitoring**

Curlew recovery can be grouped into four linked areas: 1) monitoring populations and identification of problems and priorities, 2) ecological studies leading to the identification of causes and testing of potential solutions, 3) successful conservation outcomes and 4) raised awareness of public, landowner/occupier and decision-makers, leading to a better policy.

There was a strong feeling that the geographical range contribution of Curlew breeding in Wales should be maintained in the short-term and enhanced in the long-term, both to avoid the risk of local or wider extinction and to enable people to enjoy them. With this view, a monitoring programme must be urgently developed and taken forward to identify Curlew "hot spots" throughout Wales in both upland and lowland habitats.

Several speakers emphasized that detailed ecological research with long data series is the ideal basis for conservation action. However, the conservation urgency for Curlew demands shorter studies, informed by intuition and knowledge to reach specific recommendations for action either at a local, regional or country level. Several inspirational discussions suggest this should be facilitated by a volunteer led approach, where for example, all monitoring and or science projects is repeatable and comparable with other Curlew areas.

Monitoring, research and recovery action across all Curlew key areas must be taken forward locally where there is an integrated and common approach of data exchange and information to reinforce national actions across the species' range. Such scoping will depend on a coordinated, large and widespread force of volunteer input.

The conservation intervention tool of headstarting was discussed and it was suggested that this approach could be applied to increase Curlew breeding success. Headstarting involves specialists collecting eggs from incubating birds in the wild, hatching and hand-raising the chicks in captivity to fledging age, and releasing the birds back into the wild. This intervention has been trialed on avian species recovery programmes for globally endangered species such as the Spoon-billed Sandpiper, and in UK for Black-tailed Godwit.

### **Engagement**

One of the key aspects considered important was to promote the engagement with farming and landowner communities; this could be delivered by encouraging and nurturing 'local Curlew champions'. It was accepted that farmers are enthusiastic about Curlews but may not fully understand the reasons for decline. Local (hopefully Welsh speaking) independent enthusiasts could be invaluable in building that understanding and enthusiasm for tackling all the issues surrounding the decline, galvanising and getting them thinking/talking.

Following on from the recent 'Call of the Curlew' workshop a website has been already set up at [www.curlewcall.org](http://www.curlewcall.org) with a view to conserving breeding Curlews in southern and lowland Britain. This site contains a lot of basic information that would be of value to Welsh Curlew workers, and the Curlew Forum would be very happy to offer space on Welsh Curlews on this website until the Welsh website is up and running.

## **Predation on Curlew**

There is growing evidence from studies in the UK and elsewhere that breeding populations of several ground-nesting birds, such as waders, are more likely to be limited by predation. Andrew Hoodless (GWCT) presented a review of Curlew breeding success and how this is influenced by the impact of predation. It was suggested that Curlew need to have a breeding success of  $\geq 0.5$  fledged chicks per breeding pair to maintain population stability. Peer-reviewed studies suggest a high proportion of breeding attempts failed at the nest stage, with predation accounting for a significant percentage of nest failures.

Discussion focused on the suite of intervention measures that can be applied to reduce its impact. Such interventions included removal (predator control) and/or exclusion of predators (anti-predatory fencing). Several presentations touched on targeted predator control as an effective form of intervention to improve Curlew breeding success. Excluding mammalian predators (foxes, badgers) with mobile electric fences was also considered as an alternative intervention tool. Here temporary enclosures protect individual nests to improve hatching success, as demonstrated by the work undertaken in Shropshire.

## **An agri-environment scheme fit for Curlew recovery**

There is a need for an evidence-based review of existing AES requirements for breeding Curlew. Have they worked? Are they suitable? It was recognised that the key requirements are the maintenance of extensive farming systems, including options for out-wintering cattle and appropriate levels of grazing. Discussion also centred on a key element to any AES delivery, namely, securing capital works payments that are realistic and attractive enough to deliver species recovery. Curlew would benefit from adjustments in agricultural policies where farmers are incentivised on outcome-led results.

## **Natural resource management**

A main challenge often discussed was how to incorporate Curlew conservation delivery into the broader framework of delivery for the sustainable management of natural resources (SMNR). This was crucial to enable the unlocking of funding streams on a wider scale. It was widely noted that a case study or trial is required to demonstrate and articulate how the key principles of SMNR can be delivered e.g. Curlew /mixed-grazing /quality premium produce /traditional breeds /sustainable moorland grazing /re-wetting peat /hay meadows /pollinators /legal predator control /farm economics /eco-system resilience /human well-being.

The Conference organising committee express their gratitude and appreciation to all the speakers and participants for their energy, enthusiasm and passion for Curlew recovery in Wales.

## **Next steps**

- The drafting committee will convene and identify membership of a Wales Curlew Action Group and convene a meeting of the group before May 2018. Regional working groups may also be created to support the strategic direction of curlew work in Wales
- Develop a Wales Curlew recovery plan
- Identify Curlew 'hot-spots' in both upland and lowland habitats by interrogating the Bird Atlas data
- Develop a network of community groups within each Curlew hot spot
- Initiate constructive dialogue with key decision-makers across conservation, governmental and policy areas before May 2018.

*Drafting Committee: Patrick Lindley, Mary Colwell, Mike Smart, Rachel Taylor and Dave Smith*

*5 March 2018*



# Status and Future of Curlew in Wales

Royal Welsh Agricultural Showground, Builth Wells, Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> January 2018

09.30-10.00 Arrivals, registration and coffee

## 10.00 – 11.25 SETTING THE SCENE Chair Dave Rees

10.00-10.10	Welcome and introduction	Mary Colwell
10.10-10.20	The importance of Curlews in Wales	Iolo Williams
10.20-10.30	The national picture and status of Curlew in Wales	Patrick Lindley
10.30-10.40	A sheep farmer's perspective	Phil Stocker
10.40-10.55	RSPB Curlew trial management project (north Wales)	David Smith and Fiona Walker
10.55-11.10	Tagging breeding Curlew	Rachel Taylor
11.10-11.25	Update on nest monitoring, Curlew Country, Shropshire and Welsh Marches	Tony Cross

--- 11.25-11.45 Morning coffee ---

## 11.45 – 13.30 CURLEW CONSERVATION Chair Rachel Taylor

11.45-12.00	Does predator control work for waders?	Andrew Hoodless
12.00-12.15	Predator control, waders and conflict	Steve Redpath
12.15-12.30	Curlew, people and recovery action in Ireland	Barry McMahon
12.30-12.45	Update Ireland Curlew Task Force	Barry O'Donoghue
12.45-13.00	Update Southern Curlew Forum	Geoff Hilton
13.00-13.30	Questions to speakers	

--- 13.30-14.30 Lunch ---

## 14.30 – 16.30 WORKSHOP: 'LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE TO DELIVER SUCCESS'

Joint Chairs Patrick Lindley (NRW) and Barry O'Donoghue (NPWS)

- What do we need to initiate a Curlew programme for recovery?
- What are the key themes emerging and what are the solutions/programme of work?