

Statement from the Curlew Summit, 8 July 2019

A meeting to discuss the pressing conservation issues facing breeding Curlew in the UK was held at No. 10 Downing Street on 8 July 2019. It was attended by representatives of conservation non-government organisations, game and land-owning interests, as well as ornithologists closely involved with Curlew conservation issues. Its aim was to brief Lord John Randall and the three Parliamentary Curlew Champions: Jake Berry MP, Lewis Macdonald MSP and Mark Isherwood AM as well as those representing government departments and statutory conservation agencies for England, Wales and Scotland. This statement reflects key points from the discussion which cannot be taken as necessarily reflecting the views of all those represented.

The problem

1. Addressing and reversing the causes of Curlew declines is imperative because of:
 - the species' cultural importance to people;
 - its role as an ecological umbrella species;
 - our obligations to fulfil country, UK and international legal requirements.

Population modelling shows that in large parts of the UK, extinction is likely within one to two decades if current trends continue.

2. A good start has been made with current initiatives, but typically these are:
 - too small and localised;
 - unfunded or lacking medium-term funding security;
 - uncoordinated
3. Curlew breeding success is impacted by multiple issues, the importance of which vary geographically. Some are particularly severe and widespread. These are principally:
 - predation of nests and young;
 - mortality during grass rolling, harrowing and cutting;
 - upland afforestation;
 - recreational disturbance (especially from dog-walking);
 - changes to grazing regimes;
 - land abandonment.

These multiple causes often interact.

4. The impact of re-opening shooting in France during the non-breeding season will impact British breeding Curlew with high certainty. For example, we know that Curlew from both Shropshire and the New Forest over-winter in France.

Conservation measures needed

5. Close engagement with the farming and land-owning community is critical in order to share ownership of the issues and co-create solutions for Curlew. This needs actions at all scales from local to national. Working with farmers on Curlew conservation will also give multiple other benefits to other ground nesting birds, wildflowers and insects and potentially create a template for improved partnership between farmers and conservationists.
6. Effective agri-environment and other land-management schemes that fund and deliver necessary measures are critical for Curlew conservation. These schemes need to be effective, flexible and targeted and learn from existing initiatives. Effective land management schemes will:
 - provide adequate compensation for Curlew-friendly grassland management;
 - provide adequate compensation for intervention measures to increase hatching and fledging success across all habitats including arable, grassland and semi-natural;
 - monitor effectiveness and outcomes as a critical element that allows progressive adaptation of measures;
 - have adequate funding for advisors to promote and encourage local uptake;
 - build on the successful 'farmer cluster' model;
 - focus actions in target areas (for example clusters of farmers working with local conservation groups and volunteers) to develop and refine knowledge of effective actions that can be implemented more widely. Identification of these target areas being a priority;
 - provide funding for both predator deterrence and legal and targeted predator control by well-trained practitioners using best practise methods at a sufficiently wide scale and be undertaken in conjunction with Curlew-friendly grassland management.
7. Ambitious, long-term and collaborative research to understand the reasons why predators are so abundant, and to identify landscape-management solutions to the problem. A number of solutions to unsustainable predation rates are available, including lethal predator control, but most suffer from some combination of high cost, difficulty, or controversy. At the same time, high generalist predator abundance is a pervasive problem for British wildlife.
8. 'Head-starting' (*i.e.* artificially incubating eggs and subsequently releasing fledglings) may be necessary to sustain local populations until land management and predation issues are addressed. Similarly, headstarting can be used to return populations to areas where they have been lost. However, this is costly and does not resolve the underlying problems. Accordingly, it is essential that head-starting integrates with broader Curlew recovery planning. National co-ordination of headstarting initiatives to ensure best practice, shared learning, use of resources (including available eggs) and reporting would be beneficial.
9. Targeted surveys in identified hotspots is essential to provide baseline data for conservation measures. A full national survey would provide valuable information for targeting land management schemes and would also be valuable in helping raise the public profile of Curlew conservation needs. However, resourcing such a survey should not be at the expense of practical conservation actions.

10. It will be critical to monitor the effectiveness of management measures so these can be progressively adapted. Local volunteers can assist with monitoring but support, co-ordination and training must be financially supported. Knowledge of remnant populations in south England is good thanks to efforts of several local conservation groups with substantial volunteer input. However, knowledge of breeding success and numbers away from these areas is much more limited although good in a few areas.
11. There are no designated internationally important sites for breeding Curlew despite the North Pennines being proposed as a Special Protection Areas for the species in 2001. Statutory site protection will aid conservation actions at this site. The need for further SPAs has been recognised elsewhere, especially in Scotland, and identification, designation and management of core breeding areas needs to be urgently progressed.
12. Co-ordination across the four countries of the UK is necessary to ensure co-ordination of policies; exchange of information; and collective 'learning by doing'. Co-ordination should be:
 - adequately resourced;
 - inclusive of relevant stakeholders;
 - exploit the significant resources and knowledge that the non-government sector can contribute;
 - share best practice in design, monitoring and adaptation of agri-environment schemes and other measures;
 - co-ordinate priority research;
 - co-ordinate outreach and public awareness – especially with the farming community and in respect to predation control;
 - representative of all 4 countries, possibly with a rotating chair that is serviced by a neutral advisory body such as JNCC. This structure is under discussion.

Co-ordination structures previously used for issues such as raptors and lead shot in wetlands could provide useful models. 'Top-down' co-ordination needs to be supplemented by 'bottom-up' input.

13. Actions for Curlew will directly benefit multiple other species and generate conservation recovery methods applicable in other situations. Collectively we need to significantly step-up the urgency, intensity and focus of actions for Curlew if we are not to lose this iconic bird 'on our watch'.