

SOS Save our Curlews Campaign Report 2022

(Upper Clun and Clee Hill CWG areas)

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Birds of Shropshire* estimated that the Curlew population declined by 77% between 1990 and 2010, down to around only 160 pairs, and had disappeared from 62% of the Bird Atlas survey squares that they occupied in 1990. They have continued to decline since, down to below 120 pairs. At the current rate of loss, the population will halve in 12 years, and virtually disappear within 25. There is a real danger that Curlew will become extinct in the County, unless urgent and effective action is taken to save them.



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2. PROJECT WORK

Curlew territories are located by volunteers, in Clee Hill by the Community Wildlife Group bird survey, and in the Upper Clun by resident recorders submitting details to the Bird Recorder. Project work involves nest finding, protecting nests with electric fencing, and radio-tagging and tracking chicks to find out how they use the landscape, and what happens to them. Understanding the reasons for low levels of chick survival is the key to an effective conservation plan.

Project work started in 2018, and has operated in four of the last five years (the exception being 2020, due to covid-19 restrictions) in the Upper Clun and Clee Hill areas, and in two years (2021 and 2022) in the Strettons area.

Project Results 2022

In the Upper Clun and Clee Hill CWG areas, six nests were found and fenced, two in each area.

Three fenced nests were predated. The fences are effective in keeping out mammalian predators, and there was no evidence that any of the fences were breached, so the eggs were probably taken by corvids. However, sitting Curlews have been seen to withstand attacks from Carrion Crows, so it is likely that the Curlews were absent from the nest when the eggs were taken (except perhaps in one case where nearby nesting Ravens were the most likely predators). Absence may have been due to human disturbance, or both birds were away feeding at the same time, but Curlews usually sit tight once incubation is underway, so it may have occurred after foxes near the fence had previously caused the Curlews to abandon the clutch, or leave it unattended, as apparently happened in 2021.

Three nests produced 10 chicks, which were all radio tagged and tracked. No young fledged.

The results are summarised in the Table.

Project Area	Pairs Located	Nests Found	Nests Fenced	No. Eggs in Fenced Nests	Unhatched Eggs	Nests producing chicks	Chicks Hatched	Chicks Radio-tagged	Fledged Young
Clee Hill CWG	7 + 1*	3	3	12	1 clutch (4) + 1 damaged	2	7	7	0
Upper Clun CWG	7 - 8	3	3	9	2 clutches (3 + 2) + 1 dud	1	3	3	0
Total	14 - 16	6	6	21	15	3	10	10	0

* one fenced nest was just outside the CWG area * the 3 unhatched clutches were all predated

Seven of the 10 tagged chicks survived for only 7 days or less (average 3.1 days). The other three survived for 12-19 days (average 15.7 days). The average for all 10 was 6.9 days, only a small fraction of the 35 or so days they need to fledge/

The identity of the predators cannot be known for certain. However, the remains found with the tag (if any), the location where the tag was found, and in some cases the distance from where the live chick was last seen, has allowed an assessment to be made on the balance of probability. The most likely predators were avian (unknown - 4) and fox (6).

Potential avian predators of small chicks include Buzzard, Kite, Carrion Crow and Raven, and Curlews have been seen frequently driving away these species. Kestrel is also a possible predator, but no defensive action against Kestrel has been observed.

While the predator cannot be known in all cases with 100% certainty, it is certain that all the potential predators, mammalian and avian, have higher populations than their naturally sustainable level because of the large amount of food available from the release of millions of gamebirds each year for shooting, only around 35% of which are actually shot.

Project Results 2018 - 22

A full report, detailing project results since 2018 in these two Community Wildlife Group areas, and in the Strettons area since 2021, has been published and widely disseminated. It shows in much more detail the evidence that the main cause of Curlew decline is predation, driven by the large increase in predators fuelled by massive gamebird release. It can be found on the SOS website www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/

3. DISSEMINATION

The results, the Annual Reports, and the 2018-22 report, are all sent to the South of England Curlew Forum, the UK and Ireland Curlew Action Group and the Curlew Recovery Partnership for England, so the work is an integral part of the case to Government for effective Curlew conservation measures.

4. CONCLUSION

The SOS Save our Curlews project will continue in future years. However, we have worked in Upper Clun and Clee Hill for four years now. In 2023, as well as continuing in the Strettons area, we intend to work in different parts of the County, around Oswestry, to ascertain if predation levels are fairly uniform. This will be our contribution, to keep producing more evidence for the need for immediate action to reduce predation pressures at the landscape scale by limiting gamebird release.

Project results and a full set of references can be found on our website www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/

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