

SOS Save our Curlews campaign



This year, the Shropshire Ornithological Society (SOS) *Save our Curlews* project continued to work with Strettons area Community Wildlife Group (SACWG) to find nests and put an electric fence round them, to guard the eggs from mammalian predation. It was also intended to radio tag and track the chicks that hatched, to find out how they use the landscape, and what happened to them.

SACWG members located seven pairs, and the nests of three of

them were found by the project. One was predated before the clutch was complete, one was predated after fencing, and the third was abandoned (the fence was functioning normally, and had not been breached). The pair with the predated fenced nest re-laid, but that nest too was predated. Eggshell fragments were found inside the fence on both occasions, indicating they were eaten by crows, but it is possible that the nest was abandoned before the eggs were eaten. Abandoned nests are believed to be caused by foxes patrolling the perimeter of the fence, scaring the sitting bird away. The nest finders looked for relay nests for all pairs, but there is no evidence that the other two attempted to relay. Another pair was located and monitored, but no evidence was observed that this pair laid any eggs, although it is possible that in this case too a partial clutch was predated early.

Across the County, breeding success has been very poor again. About 100 pairs are known to have produced six chicks at most, compared with the 50 or so they need for a stable population. Three of these young fledged from nests on the Long Mynd. At the current rate of decline, the population will halve in 12 years, and virtually disappear in 25.

The Strettons area is part of the Stepping Stones area, a project with a 50-year vision led by the National Trust and Natural England, with support from the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Partnership. There are an estimated 500 pairs of Curlew left in the south of England (south of a line from the Dee estuary to The Wash). The International Union for Nature Conservation criteria include maintaining the range of threatened species, as well as their populations, so the Shropshire population, now down to 100 – 110 breeding pairs, over 20% of that in southern England, is nationally and regionally important. Over 60% of the county's Curlews breed in the AONB, and 40% of them live in the Stepping Stones area. Efforts are being made to include a long-term species recovery project in the Stepping Stones programme, and the SOS / SACWG *Save our Curlews* project will continue in the long term as part of this.

It is also necessary to continue to produce the evidence that predation is currently the main cause of nest and chick loss, driving the population to local extinction; that lethal predator control does not keep pace with the increase in the number of

predators resulting from the ever-increasing release of gamebirds for shooting (estimated at over 2,000,000 per year in Shropshire in 2018); and the only solution is a reduction in the food supply for predators at a landscape scale.

The project has been running since 2018, and in the Strettons area since 2021. A full report, with results 2018-22, and conclusions, can be found on the SOS website, www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews

In 2023, we also started project work in two CWG areas around Oswestry, to see if productivity and predation is as great a problem there as it is in the south Shropshire Hills. A full report for 2023 will be published on the SOS website shortly.

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