

THE NEW FOREST CURLEW PROJECT

A LOCAL CALL TO ARMS TO HALT A DRAMATIC DECLINE

The sight and sound of curlews displaying over a New Forest valley mire on a crisp spring morning is a wildlife experience to cherish, but as Prof Russell Wynn of Wild New Forest reports, such experiences may soon be relegated to history unless a dramatic decline can be halted.

In 2016, [Wild New Forest](#) and Forestry England began a programme of survey and monitoring of breeding curlews in the New Forest National Park, following a 'call-to-arms' to halt a dramatic decline in the UK and wider global population. The survey was co-ordinated by Prof Russell Wynn (Director, Wild New Forest) and Andy Page (Head of Wildlife Management, Forestry England), and relied heavily upon volunteer observers and public sightings.



After the first year of fieldwork, covering about 100 km² of suitable habitat, it was clear that recent New Forest population estimates of 100-130 pairs were far too high, and that the true figure was in fact closer to 40 territories, an alarming reduction of as much as two-thirds in the last 25 years. It was also clear that the productivity of breeding pairs was worryingly low, with many monitored nests failing at the egg stage and few chicks seen making it to fledging.

In 2017 and 2018, further monitoring confirmed the size of the breeding population at 40 territories, and deployment of 24 nest temperature loggers (sponsored by the New Forest Association), revealed that as many as 50% of nests were failing at the egg stage, largely due to predation by mammals such as foxes. Reports from surveyors in the field also highlighted the issue of recreational disturbance and confirmed that few pairs were successful in hatching chicks.

In an attempt to halt the decline and mitigate the key pressures, Forestry England and partners have modified signage and introduced seasonal rangers to try and reduce recreational disturbance, while the new survey data has been used to support seasonal closure of a car park in one of the



remaining curlew hotspots. Wild New Forest have worked with the New Forest National Park Authority to secure features in local media, as well as BBC Countryfile in spring 2018, reaching an estimated five million viewers. However, the issue of how to tackle high numbers of generalist predators is a difficult one and is currently a hot topic amongst conservationists and land managers across the UK.

Preserving the UK's breeding curlews has generated interest in high places, with curlew conservation summits being held at 10 Downing Street in July 2019 (hosted by Lord John Randall, Environment Advisor to Theresa May) and at Highgrove House in Feb 2020 (hosted by Prince Charles). Russell Wynn represented the New Forest Curlew Project at both these fora, highlighting the important role that volunteers and the wider public can play in generating data and supporting behavioural change.



In 2019, the full suite of breeding waders in the New Forest were surveyed as part of the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme, commissioned by Forestry England and delivered by a team of volunteer observers co-ordinated by Hampshire Ornithological Society. The results are currently in preparation and will be reported in a later edition.

Wild New Forest and Forestry England are continuing to monitor the remaining curlew population, although coronavirus restrictions will likely hinder fieldwork activities in 2020.

To end on a more positive note; actions being taken to reduce the decline in the UK curlew population will undoubtedly benefit a wider range of species, and in the New Forest this totemic species is being used to highlight the vulnerability of our internationally important freshwater habitats. Let's hope we can tip the balance back in favour of our New Forest curlews, ensuring that this wild icon continues to delight and inspire future generations.

Professor Russell Wynn, Wild New Forest

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