

## The Decline of the Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*

The distinctive bubbling call of the Curlew, once heard, stays with you forever. We are extremely fortunate to have these majestic birds breeding in good numbers, on our upland grassland and moors. However, as much as we probably take the Curlew's presence for granted there is significant evidence from the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) to show that the species is in serious decline nationwide. Most of Ireland, West Wales, the West Country and Western Scotland have witnessed a dramatic drop in breeding and this has prompted its perilous situation to be described as 'the most pressing bird conservation priority in the UK'.



photo: Stephen Lilley

The Curlew is one of our most rapidly declining breeding bird species showing a 46% decline across the UK from 1994 to 2010 with this figure exceeding 50% in Wales and Scotland. The UK holds 28% of the European breeding population and in response to these declines, and those seen elsewhere in Europe, the species has recently been listed as globally near-threatened, one of the few British species on this list. The wintering population in the UK comprises a significant proportion of UK breeding birds as well as birds originating primarily from breeding sites in northern Europe and Russia, and has declined by 20% in the last 15 years.

Possible reasons for these declines include:

- Increases in generalist predators, reducing breeding success
- Afforestation of marginal hill land
- Changes in farming practice reducing habitat quality
- Climate change

Britain's estuaries support internationally important communities of wading birds due to our mild climate

and key position on the East Atlantic flyway. However, our estuarine ecosystems are under ever increasing pressure from human activities, such as development and agricultural intensification.

The BTO plans to use Bird Atlas data to investigate patterns of extinction and colonisation. This analysis will examine changes in tetrad occupancy and increase the understanding of factors affecting the species' decline. Bird Atlas data, and also that from the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) will help predict patterns of Curlew abundance, particularly in less well-monitored parts of the country. Building on the results of a recent analysis using BBS data, the BTO will be able to relate patterns of Curlew abundance and distribution to habitat, topography, climate and other environmental factors. Using remote tracking techniques, the BTO will be able



photo: Brian Vickers

to examine how breeding Curlew use upland areas and relate their movements and home range to aspects of the upland landscape. Accumulated data and also that from the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) have given the BTO good information about population and distribution changes of breeding and wintering Curlew. However, less is known about the impact of changes in adult over-winter survival. Recent research has demonstrated that the annual survival of Curlew in North Wales increased following the hunting ban, but declined in response to mechanised cockle-dredging. It is anticipated that the research will help the understanding of how wintering Curlew use estuarine and farmland habitats, both inside and outside protected areas, and how coastal development, disturbance and habitat creation might impact on their survival.