

17 STONE CURLEW SPECIES ACTION PLAN

17.1 INTRODUCTION

The Stone Curlew *Burhinus oediconemus* was once a widespread and familiar farmland and downland bird over much of southern England but it has undergone significant decline over recent decades. It prefers dry, stony open ground. The nest scrapes are usually just below the top of a ridge which gives good all-round vision. The birds are largely nocturnal, feeding on invertebrates in short grass habitats.

It was formerly a scarce summer visitor to north Hertfordshire. In the 1840s it was apparently fairly common in all the open fields in the area of Royston, Therfield, Kelshall and Sandon, but was already noted as declining as agricultural methods improved. Since the 1960s they were still to be found in the same area but in very low numbers. In the Barley-Reed-Royston area at least 11 pairs were present in 1975 and 12-14 pairs in 1976. These were the highest figures in recent times. By the early 1980's it had ceased breeding in the county.

It has been chosen as the subject of a species action plan because not only does the Stone Curlew still breed in small numbers just outside the county but it also reflects the needs of many species found on open farmland. It is considered that action within a limited area by a small number of farmers may bring this distinctive bird back to the county. The techniques required to promote its conservation are now well researched by the RSPB and incentive schemes to aid its survival are available.

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. It is now largely restricted to two areas of the UK; Breckland and Wessex. The current UK population is estimated at 150 - 160 pairs.

The Stone Curlew is now extinct as a breeding bird in Hertfordshire. The last proven breeding was in 1981, with birds seen in appropriate areas for a few more years. Twenty years ago it bred in at least six sites on open farmland in the north of the county. It still occurs not far outside Hertfordshire in neighbouring Cambridgeshire.

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.

17.3 CURRENT FACTORS CAUSING LOSS OR DECLINE

Loss of semi-natural grasslands to arable farming, and reduced grazing by livestock and rabbits on the remaining grasslands.

Nest destruction in arable crops due to farming operations, such as mechanical hoeing.

Changes in agricultural practices, notably the shift from spring to autumn sowing, resulting in fewer crops retaining an open structure until June or July.

Other factors such as egg collecting, collisions with utility lines and fences and shooting in European countries while on migration are also thought to be having an impact.

17.4 CURRENT ACTION

In Hertfordshire there is no current action. Elsewhere protection schemes have been run by the RSPB since the mid 1980s to protect nests and young on arable land. This work is now included in a joint RSPB/English Nature Stone Curlew Recovery Project.

The Brecklands and part of South Wessex Downs are designated ESAs. Rotational and non-rotational set-aside, with some specific modifications, may have helped the species.

The Arable Stewardship Scheme, encouraging decreased pesticide use and over-winter stubbles is being piloted in several areas, one of which include NE Herts.

17.5 STONE CURLEW ACTION PLAN OBJECTIVES

To re-establish the Stone Curlew as a regular breeding bird in Hertfordshire.

Target: one pair within 5 years, 3 pairs within 10 years.

17.6 PROPOSED ACTION

17.6.1 Policy and Legislation

SC1. Establish a Project Steering Group by 1998.

Action: HertsBC, HMWT, RSPB.

SC2. Consider the requirements of the Stone Curlew when targeting agri-environmental schemes within the county. The maintenance or restoration of short grassland and appropriate management of arable fields in key areas in the north-east of the county is a priority.

Action: MAFF, RSPB.

17.6.2 Site Safeguard and Management

SC3. Identify target area for re-establishment by 1998.

Action: HertsBC, HMWT, RSPB.

SC4. Visit and seek to persuade landowners and farmers within the target area to carry out positive management actions for Stone Curlew under the pilot Arable Stewardship scheme or chalk grassland options of Countryside Stewardship, or through set-aside management, initial visits by 1999.

Action: HMWT, CMS, FWAG.

17.6.3 Species Management and Protection

SC5. Maintain annual surveillance in appropriate areas for any sign of birds re-establishing.

Action: HertsBC.

SC6. Establish protection scheme if any birds return. Seek to assist landowner(s) in maintaining favourable conditions by all available means.

Action: RSPB, HMWT, HertsBC.

17.6.4 Advisory

SC7. Ensure relevant landowners and farmers are aware of the species requirements, legal status, available incentive schemes and specific exemptions for Stone Curlews under set-aside, by 2000.

Action: HMWT, CMS, FWAG, RSPB.

SC8. Ensure all relevant conservation advisers are aware of the project, the project objectives and the specific actions required to conserve Stone Curlews by 1998.

Action: HMWT, CMS, FWAG, RSPB.

17.6.5 Research and Monitoring

SC9. Monitor any birds that return.

Action: HertsBC, RSPB.

17.6.6 Communication and Publicity

SC10. Establish and maintain links with Stone Curlew protection schemes in neighbouring counties. Seek annual status report.

Action: HMWT, RSPB.

SC11. Encourage birdwatchers and landowners to look out for Stone Curlews in the appropriate areas. Prepare press release and article.

Action: HertsBC, HMWT, RSPB.

SC12. Organise a conference in 1998 to promote work on the bird species targeted through the local biodiversity action plan.

Action: HertsBC.