



## 17.1 Introduction

The Stone-curlew *Burhinus oedicephalus* was once a widespread and familiar farmland and downland bird over much of southern England but it has undergone a significant decline in recent decades. The birds are largely nocturnal, feeding on invertebrates in short grass habitats and dry, stony ground. Open farmland on light soils has increasingly been used in recent years. Nest scrapes are usually situated just below the top of a ridge, which give long distance, all round vision. This allows incubating birds to slip away, rather than flying, if danger approaches.

## 17.2 Current status

The Stone-curlew is a rare and declining species, numbers of which have fallen by 85% in the past 50 years, and more than 50% since 1960, reaching an all-time low of 160 pairs in 1985. It is now largely restricted to two areas of the UK: Breckland and Wessex. However, conservation action has raised the current UK population to more than 300 pairs, meeting the national Biodiversity Action Plan target five years ahead of schedule. A new target will be adopted in 2006.

In Hertfordshire, Stone-curlews formerly bred, quite numerous, in the north of the county. In 1877 it bred regularly on the hills west of Hitchin, but was beginning to decline by 1899. By 1927 birds bred regularly in

rough pastures around Clothall, Wallington and Kingswood and this status prevailed until 1942 when birds still bred fairly commonly in the vicinity of Bygrave, Wallington, Clothall, Cromer and towards Buntingford. A pair, were thought to have bred near Baldock in 1949 and a pair bred annually on Pegsdon Hills between 1949 and 1953 when at least two pairs were present. Records came from Pirton of one pair breeding in 1953, two pairs in 1954 and one pair in 1955. A pair was located in 1955 two miles east of Barkway and a nest was found between Baldock and Royston in 1957. At the time of the first breeding atlas (1967-73), birds were still regularly breeding on open farmland in the north of the county, when breeding was confirmed from six tetrads, was probable in four tetrads and possible in a further two. The last proven breeding was in 1981. However, single birds continue to occur in the north-east of the county, almost on an annual basis.

## 17.3 Current factors causing loss or decline

The national decline of Stone-curlews is attributed to habitat loss through the abandonment of low-intensity mixed and pastoral agriculture and the loss of dry grassland in favour of intensive arable farming, with the emphasis on autumn sown cereal crops.

On arable land, mechanised farming operations (inter-row hoeing of root crops and rolling of cereals) seriously affect breeding success and many eggs and chicks are lost. Nesting birds are also at risk from pesticides; carbamate compounds are a possible cause, but this has yet to be proven.

Egg collecting continues to be a threat at a localised level. The main recorded cause of death for adult birds is collisions with utility wires and fences, and shooting in Europe when the birds are on migration or at their winter locations.

## 17.4 Current action

### 17.4.1 Legal status

The Stone-curlew is listed on Annex 1 of the EC Birds Directive and Appendix II of the Berne Convention. It is

also protected under Schedule I of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

#### **17.4.2 National and county status**

The Stone-curlew is a national Red List species, and a national Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) species. In Hertfordshire, it is a Red List species and a county BAP species with its own Species Action Plan (SAP).

#### **17.4.3 Mechanisms targeting the species**

It is a priority to increase the availability and suitability of semi-natural grassland for stone-curlews as a nesting habitat. Where birds occur on arable farmland, annual monitoring and nest protection is critical. Therefore, raising awareness amongst farmers and encouraging them to assist in nest protection is crucial. Nests can be located and chicks picked up and held during farming operations, then replaced in the nest scrape. Such co-operative work has increased breeding success.

Environmental Stewardship can play an important role in the conservation of stone-curlews.

##### *Environmental Stewardship – Entry Level Scheme:*

- Manage permanent grassland with very low inputs (EK2 and EK3).

##### *Environmental Stewardship – Higher Level Scheme:*

- Fallow plots for ground-nesting birds (HF13)
- Cultivated fallow plots or margins for arable flora as enhanced set-aside option (HF16)
- Fallow plots for ground-nesting birds as an enhanced set-aside option (HF17)
- Maintenance, restoration and creation of species-rich, semi-natural grassland (HK6, HK7, HK8).
- Maintenance, restoration and creation of semi-improved or rough grassland for target species (HK15, HK16, HK17).

**17.5 Stone Curlew Action Plan****Objectives, actions and targets**

**Objective 1:** To ascertain the presence and/or breeding of Stone-curlews in the County

**Target:** Set up an annual monitoring programme by 2003

Action code	Action	Target start date	Target end date	Lead partner	Other partners
SC/A/1.1	Carry out play back surveys in a selected area of North Herts	2003	2005	HBC	RSPB, EN (licences)
SC/A/1.2	Liaise with key partners to establish a process for monitoring and undertake measures to protect any breeding attempts	2004	2004	Stone-curlew Working Group	RSPB, landowners, CMS, FWAG
SC/A/1.3	Encourage key landowners to report sightings	2004	Annually	Stone-curlew Working Group	RSPB, CMS, FWAG

**Objective 2:** To re-establish the Stone-curlew as a regular breeding bird

**Target:** Create suitable breeding habitat in North Hertfordshire by 2010

Action code	Action	Target start date	Target end date	Lead partner	Other partners
SC/A/2.1	Set up a Stone-curlew Working Group to help oversee the implementation of the plan	2004	2005	HBC	CMS, DEFRA, FWAG, HBRC, HMWT, RSPB, landowners
SC/A/2.2	Identify and map suitable target areas for re-establishment	2004	2005	HBC	EN, FWAG, HBRC, HMWT, LA's
SC/A/2.3	Identify, contact and visit landowners to provide habitat creation advice	2004	2007	Stone-curlew Working Group	CMS, FWAG, RSPB
SC/A/2.4	Create and maintain at least three nesting plots on three key sites	2007	2010	Landowners	Stone-curlew Working Group

**Relevant Action Plans:**

*Hertfordshire Plans*

Farmland; Grassland and Heathland

*National Plans*

Stone-curlew; Lowland calcareous grassland; Lowland heathland

**Abbreviations (Partners)**

**CMS** – Countryside Management Service

**DEFRA** – Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

**EN** – English Nature

**FWAG** – Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group

**HBC** – Herts Bird Club

**HBRC** – Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre

**HMWT** – Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust

**HNHS** – Hertfordshire Natural History Society

**LA's** – Local Authorities

**RSPB** – Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

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