

Curlew *Numenius*

The iconic new forest wading bird

Species Profile

Curlews are a relatively long-lived wading bird, the oldest recorded at over 30 years. The UK breeding population of ~60,000 pairs is mostly focused in upland areas of northern England and Scotland, but the relatively small English lowland population is important because of its wide distribution. The New Forest holds up to 10% of this remaining lowland population, and is the most south-easterly in the UK. If it was lost then the distribution map would see a significant retreat to the north and west, and a large number of residents and visitors in the New Forest would lose the opportunity to experience the evocative calls of this wild icon.



Curlew wading through wet heath. Birds arrive from early April to late March and establish territory. During breeding season adults feed on earthworms, beetles, spiders and caterpillars. © Wild New Forest

Curlews typically arrive back on territory in the New Forest from mid-March onwards, with preferred habitats including bog, valley mire, and wet heath. However, breeding birds will also commute to adjacent pastures and coastal sites to feed, highlighting the importance of connected landscapes for this species. Nesting begins in late April, and for about a month the incubating bird (mostly the female) sits on the eggs in all weathers keeping them at a relatively constant temperature of about 20°C. A paper recently published by the New Forest Curlew Project co-ordinators in the journal *British Birds*, describes how incubating Curlews across the southern New Forest remained on the nest during a severe thunderstorm in May 2018, and actually increased the temperature of the clutch as the air temperature plummeted during torrential rain, in a newly observed behavior termed 'hyper-incubation'



Chicks hatch late May to early July. Chicks feed on surface insects

© Shane King



Curlew eggs are incubated normally from late April to late May © Andy page

Any surviving clutches usually hatch in late May or early June, and the chicks then have to avoid avian predators such as Ravens, Carrion Crows and Buzzards for a further month or so if they are to survive to fledging. By the end of July the breeding grounds have been vacated; some New Forest Curlews then winter locally in the Solent and elsewhere in southern UK, but at least one colour-ringed bird from the northern New Forest spent its winters on the French coast near La Rochelle.