

Curlew Roost Monitoring



CURLEW
RECOVERY
PARTNERSHIP
ENGLAND

1. Introduction

The Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* (hereafter Curlew) is one of the earliest species of wader to return to its breeding grounds in spring and can be found back on territory from early to mid-February in some regions. In the early stages of the breeding season Curlew will occupy their nesting territory during the day but will often relocate to a safer location close by to roost overnight. This behaviour is noted in *The Birds of the Western Palearctic* (hereafter BWP) (Cramp & Simmons 1983) and has been observed in many regions throughout the UK. It is likely that communal roosts occur in other regions with suitable habitat, although current observations are limited.

Roost locations are often associated with permanent waterbodies (e.g. freshwater pools) but can occur in areas with more ephemeral waterbodies, such as flood meadows and flooded fields. These locations often provide islands to roost on away from the threat of ground predators (e.g. Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*). Very early in the season it's likely that the birds will come into roost individually or in groups, before pairing off as the season progresses. BWP notes that whilst the birds roost communally, the majority will be paired up and fights may break out between pairs, especially early in the season.

Monitoring communal roosts can provide information on a number of aspects of the breeding cycle. Early season monitoring (Feb–Apr) can provide an indication of the number of breeding pairs in the surrounding habitat, although birds may nest some distance from the roost (e.g. a colour-ringed individual in Gloucestershire has been observed at a communal roost before being relocated on a breeding territory ~5 miles away). However, it should be noted that not all birds in pre-season roosts will necessarily be local breeders, as observations of colour-ringed individuals at communal roosts have shown them to be migrants on passage to their breeding grounds, occasionally staying in the area for over a week.

Mid-season monitoring (May–June) can provide information on failed breeding attempts. Pairs that are still incubating/chick rearing will not roost together, therefore any pairs attending roosts during the peak season will likely to have failed (however they could potentially re-lay depending on the date). As the season progresses, more failed breeders will begin to roost together, along with females as they leave their brood and begin their migration back to their wintering grounds.

Late season monitoring can provide the opportunity to observe recent fledglings, although unless they have been colour-ringed no firm conclusions can be made regarding the origin of these birds. This is also a good time to attempt to catch and ring birds at the roost sites if conditions allow.

2. Equipment

- Binoculars.
- Telescope.
- Night scope (optional).
- Notebook/recording sheets & writing equipment.

3. Method

The method outlined below should be used as a guide only, individual locations and circumstances will determine the optimal method for monitoring Curlew roosts.

- If communal roost sites are not known within the survey area, use an OS map and/or Google Maps to locate potential roost sites within your monitoring area. These will include areas of freshwater with suitable roosting sites (e.g. islands, scrapes) and may include nature reserves, fishing lakes, reservoirs and large farm ponds, as well as areas with ephemeral waterbodies such as flood meadows. It is also worth asking the local birdwatching community for information as there may well be individuals or networks already monitoring roost sites.
- If the potential roosts are on private land (and can't be monitored from public rights of way), obtain the landowner's permission before gaining access (see Land Manager Liaison Factsheet).
- Recce the location(s) in daylight to determine their suitability as roost sites and to find optimal Vantage Point (VP) locations. A suitable roost location will have low disturbance and suitable roosting habitat (islands, pool margins etc). An optimal VP location will provide maximum coverage of the site whilst ensuring the observer is concealed from view. If the location looks promising but a suitable VP cannot be found, consider using a portable hide/screen to provide cover.
- Roost monitoring visits should be conducted in the early morning and/or late evening. If conducting a morning visit, aim to be in place ~30 minutes before sunrise. If conducting an evening visit aim to be in position about an hour before sunset.
- Record the VP start/finish times, weather conditions and notable bird activity (numbers, behaviour, interactions) during the duration of the survey.
- Use of a night scope can be beneficial in monitoring late arrivals to evening roosts and for getting accurate counts of birds.
- In early spring, it is possible that migrating birds will turn up on passage to their breeding grounds and these birds could potentially be mistaken for local breeding birds. However, observing their behaviour should make separating these migrants from local breeding birds possible, as birds on migration are often found in small tight flocks and are constantly alert with their necks raised and do not tend to stay for long. However, as mentioned above, this is not always the case so care should be taken before drawing conclusions.
- If possible, monitor roost sites throughout the breeding season with weekly or fortnightly visits. During the early season, numbers will peak in Feb–Mar (depending on local breeding phenology) and trail off as incubation gets underway. Numbers will build again from May onwards as failed breeders remain on breeding grounds for some time before departing for the coast, usually from mid-June onwards. With this in mind, more regular visits at these peak times will be beneficial for building up a clearer understanding of the breeding season.
- In the early and/or late season, it may be possible to attempt to catch and colour-ring birds at roost sites using mist nets and/or whoosh nets.

4. References

Cramp, S. & Simmons, K.E.L. (1983). *The Birds of the Western Palearctic, Volume 3*. Oxford University Press.

