



Working
for **Waders**

Preventing the loss of
Scotland's wading birds



THE STORY SO FAR...

2023



**Working
for Waders**

WADING BIRDS CONTINUE TO DECLINE IN SCOTLAND.

Working for Waders was formed in 2017 to halt the loss of breeding birds in response to an emerging conservation crisis. The project has three specific aims:

- To raise awareness of wader declines
- To show that declines can be reversed
- To demonstrate the importance of working in partnership

Working for Waders takes a dynamic approach and brings people together to share ideas and collaborate. We are building connections across Scotland, supporting networks and engaging with important stakeholders in conservation and land management.

Our membership is broad and wide-ranging. We have a flexible membership structure, currently co-chaired by SRUC and Nature Scot, which includes public bodies, conservation organisations, research organisations and individual farmers and gamekeepers.

If you're interested in helping us reverse the decline of waders in Scotland, please get involved!

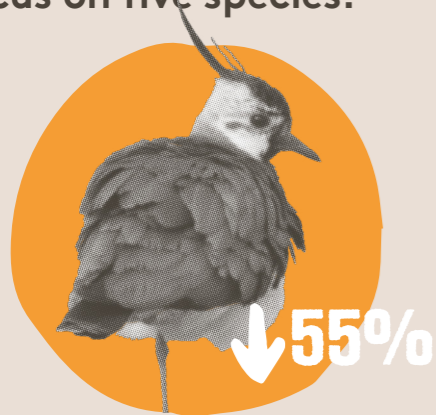
Together we are

**Working
for Waders**

www.workingforwaders.com
#workingforwaders

THE WADERS

Wading birds come in all different shapes and sizes. Some species live in Scotland all year round and others only visit for a few months in summer or winter. While we work for the benefit of all waders and wader habitats across Scotland, Working for Waders has a specific focus on five species.



LAPWING

Easily identified by their striking metallic plumage and their acrobatic courtship flights. Their distinctive call has inspired a variety of local names across Scotland such as peewit, peewee, peesie and teuchat.

Lapwing numbers have dropped by an estimated 55% since 1994.



CURLEW

Curlews are the biggest British waders, and their evocative calls mean that they feature prominently in folklore and myth. Curlews are also called whaups, and are often found on estuaries and coastal habitats across Scotland, but they usually nest on moorland and damp fields and bogs.

The number of curlews breeding in Scotland has declined by 61% since 1994.



OYSTERCATCHER

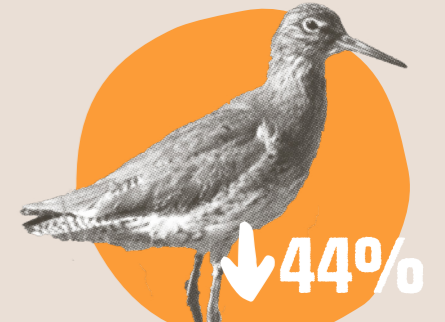
Oystercatchers are obvious black and white birds with orange beaks and a distinctive, bickering call. They winter on the coast and some remain to breed along the seaside, where their diet includes molluscs and bristleworms. Other populations breed inland, where their diet is mainly based on earthworms.

Over the past 22 years, the population of Oystercatchers has declined by 38%.



GOLDEN PLOVER

Golden Plovers are shy, elusive birds which breed in moorland habitats. Beautifully marked with yellow and golden feathers, the birds develop black bellies during the breeding season. Large flocks of golden plover from continental Europe spend the winter in Scotland, favouring coastal areas in the east and south, as well as several island groups.



REDSHANK

The redshank is a small and dainty wader with bright red legs and a repetitive fluting call. They breed in rushy grassland around the fringes of streams, marshes and wetlands. They can be difficult to survey and we do not have enough data to be able to confidently calculate a population trend for Scotland, but at a UK level their breeding population has declined by 44% over the past 22 years.

BACKGROUND

Wading birds have played an important part in our culture. We often mark the changing seasons by the coming and going of birds like oystercatchers, lapwings and curlews, and for country folk they are a much-loved part of the landscape. But wading birds are in serious trouble, and their numbers have started to dwindle.



The ecology of waders is complex and varies widely between species. Many wading birds undertake seasonal movements of some sort, whether from upland to coast or across nations and continents during the course of a year. In doing so they inevitably face many challenges, but there is evidence that wader declines in Scotland are linked to problems with breeding success.

There's no easy explanation for poor breeding success. Our countryside has undergone enormous changes over recent decades, and many wader habitats have been lost in a bid to promote agricultural efficiency. The recent increase in afforestation also has consequences for birds which naturally prefer landscapes with fewer trees. The way we manage our land is changing and many traditional breeding habitats are less welcoming for waders than they used to be.

While underlying change at a landscape scale is perhaps key, there are also threats from imbalances in predator numbers, which impact more heavily on depleted wader populations. Several species are now struggling to produce enough youngsters to replace the adults that die off, and that means that they cannot hold on for much longer without active help.

The decline of wading birds has become a national concern, and we must work together to ensure that waders will continue to brighten our countryside for future generations.

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As many waders breed on farmland, farmers and landowners are an important group to engage with. Many of our best projects were set up or instigated by farmers, and we're constantly impressed by the level of passion and commitment farmers have shown for wader conservation.

Building on the success of work we've been running since the project started, farmers have continued to lead important strands of the Working for Waders workload. Injecting a degree of local knowledge, pragmatism and know-how, farmers have been on hand to road-test new ideas and trial data-gathering methods in a number of projects across Scotland. This has been invaluable, particularly for the Farm Wader Calendar, which is designed to collect information about wader breeding activity during the spring.

Much of this work has been led by BTO Scotland, and it has also been linked to a number of similar work which is taking place elsewhere in the UK. BTO's Paul Noyes has worked closely with a number of farmers to refine and improve the way we monitor wading birds, and he's excited by the progress made so far. "This is a really important piece of work for conservationists, but we also have to recognise that spring can be a busy time on the farm. Farmers are often well-placed to monitor wading birds, but it's tricky to fit another task into an already hectic schedule. We've been working with farmers to design data-gathering methods which are quick, easy and hassle-free – and it seems to be paying off! We're looking forward to developing this piece of work for the future"



CLUSTERS and COLLABORATION



Waders naturally travel great distances during the course of the year, but even when they settle down to breed, research has shown that birds will still use surprisingly large areas of suitable habitat. It's obvious that when it comes to wader conservation, we need to think bigger than projects on individual farms. That's why we're supporting farmers who want to work together across large areas, joining forces to make a difference for waders at a landscape scale.

Our work on developing farm clusters is ongoing, and we are exploring ways to help farmers work together to identify local issues and challenges. It has been very satisfying to watch progress made by the Clyde Valley Wader Group as they explore a range of conservation options to protect wading birds in Lanarkshire. The Clyde group is extremely passionate and dynamic, and with support from a range of partners including SAC, RSPB and Working for Waders, they've been able to identify some exciting new opportunities for waders.

Farmers have often observed that lapwings traditionally chose to nest in brassica stubbles (ie the residues left after sheep have eaten crops of rape or kale), and the group has been determined to recreate these habitats in upland farms where most arable crops have been missing for many years. Their work in this direction has been really exciting, particularly since it links into higher level discussions about agri-environment schemes which could provide future funding for wader-friendly farmers.

Elsewhere in Scotland, we've also been looking at farm cluster ideas in Galloway, in Angus and on the Isle of Skye. These are only in their earliest stages, but it's crucially important to understand how collaborative groups can work together effectively across large areas. Some of this collaboration work has been supported through funding made available through Scottish Government's Knowledge Transfer and Innovation Fund.

“... IT'S CRUCIALLY IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND HOW COLLABORATIVE GROUPS CAN WORK TOGETHER EFFECTIVELY ACROSS LARGE AREAS.”



SUPPORTING ACTION



Since the project began, Working for Waders has run two rounds of a Small Grants Fund to help farmers and land managers make a start on practical works to improve wader habitats. The first round of funding was limited to £1000, but a second round also supported work up to the value of £3000. These opportunities generated a great deal of interest from farmers, and it was encouraging to hear from so many people approaching the same issues from a range of different angles.

Alongside several successful applicants, Minuntion Estate near Girvan was awarded funds to dig wader scrapes on rough pasture above the River Stinchar. Unlike classic wader scrapes which resemble shallow ponds, these scrapes were planned in conjunction with Working for Waders to incorporate some new and intriguing designs. In order to maximise the edge-habitat available to snipe and curlew chicks, one scrape was dug in a large area of wet ground in the shape of a thin wiggly line in order to hold back the water. Initial results seem to suggest that this idea has paid off, and it has become a nice example of how bigger ideas can be adapted to suit local circumstances.

Speaking about the Small Grants Fund, Minuntion's Laura Warrender said "We're very proud of our curlews in the Stinchar valley. They've been lost from many other parts of Ayrshire, so we're aware how precious these birds are. We already carry out predator control and certain aspects of habitat management, but the Small Grants Fund gave us an opportunity to experiment with a new idea."

The Small Grants Fund has been shelved for 2023 while we focus on other areas of work, but it continues to provide useful contacts and case studies for the project.



NATURE OF SCOTLAND AWARDS

The Nature of Scotland Awards recognise the outstanding achievements of those working hard to protect our precious natural heritage. Run by RSPB Scotland and co-sponsored by NatureScot, the awards cover a wide range of categories from “Business for Nature” to the “Health and Wellbeing Award”.



Working for Waders was proud to be nominated for the “Innovation Award” at the annual ceremony which was held during November in Edinburgh. In this category, we were nominated alongside RSPB Abernethy for their work on cattle grazing for capercaillie and Generation Restoration, a project supporting seagrass meadows.

Accepting the Highly Commended award on behalf of Working for Waders, NatureScot’s Louise Farmer said “we’re thrilled to receive this award, which recognises the successful way we’ve brought together differing perspectives with shared goals to make a positive impact for wader populations. Winners on the evening represented initiatives that were focused on supporting the recovery or reintroduction of species, the creation and management of habitats, community projects and improving well-being from across Scotland. The awards cover a broad church and some excellent work was recognised during the ceremony - we’re very happy to be involved!”





NEST CAMERA PROJECT

We know that waders face many problems related to breeding productivity, but we still lack a detailed perspective on how and where the birds are failing. Over the last two years, Working for Waders has run a camera project across Scotland in a bid to find out more about successes and failures at the nest.

In 2022, we were surprised by the amount of nest losses caused by livestock. Sheep were filmed damaging eggs of curlews, lapwings and oystercatchers, and this resulted in an unexpectedly high level of nest failure. Livestock damage is nothing new; we've known that sheep damage eggs for several decades, but there is no ready explanation for why it should have happened so frequently this year. More study is needed, and we should avoid any kneejerk reactions to these findings. Wader conservation frequently depends upon livestock farming, so any future solutions will be based on compromise.

We approach the 2023 breeding season having learned some important and unexpected lessons. Whatever the spring brings, we aim to record it!

Working with a team of dedicated farmers, gamekeepers and birdwatchers, we have set up and run a network of cameras on wader nests from Galloway to Shetland, and the project has allowed us to uncover an extraordinary level of detail about wader breeding attempts.

In its first year, the project shed light upon a range of issues, not least how difficult it can be to run cameras at wader nests. Notwithstanding technical lessons, we managed to capture vital footage of badger predation, and we also learned a great deal about agricultural disturbance caused by rolling fields and the spreading of slurry. At the same time, we also gathered footage of small, intimate moments of eggs hatching and parent birds changing over shifts at the nest. This footage became an important tool for engaging with people and opening up conversations about wader conservation.



LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

JENNIFER STRUTHERS

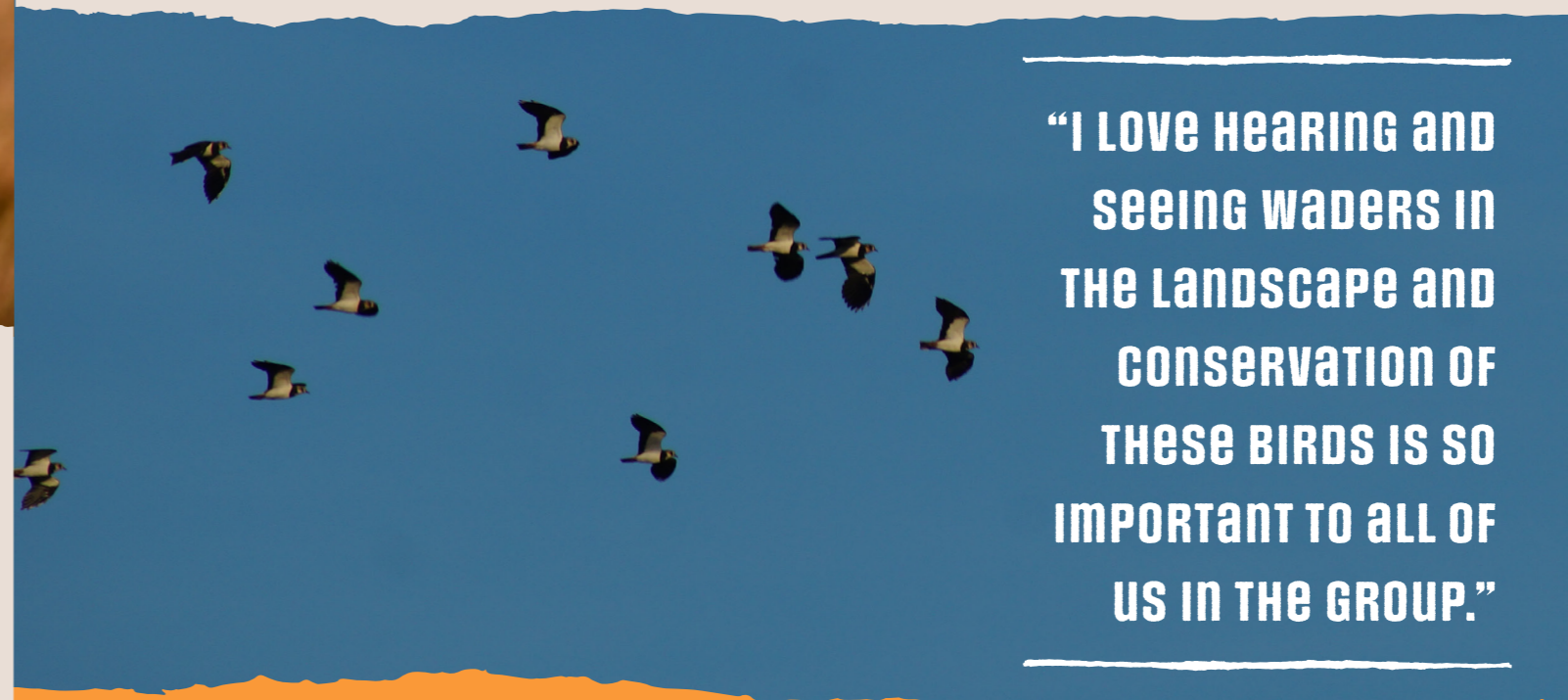


Clyde Valley Wader Group has always had a proudly pragmatic approach to wader conservation, and its members are extremely keen to make things happen on their farms.

The group is facilitated by SAC's senior consultant Jennifer Struthers, who is based in Lanark. Jennifer's hard work allows the group to focus and distil their thinking, and she has enabled a range of different stakeholders to work together over several years.

Speaking about her work with Clyde Valley Wader Group, Jennifer explains that "Waders are an important part of the landscape here in Lanarkshire. We really care about these birds, and we're very conscious of their declines in many parts of the country. It's easy to get downhearted about wader conservation - we often hear the bad news stories, but it's so inspiring to work in a group that has such enthusiasm and optimism for the future - particularly when that enthusiasm translates into action on the ground".

"I love hearing and seeing waders in the landscape and conservation of these birds is so important to all of us in the group. The enthusiasm and passion of the farmers is key to the success of Clyde Valley Waders Group. This enthusiasm makes facilitating this group extremely enjoyable and rewarding. Too often Top-level government policy and support schemes are often planned with the best of intentions, but have had very little input from the farmers and land managers. It's so important to maintain constant dialogue with people on the ground, providing feedback and trialling new ideas to find out what works and what needs improvement".



"I LOVE HEARING AND SEEING WADERS IN THE LANDSCAPE AND CONSERVATION OF THESE BIRDS IS SO IMPORTANT TO ALL OF US IN THE GROUP."



find out more and get involved at
www.workingforwaders.com



THE STORY CONTINUES...

Thanks to SAC, Richard Lockett, Laura Warrender, RSPB Scotland and all contributors to the Working for Waders nest camera project in 2023. Design and layout by Alan Cameron Design. Compiled March 2023.