



Minutes of meeting held 26TH January 2023 via Zoom at 7:30pm

Present: Ellen Bradley (EB), Wendy Carr (WC), Peter Cummings (PC), Carol Douglas (CD), Isabel Draken (ID), Jonathan Heath (JH), David Howlett (DH), Mark Kerr (MK), Ellie Parker (EP), Laura Parker (LP), Mick Parker (MP), James Powell (JP), Jane Smart (JS), Michael Southworth (MS), Leigh Weston (LW).

Apologies: Sue McWhinney, Paul McWhinney.

Presentation on Curlews

The usual pattern of our standard agendas was replaced by a presentation from Ellen Bradley of Curlew Action. The introduction and subsequent discussion were chaired by LW.

The key elements of the presentation and the subsequent discussion were as follows.

There are several species of curlew of which two are frequently seen in the UK – the Eurasian curlew and the Eurasian Whimbrel. Despite their decline worldwide, in some countries they are still shot for sport. Efforts are being made to stop this. The UK there are some 5850 breeding curlews which represents about 25% of the global population but also a decline here in curlew numbers of 50% in 25 years.

Of much local significance is the fact that the Pennines including Malham have the highest concentration of this bird in Europe except for Finland which has similar concentrations.

The emphasis on the curlew lies in the fact that if we take steps to stop its decline, these same steps will also stop the decline of other birds, mammals, and insects. The decline is largely due to the way humans manage the countryside so by focussing on this via the curlew as the “flagship species” a number of biodiversity problems can be beneficially tackled.

The main causes of decline are:-

1. As the curlew is a ground nesting bird, chick and egg depredation is high. Corvids, sheep, foxes, and dogs can destroy nests. The amount of cover available to curlews that is suitable for nesting (tall grass, reeds, etc.) is diminishing as the needs of farming put pressure on wild spaces.
2. Silage cutting. The switch from hay making once a year to silage cutting twice or more per year means that fields are cut much shorter and more often in the months when curlews are breeding. This has significantly reduced the chances of survival of chicks over the past 40 years.
3. Forestry. Tall trees are perfect perches from which predators of curlews watch and swoop. Small clumps of woodland closely linked enable predators to survey a much wider area than they would be able to if there were more precise definition of where woodlands and where open fields/meadows are. The need to protect curlews and other bird species directly conflicts with the need to plant trees for carbon capture purposes.



4. Tourism and leisure pursuits. Curlews can be adversely disturbed as a result of tourists and walkers not being aware of the need to respect the habitat of curlews. Pet dogs can be let loose without their owners appreciating the devastating effects on wildlife. Education of the public becomes an important issue here.
5. Climate change. This has an impact on where curlews nest and breed. Eg. If favoured nesting sites in estuaries start to be constantly flooded, or prolonged droughts in early summer deprive chicks of water and insects nearby, the chances of the species' survival are reduced.

Currently, the work being done to halt the decline of curlews include:-

1. Licenced and specifically trained individuals can take eggs from vulnerable nests and care for the eggs/chicks until they are fully fledged when they are released into the wild. This specifically occurs when nests are near airfields. (A curlew colliding with an aircraft can provoke a serious accident.)
2. Identification of the curlew breeding grounds that are in highly vulnerable locations and taking steps to reduce this vulnerability.
3. Practical steps such as electric fences being put round nesting sites and then removed when the chicks hatch out. Or removal of unnecessary poles and posts where predators may perch. And making scrapes in the ground near nesting sites which collect water and attract insects near to where newly hatched chicks start to move around.
4. Curlew action provides signs that can be put up to encourage walkers and tourists to by-pass nesting areas.
5. Ongoing research which includes setting up cameras in nests, ringing curlews and tracing their movements, registration of habitats to contribute to decision-making on where and how best to promote survival with the scarce resources available.
6. The Curlew Action website, and its regular newsletter are a mine of information about curlews and how to promote their continued survival. Anyone or any group interested in saving the curlew can find useful resources on the website.

Suggestions as to the ways in which people can help are:-

1. Put up posters about the plight of the curlew in appropriate locations. (Posters available from Curlew Action)
2. Donations to Curlew Action
3. Encourage organisations and groups to hear presentations on curlews so that the problem can be more widely understood
4. Become involved with monitoring curlews
5. Follow and support Curlew Action via its website, newsletter and social media.

Summary of questions and answers

What is more threatening to curlews – silage or predators such as red kites?

Predators have always been there and are part of nature so this needs to be accepted. However, nowadays they live longer and are fed better, often by gamekeepers for sporting reasons. This means there are now more raptors ready to kill curlews and their chicks. Overall, this is not so much



of a challenge as the practice of silage which is definitely a land management issue introduced by modern farming methods. This represents difficulties in dissuading farmers and landowners from silage cutting as their livelihood is at stake.

How can we convince farmers to be more supportive of curlew protection by, for example, monitoring curlew breeding sites on their land?

There is no easy solution. Winning the confidence of farmers and landowners can – although in not all cases - be very difficult and a very slow process.

Will curlews be encouraged in nest in the field I own if I encourage the growth of tall grasses etc. that curlews favour?

Curlews tend to go back to the same site again and again so it might be many years before nesting pairs discover that this is a favourable and stable site suitable for relocation.

How can we go about monitoring curlews?

A monitoring programmes is being carried out at Clapham based upon strict scientific criteria and reliable measurement methods. It may be possible to set up such an experiment on the land farmed by one of the participants at the meeting. Resources that offer advice on this issue are also available on the Curlew Action website.

Action 1: to be followed up with LW.

Reference was made to the Ancient and Veteran Tree register and whether a similar kind of approach could be adopted for monitoring curlews.

A facility along these lines seems to exist through the BTO (British Trust for Ornithology). This is currently being developed for curlews in conjunction with the CRP (Curlew Recovery Partnership)

Action 2: JH to circulate information about this scheme.¹

Doesn't there need to be more liaison between the tree planting lobby and the curlew protection lobby? Both are important sustainability issues but can be mutually contradictory.

Curlews tend to nest in large groups and if land gets divided up into small patches between meadow and woodland, so the number of safe breeding grounds for curlews diminishes. Breeding areas become unsatisfactorily small and more predators can find more perches from which to spy out their prey.

¹ The link for the BTO nest monitoring scheme is <https://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/nest-record-scheme>. Anyone can register and record nests. It can be quite involved to set up but detailed guidance is given. Nb. Once we have identified volunteers for nest monitoring LW and JH will link up with the BTO wader lead who has said he will guide us through the new curlew monitoring scheme.



Therefore there is a clear need for better liaison between the two requirements. Efforts are being made to identify where trees can be planted without being detrimental to curlew populations and to provide advice about which trees can be regarded as “curlew friendly”.

Will ELMS make a difference?

It is too early to say as this government policy has only just been issued and its implications still need to be understood across all interested parties.

Can anyone harvest curlew eggs and release the chicks when safely fledged?

Only licensed specialists are allowed to do this work.

Are there any sanctions against destroying curlew nests through silage cutting?

If a farmer is aware of curlews nesting on land he is about to silage, then if he goes ahead regardless, he can be prosecuted.

If nests are destroyed by chance when silage cutting, there is no penalty.

There have been no prosecutions under this law as far as we know.

Closing remarks

All attendees were encouraged to read Curlew Moon by Mary Colwell

Action 3: All those interested in actively promoting curlew survival to contact LW and discuss next steps.

Standard agenda items

The minutes of meeting on 24th November 2022 were taken as agreed without any further reference.

The “Eyes on the Bog” item will be written up by the Chair and circulated to all MEG supporters and volunteers.

The date of next meeting is **Thursday 23rd February at 7:30pm**. A themed meeting is being planned.

Action point No.	Item
1	Possible to set up an experiment in Malham similar to the Clapham curlew experiment?
2	Scheme for reporting curlew sightings? See response at foot of minutes
3	All attendees were encouraged to read Curlew Moon by Mary Colwell