

**Northern Ireland Species Action Plan**  
**Curlew**  
*Numenius arquata*  
**October 2000**

**1. Current status**

- 1.1** The curlew, *Numenius arquata*, is a large ground nesting wader. It is a characteristic breeding bird of upland areas, where it nests on moorlands and damp, rushy pastures and also of lowland wet grasslands, wet pastures and meadows. It occurs in winter in coastal areas with three Northern Ireland estuaries holding numbers of national importance.
- 1.2** The total UK breeding population is estimated to be at least 75,000 breeding pairs, (up to 30% of the European population <sup>(5)</sup>). The Irish population, which is widely dispersed over all but the most south-easterly counties, is estimated at 12,000 pairs<sup>(8)</sup> with the nationally important population in Northern Ireland being estimated at 5,000 pairs in 1988<sup>(7)</sup>. Key areas include the wet grassland complexes of the Lough Erne and Lough Neagh basins, the islands in Lower Lough Erne, the southern slopes of the Sperrins, the Antrim Hills and the Fairywater bogs of Co. Tyrone.
- 1.3** The breeding bird Atlas <sup>(2)</sup> indicates declines in breeding range, most notably in the south and east of Ireland. In Northern Ireland, an overall decline of 25% in the number of breeding pairs at the main sites was recorded between 1985-7 and 1992 <sup>(7)</sup> with further declines recorded in 1996 <sup>(4)</sup>. A survey undertaken in 1999 indicated that the population had declined to an estimated 2,091 pairs, a decline of 58% from the 1988 population <sup>(6)</sup>.
- 1.4** The Wetland Bird Survey <sup>(11)</sup> indicates that a relatively stable population of over 6,500 curlew winters in Northern Ireland. Most occur on the coast particularly at sites with extensive intertidal areas such as Strangford Lough and Lough Foyle.
- 1.5** The curlew is protected under Article 4.2 of the EC Birds Directive, Appendix 2 of the Berne Convention and as a quarry species, under Article 4 of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. It is also included on the red list of Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland and is listed as a SPECIES THAT REQUIRES MONITORING in the Irish Red Data Book <sup>(10)</sup>. The species European status is listed as a SPEC 3 <sup>(8)</sup>, a moderately declining winter species.

**2. Current factors causing loss or decline**

- 2.1** Low productivity levels as a result of predation of eggs and chicks is currently the major factor limiting breeding success<sup>(4)</sup>. This is believed to result from increased populations of predators (foxes, crows and gulls), possibly brought about by reduced levels of control and increased feeding opportunities arising from higher stocking densities and other agricultural improvements.

- 2.2** Past and current loss, fragmentation and reduced quality of breeding habitat as a result of agricultural improvement, afforestation and peat extraction have reduced the area in which breeding can occur and, by concentrating breeding birds into smaller areas, also may have increased vulnerability to predators<sup>(1,3, 6, 7)</sup>.
- 2.3** Although numbers in winter are not declining, loss of intertidal feeding habitats through development and disturbance of feeding and roosting areas are important potential threats.

### **3. Current action**

- 3.1** DARD's agri-environment programme contains habitat prescriptions of benefit to curlew, such as the wet grassland prescriptions in the Fermanagh ESA and there is an Upland Breeding Wader Option in the Countryside Management Scheme.
- 3.2** DARD and RSPB will be jointly employing a project officer for three years to contribute to the effective delivery of agri-environment prescriptions for a range of important species, including curlew.
- 3.3** The majority of key wet grassland sites and some other sites, such as the Fairywater bogs in Co Tyrone, have been notified as ASSI.
- 3.4** A regular programme of surveys of the key sites, including assessments of breeding success, has been implemented by RSPB with funding from EHS.
- 3.5** RSPB manages and monitors several key islands in Lower Lough Erne as a Reserve for breeding waders, including curlew.
- 3.6** QUB, in association with RSPB, is seeking a CAST award to study the relationship between land-use and the abundance and diet of foxes.
- 3.7** Forest Service policy contained in Afforestation-the DANI Statement on Environmental Policy recognises the value of wetlands used by breeding waders and concludes that afforestation should not take place on such sites.

### **4 Action plan objectives and targets**

- 4.1** Increase curlew breeding success in core areas to levels sufficient to maintain a stable population by 2005. i.e. 0.5 - 0.6 chicks fledged per breeding pair.
- 4.2** Halt the decline in the breeding population by 2005.
- 4.3** Restore population size and range to 1985-87 levels by 2010.
- 4.4** To maintain the range and numbers wintering in coastal habitats at 1993/4 - 1997/98 WEBS count levels.

## **5. Proposed actions with lead agencies**

An integrated approach is required, involving immediate action to increase breeding success at key sites by reducing losses due to predation, coupled with immediate and longer term action to restore the quality and extent of breeding habitat. This will require effective exploitation of current Agri-Environment arrangements (ESAs and CMS), the development of additional measures where appropriate and long term agricultural policy reform.

### **5.1 Policy and legislation**

- 5.1.1** Promote CAP reform measures which restructure livestock support payments and provide for the protection and enhancement of marginal upland habitats.  
(ACTION: DARD).
- 5.1.2** Implement grazing conditions attached to livestock subsidies.  
(ACTION: DARD)
- 5.1.3** Support and promote the uptake of appropriate options of the Countryside Management Scheme. Extend existing and develop new measures as appropriate.  
(ACTION: DARD).
- 5.1.4** Ensure that effective mechanisms to reduce the number of carcasses of fallen animals are devised and implemented as a matter of urgency and that existing advice and guidance as set out in DARD advisory notes is closely followed.  
(ACTION: District Councils, DARD)
- 5.1.5** Ensure that the influence of forestry on curlew populations is considered in the proposed review of Forest Policy.  
(ACTION: Forest Service)
- 5.1.6** Develop and implement a strategy for the integrated safeguard of the coastal zone environment.  
(ACTION: DOE).
- 5.1.7** Review and if necessary, increase the level of protection given to the curlew in the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.  
(ACTION: EHS, DOE).

### **5.2 Site safeguard and management**

- 5.2.1** Continue to declare and manage ASSIs for breeding and wintering curlew.  
(ACTION: EHS)
- 5.2.2** Establish agreements with landowners for the positive management of areas important for breeding curlews within ASSIs, including a comprehensive condition and compliance monitoring programme.  
(ACTION: EHS).

**5.2.3** Seek opportunities to restore areas of wet grassland that in the recent past were important for breeding waders.  
(ACTION: EHS, DARD).

**5.2.4** Consider the acquisition of further key sites and ensure the effective management through the control of predators and appropriate grazing of existing reserves or sites under management agreements.  
(ACTION: EHS).

### **5.3 Species management and protection**

**5.3.1** Establish trial and ‘control’ areas to determine the effects of predator control and the removal of carcasses of fallen animals on the abundance of foxes and crows and on the breeding success of curlew.  
(ACTION: EHS).

**5.3.2** Take steps to ensure effective implementation of the statutory suspension of wildfowling in severe weather.  
(ACTION: DOE)

### **5.4 Advisory**

**5.4.1** Ensure that those responsible for implementing and supporting agri-environment schemes continue to receive effective training and up-to-date advice on land management practices which would benefit breeding curlew.  
(ACTION: DARD)

**5.4.2** Ensure that farmers and landowners are aware of the presence of curlews on their land and promote and encourage them to use the information available on appropriate management.  
(ACTION: DARD)

### **5.5 Future research and monitoring**

**5.5.1** Establish a comprehensive five year monitoring programme to monitor curlew numbers and breeding success and monitor fox and crow abundance in areas used in the predator control trials (5.3.1).  
(ACTION: EHS)

**5.5.2** After three years of the trials (5.3.1) undertake two years of intensive studies of curlew nest and chick survival in the area in which predators are controlled and carcasses are removed for comparison with data from existing studies in Northern Ireland.  
(EHS).

**5.5.3** Carry out research into the diet of crows and foxes to determine which aspects of land-use change may be related to increases in predator populations.  
(ACTION: DARD, EHS).

**5.5.4** Evaluate the impact of wildfowling on breeding and wintering curlew.  
(ACTION: EHS)

## 5.6 Communications and publicity

**5.6.1** Develop and implement a comprehensive public affairs campaign to explain, support and promote the predator control trial.  
(ACTION: EHS, DARD)

**5.6.2** Use the curlew issue in Northern Ireland to help promote the need for agricultural and rural support schemes which encourage sustainable agriculture whilst protecting and enhancing biodiversity.  
(ACTION: DARD)

## 5.7 Links with other action plans

**5.7.1** It is likely that the implementation of this plan will also benefit the Northern Ireland populations of the following UK BAP priority species skylark *Alauda arvensis*, marsh fritillary *Eurodryas aurinia*, reed bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*, pennyroyal *Mentha pulegium*. Implementation will also benefit the Irish hare *Lepus timidus hibernicus* (a Northern Ireland action plan species).

**5.7.2** This plan should be considered in conjunction with the following UK Habitat Action Plans:-

- Purple moor grass and rush pastures
- Coastal and floodplain grazing marsh
- Lowland meadows
- Lowland raised bog
- Blanket bog

**5.7.3** There may be additional links with species and habitats listed in the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy which will be added later.

## 6 References

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- (10) Tucker, G.M. & Heath, M.F. (1994). *Birds in Europe: their conservation status*. Cambridge, UK: BirdLife International. (BirdLife Conservation Series no.3).
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- (12) Whilde, A. (1993). *Threatened Mammals, Birds, Amphibians and Fish in Ireland. Irish Red Data Book 2: Vertebrates*. HMSO Belfast.