

Curlew Action



Newsletter June 2022

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Thank you, David!

As he finishes off the UK leg of his world tour, we would like to say a huge thank you to David Gray and his team for their tireless support and hard work to support Curlew Action. Members of our team have had the privilege of attending many of his shows, where we've been talking curlews with anyone and everyone, whether they are a curlew lover or have never heard of one! This is not only important for raising funds, but also helps us get the word out to a new audience about the curlew. This is an essential part of what we do - by engaging and educating people about conservation, we can encourage them to make better choices as stewards of our countryside. The support of someone like David means so much to a small charity like Curlew Action. It was truly special to watch our patron on stage, we hope everyone who went enjoyed it as much as we did! David has also written a song inspired by Curlews for 'Simmerdim: Curlew Sounds', an album put together by Merlyn Driver and the RSPB. Click [here](#) to find out more!



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Sheep and Curlew

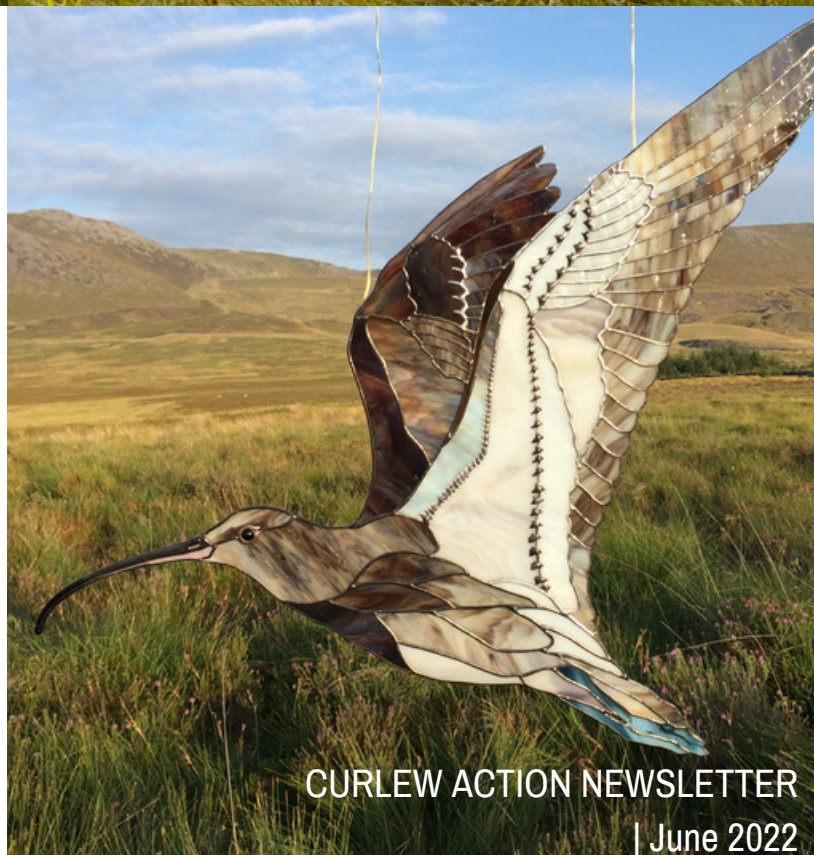
The excitement of nesting season is always tinged with anxiety, with curlew populations in such rapid decline, every chick is precious. Across the country, people keep a close eye on their local nesting curlew and wide-scale monitoring schemes keep records of their success. The deployment of nest cameras is a very useful tool for pinpointing the exact reasons why curlew nests may be failing. Hundreds of nest cameras have now been used to monitor ground nesting birds like curlew and lapwing and some interesting results have been highlighted. One surprising finding is that in some places sheep are the biggest destroyers of nests. A recent blog post by author and conservationist, Patrick Laurie, revealed sheep to be by far and away the main cause of nest failure in nests monitored by almost 90 cameras from Galloway to Aberdeenshire. Followed at a distance by Badger, then foxes. See Patrick's full blog post [here](#). Sheep can be quite aggressive and can push an adult curlew off the nest and then either eat the eggs or trample them. "One sheep picked up a lapwing's egg in its mouth and deliberately "popped" it for no good reason whatsoever." Says Patrick. The impact that sheep may be having on curlew and other wading bird populations is still being researched and Curlew Action will keep our readers updated with information on solutions that allow curlew to coexist with livestock.



Photos by Innes Smith

Curlews and Culture Webinar

Thank you to everybody who joined our Curlews and Culture webinar on the 17th of May. We heard wonderful talks from experts Merlyn Driver, Rachel Taylor and Karen Lloyd, who gave us their perspectives on the influence curlews have had on the stories, songs, art and poems which still inspire us today. We continue our webinar series in September with an expert panel discussing Forestry and the impact it is having on curlews. This is a hugely important which is influencing many of our native species.



Thoughts on Headstarting - Mary Colwell

In 2016, when I was on my Curlew Walk across Ireland and the UK, someone suggested that we should farm curlews - by that he meant raise them in captivity and then release them into the wild. I remember being incredulous and couldn't believe it would ever get to that point. Roll on 6 years and that is exactly where we are. There are 'headstarting' projects (the name given to raising eggs and chicks in captivity until the birds are ready to fledge) is now happening on Dartmoor, in Shropshire, Norfolk and Sussex, and has been tried in Gloucestershire. In all, hundreds of curlews have been raised in the safety of pens and then set free to join wild populations in the hope they will thrive and breed. The eggs for the majority of these projects come from military airfields where they would have been destroyed under licence as a safety measure. It is of course wonderful to know that doomed eggs are being harnessed for good, but there are always issues to consider.

- Headstarting is only an option if every effort is being made to put right the habitat the birds will return to when they are ready to breed. There is no point releasing curlews into sub-optimal environments where they will likely fail.
- The process of hand rearing curlews is expensive, labour intensive and has to be done over a few years - it is not a one-off. It can only be done if there is serious commitment both in time and money.
- The cost and focus required may leave smaller projects with little left over for anything else - i.e. headstarting might drain energy from other measures that may be more effective in the long-run.
- It is such an eye-catching and newsy thing to do it will get a lot of attention, taking focus away from the more mundane but essential work. And it may give the impression that all is being sorted, when in reality, headstarting in itself isn't the long-term solution.
- The birds have to be well-looked after. Welfare is of the highest importance. Done badly, the birds may have developmental issues and may not survive.
- The issue of where the eggs are sourced is a really difficult one and it has to be done under strict licence.

Headstarting is a wonderful tool done well in the right place under the right conditions and for the right reasons. Let's wish all the young birds now being produced live long, healthy and productive lives.

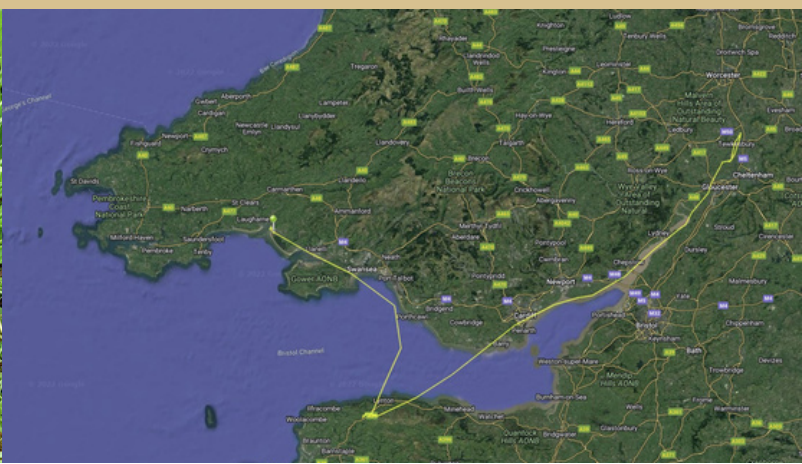




The 2022 Curlew breeding season in the Severn and Avon Vales - Mike Smart

The breeding population of 30-35 curlew pairs in this area has been monitored for nearly ten years, initially by volunteers and now more intensively by the WWT's Severn and Avon Curlew project (SAV). 2022 has been a particularly successful year for recording, partly because the weather has been normal (neither the 2018 heatwave, nor the 2019 floods, nor the desperately cold April and abnormally wet May of 2021), partly because we have had a full field team of three observers, but mainly because of sheer good luck.

So far 20 nests have been found, mostly before the grass grew too long in late April and early May. Heat-seeking, infra-red cameras fitted to drones helped us identify some nests, but in the end old-fashioned fieldcraft proved most effective. Electric fences were erected around many nests as a protection against mammalian predators like foxes and badgers, and nest cameras were used to monitor any nest disturbance. Several birds were caught for ringing, either by elastic-powered nets in nesting territory early in the season, or by mist nets at night round pools where they roost. Satellite tags (rather expensive!) were attached to five birds to give better information on their movements: some have remained almost permanently on their nesting fields, whilst some have returned to the coast and others (presumably males in search of a partner) have wandered as far as Birmingham and Melton Mowbray. Finally, we have marked some birds with large yellow, easy-to-read plastic leg flags inscribed with a code, helping us identify where birds are wintering and which individuals return next year. (see more on next page).



All in all, a highly successful recording season, but sadly the data only confirm minimal numbers of successful nests: at present only six of the 20 nests have produced chicks, and these have not all fledged yet. There could be further casualties through predation by crows and ravens, or agricultural accidents during the hay making period. This is why communications with farmers are such a major part of the SAV project: the curlews only survive because of the traditional farming methods in the river valleys – late hay cuts (mid-June at the earliest), with grazing by sheep or cattle afterwards. Many farmers consult us before beginning hay making and will delay if chicks are present. The aim is to allow farming to proceed whilst maintaining high biodiversity for birds and wildflower meadows.



A dramatic photo of a Raven attacking a curlew nest inside an electric fence. One of a range of predators and wider issues affecting curlews. Photo from a WWT nest camera.

A generous grant

Curlew Action have been fortunate enough to receive a grant of £5000 for our outreach work from the Garfield Weston Foundation. This is great news for the charity, and a vote of confidence from an experienced funder, which will help us engage more people with curlews and conservation. We are incredibly grateful to the Foundation for their support.

Do you know of any trusts or businesses who might be interested in supporting Curlew Action? If so, we would love to talk - please email Alex@CurlewAction.org.

What is Curlew Action working on?

Amongst other things, Curlew Action is working to provide more local support to individuals and groups who are working to protect their local curlew populations. We are creating a resource which will help to engage and educate local communities, provide practical support and tips for protecting and monitoring local populations and will summarise relevant and useful information on curlew populations, habitats and reasons for decline.

Curlews are caught in the crossfire of several contentious and nuanced debates within conservation. Curlew Action is working to address these issues in an open, informative and inclusive manner. We are putting together a panel of experts to discuss Predator control and Forestry in upcoming webinars.