

CURLEW CONSERVATION IN BRITAIN



In November 2015 the Eurasian curlew was named the most pressing bird conservation priority in Britain. Since then, it has taken centre stage in conservation efforts run by a number of organisations.

Ellen Bradley explains why curlews are so important.

Scan the QR code to hear the sound of the curlew.



About 25% of the global population of Eurasian curlew is found in Britain, and our comparatively mild winters attract thousands of additional curlew from Finland, Russia and other European countries each year. During the summer these birds return to their nesting grounds in Europe, leaving a dwindling British population. Despite Britain's global importance for curlews, our native population is at real risk of extinction as a breeding bird. We've lost around 65% since 1970, and in many areas the call of the curlew could fall completely silent over the next decade.

For many, hearing the haunting call of the curlew is an emotive experience. Their double-barrelled syrinx allows them to orchestrate both major and minor keys, evoking both joy and sorrow in the listener, a sound described by the poet W.S Graham as the curlews 'lovewweep'. Curlews have been inspiring poets since 1,000 AD, with the first known reference found in *The Seafarer*, an Anglo-Saxon poem. The cultural loss of their extinction would be immense, but the biological impact spreads further. Curlews are a bioindicator species, meaning they represent the overall health of the landscape, and their decline is a worrying indication of the state of biodiversity across Britain. If we lose the curlew, we will lose so much more.

Curlews are ground-nesting birds and prefer open habitats that have both places to hide and to feed. Once a curlew reaches adulthood they have a very good chance of survival and can live for up to 32 years, however, many don't get that far. So many eggs and chicks are lost that the number of fledglings needs to increase by 10,000 a year just to maintain the current population. Their struggle to breed successfully is due to a web of issues that can be broadly categorised into: harmful agricultural practices, predation and habitat loss.

The landscapes of Britain have changed dramatically over a short period. The intensification of agriculture from the mid 20th century, including the widespread drainage of grasslands, meant that the meadows and rough, damp pastures that curlews and other waders once depended upon have been converted to uniform, fast-growing grasses and other crops. A shift to feeding cattle with silage rather than hay means that fields are now mown earlier and more frequently - every few weeks during a growing season. As curlews require about 10 weeks to raise chicks to fledging, sadly, many eggs and chicks are caught up in farm machinery.



© TOM STREETER

Large numbers of generalist predators also make life as a curlew parent even harder. Britain is believed to have a higher density of crows than any other European country and the second highest average density of foxes, after Italy. These predators have thrived in our intensive landscapes and have had a devastating effect on ground nesting birds like curlew and lapwing.

These issues are being exacerbated by loss of habitat. One area of concern is afforestation, the process of establishing a forest in an area where there was previously little to no tree cover. The British government has pledged to plant trees on 30,000 hectares of land per year by 2025. While this is vital for the preservation of many British species and for tackling climate change, it has been identified as a major cause of concern for curlews. Woodland harbours predators and curlews prefer not to nest within 500 meters of wooded areas. The very real need to plant more trees across Britain remains an issue in curlew conservation and will require a balanced and pragmatic approach. A similar dialog is happening around wind farms, studies of the distribution of breeding birds has shown that many species avoid close proximity to turbines. One study showed curlews to be particularly vulnerable to displacement and would not nest within 800 meters of turbines in areas that would otherwise be suitable habitat. Further loss of habitat is being caused by widespread housing development, roads and climate change, which either dries out or floods nesting areas.



© TIM MELLING

Conservation inherently connects human societies and processes to the natural world. The range of causes contributing to curlew decline are not simple to address, they are rooted in political, cultural and economic complexities. Curlews are caught in the cross fire of many of the conservation debates in Britain: predator control, heather burning, agricultural practices, open access to land, sport shooting and afforestation. Each debate comes with its own thorny issues and difficult conversations.

Despite the challenges, the state of curlew conservation in Britain has made huge progress in recent years. A number of groups across the country are working to raise awareness and protect local

populations. The formation of the *Curlew Recovery Partnership* in March 2021, which acts as an umbrella organisation to curlew groups in England, was a huge step forward. Headstarting projects, which artificially rear chicks from nests that had little chance of fledging any young, for example those found on airfields, are giving the population a much-needed boost. *Curlew Action* is hosting a series of free online seminars to discuss these major issues, and is running a project to teach primary schools about curlews. PhD projects run by a variety of environmental organisations and universities are helping us understand more about how curlews live and how best we can help them.

Protecting our curlew population relies on the collective support of people across the country. Our small, multi-use, highly managed islands are in danger of losing one of the most evocative calls known to man and with it a great dynasty of meadow and moorland birds such as skylark, lapwing, redshank. The challenges involved in conservation in Britain will almost certainly remain and therefore protecting, restoring and living alongside our wildlife will require a balanced, inclusive and down-to-earth approach as we move forward. ✨

For more information about curlew conservation visit www.curlewaction.org