



Curlews, Lapwings and Other Birds Survey

Introduction



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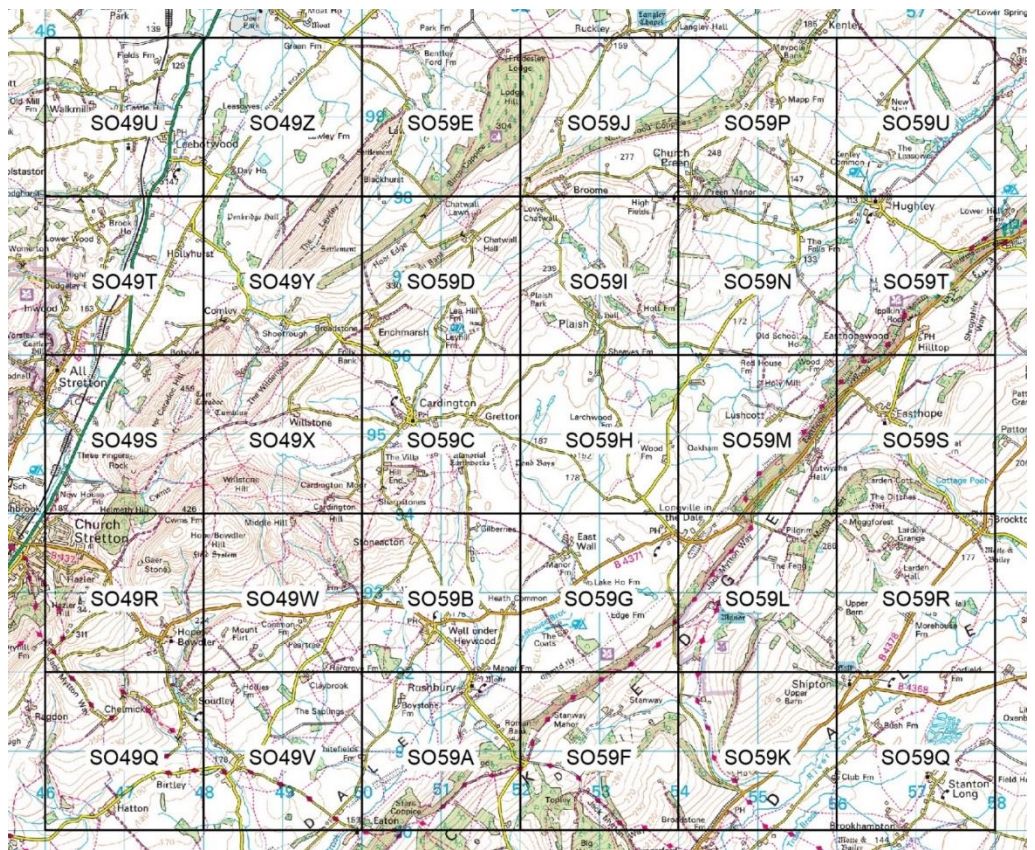
Lapwing and Curlew have both suffered a massive contraction in range and population decline in the last 20 years or so, nationally and locally. Curlew has been described as the UK's highest bird conservation priority, as we have an estimated 28% of the European breeding population, and 19 – 27% of the world population.

The Strettons area Community Wildlife Group agreed to conduct a Lapwing and Curlew survey in 2017,

to complement similar surveys carried out by other Community Wildlife Groups in different parts of the Shropshire Hills. The Church Stretton branch of the Shropshire Ornithological Society also agreed to participate in the survey.

An area was selected where these species were found breeding in the 2008-13 Shropshire Bird Atlas, comprising 30 2x2 kilometre squares on the Ordnance Survey National Grid, known as "tetrads", shown here.

The aim was to locate the territories of breeding pairs, and record behaviour, to estimate the population. No attempt was made to locate nests. Although the survey concentrated on the two main target species, and their habitats, surveyors were asked to also record on their maps any of 23 other target species seen, particularly Kestrel



and Cuckoo, if they were confident that they could do so.

Surveyors were recruited for all of the 30 squares, and were asked to make three visits, around 1 April, 1 May and mid-June, at times convenient to them, with visits concentrating on habitats where the main target species might be found, and lasting around three hours each. The surveys were conducted from Public Rights of Way, unless individual surveyors obtained landowners permission to leave them. Survey maps and recording instructions were supplied. A practical fieldwork training meeting was held for those that wanted one.

The survey was a success, and all 30 squares were covered. It has been repeated each year since 2018, using the same methodology and aiming to cover the same 30 squares, but coverage was limited in 2020 due to coronavirus restrictions.

Particular efforts have been made to record Curlews, as the Curlew situation is critical, with a 77% decline between 1990 and 2010, and a further decline since. There are probably only 120 pairs left in the whole of the County now, and there is not much time left to save them from local extinction. The Shropshire Curlew population is about one-quarter of the estimated 500 pairs in England, south of a line from the Dee estuary to the Wash, so it is regionally important.

In 2022

- Two squares to the west, SO49J and P, were added to the survey area
- Almost all squares were surveyed (30 out of 32)
- There were 42 participants.
- They put in 360 hours of survey effort
- All except 4 target species were found (Grey Partridge, Snipe & Spotted Flycatcher): Swift (nest sites) are monitored by a different project.

This is almost as good a result as 2021.

Results

The following maps show the distribution of Lapwing and Curlew territories found in 2022.

The Curlew population is estimated at 7 pairs, and Lapwing at 3-6+.

The Curlew estimate is lower than the 8-9 pairs estimated in 2021. The pair of Curlews in SO49W was relocated, but none were found at East Wall (SO59H) or Hughley (SO59U).



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The number of Lapwing is uncertain because one pair probably moved after failing at its first nest site, which probably held two pairs, and a single Lapwing was seen at another site, where possibly a mate was out of sight sitting on a nest. The pair that moved into SO49V, near Ticklerton, laid four eggs which all hatched, and all four chicks fledged.

No Curlew nests or chicks were found by the Bird survey, and it is believed that none fledged in the area in 2022 or 2021. In 2020, one pair had chicks, but there was no evidence of any

fledged young. There was no evidence that the Curlews produced any chicks, let alone fledged young in 2019, but there were at least two chicks (outcome unknown) in 2018.

Strettons Area CWG & Church Stretton SOS

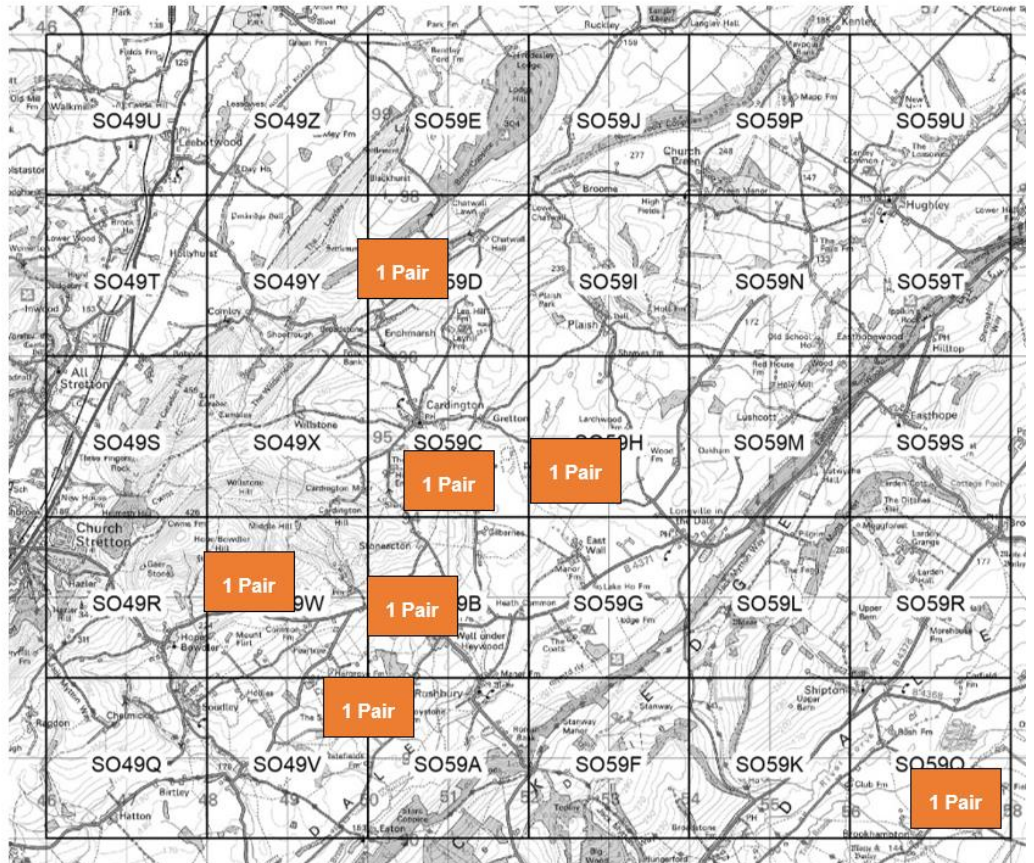
Lapwing & Curlew Survey

Results 2022

Curlew territories
(All survey and other information)

Estimated population
7 Pairs

Compared to 2021, pairs have been lost near Hughley (SO59U) and near East Wall (SO59H), but the pair near Hope Bowdler Hill (SO49W) has been re-found.

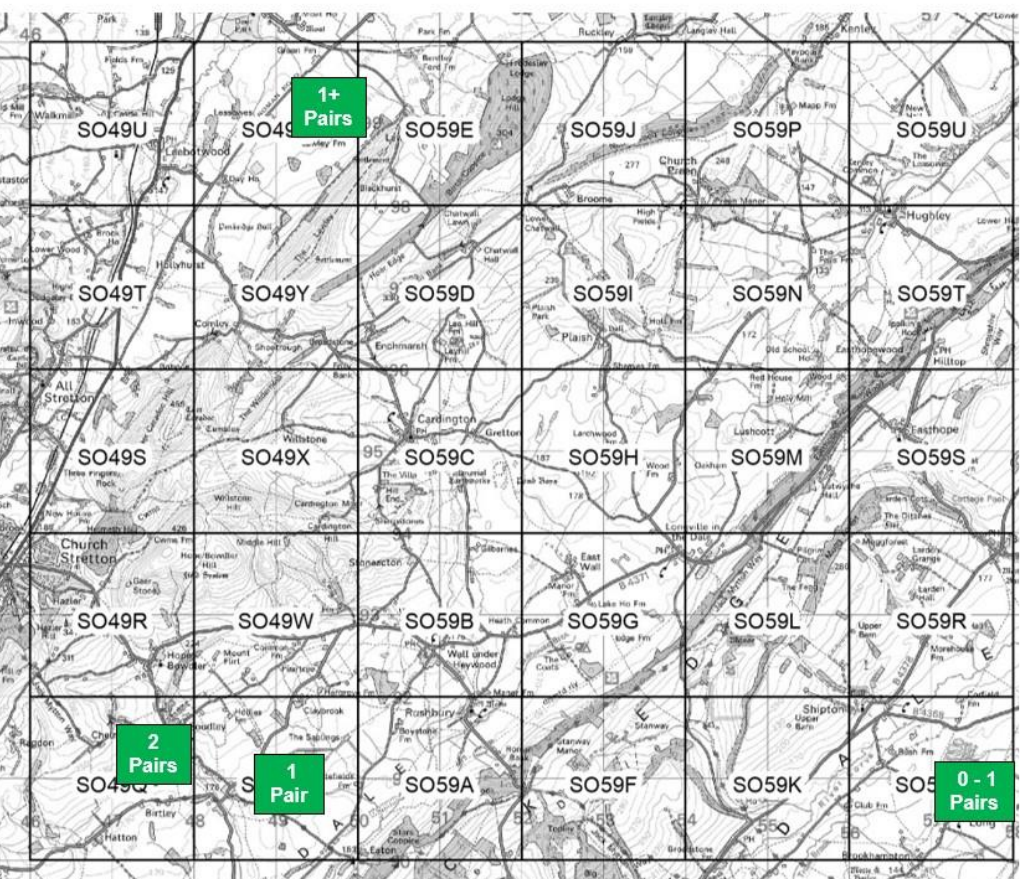


Strettons Area CWG & Church Stretton SOS

Lapwing & Curlew Survey

Results 2022

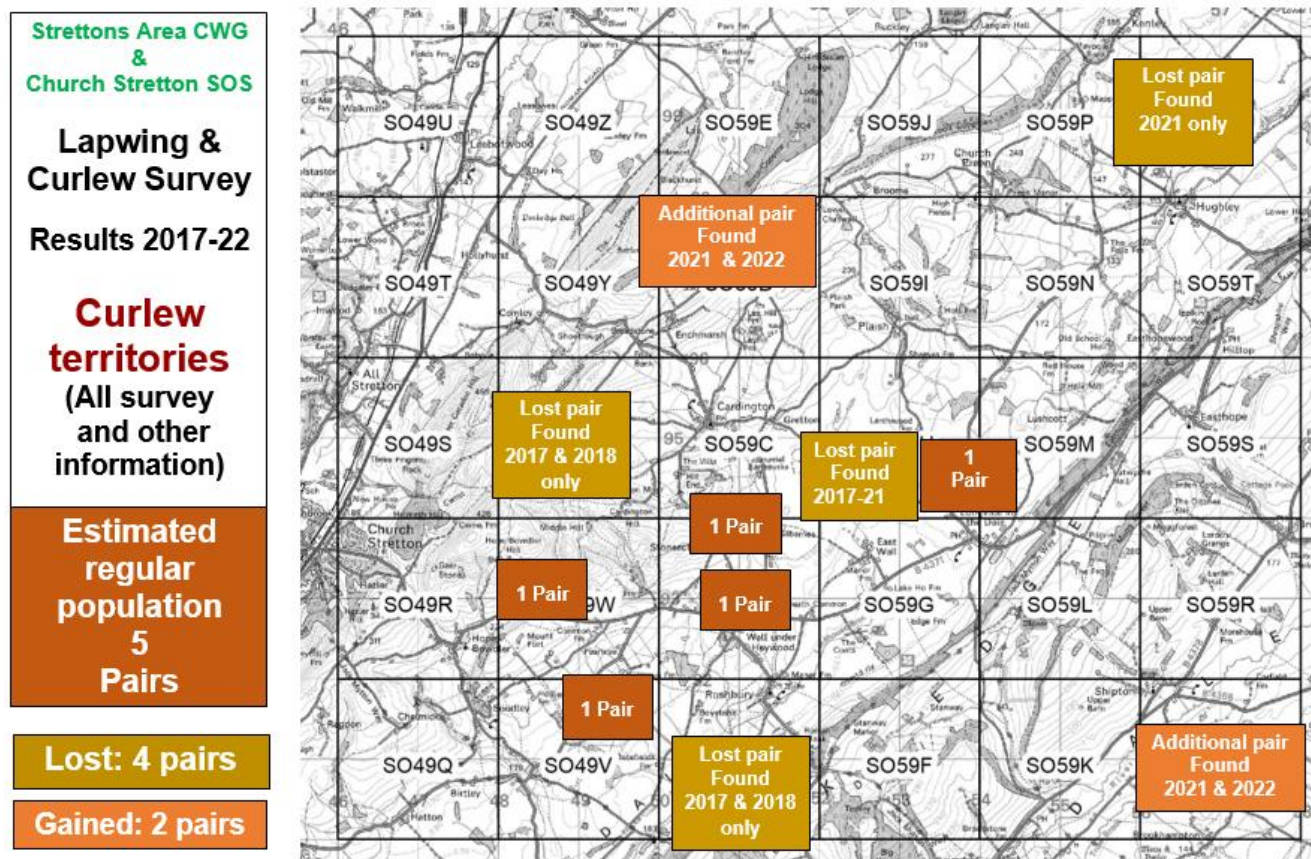
Lapwing
(All survey periods, + casual records)



Estimated population
3 – 6+ Pairs Found

Adult Curlews are generally site-faithful, so it is possible to compare results year on year. The Curlew results since 2017 have been assessed, and the results are shown on the third map. The initial apparent increase in the population is probably due to better coverage year on year, as surveyors got to know their squares better, then in 2020 as a result of people exercising from home.

Most pairs present in 2022 have been present each year since 2017, but it appears that two pairs were lost in 2019, two pairs were gained in 2021, and two more were lost in 2022.



Curlew and Lapwing were the main target species for the survey, but participants were also asked to record Other Target Species if possible, and most did so.

They were requested to make a particular effort to record Kestrels, as they too have declined considerably in recent years, and a nest box scheme and colour-ringing project is being undertaken across Shropshire to try and find out why. The records suggest at least 6 pairs, with another in SO49P (one of the two new squares, not shown on the map). This compares to only four pairs in 2020, 7-9 pairs in 2020, 4 – 5 pairs in 2019 (another very poor year for them), and up to 10 pairs in 2018, perhaps a few more than the 6 – 8 estimated in 2017.

Cuckoo has also become increasingly rare – the BTO Breeding Bird Survey has found declines of 34% in the UK, 71% in England, and 81% in the English West Midlands region, between 1995 and 2020. Members were advised in 2020 that there were more Cuckoo records than usual, but “it’s not clear whether there are more Cuckoos about, or we’re better able to hear them in the peace and quiet of staying at home [due to coronavirus restrictions]”. The population estimate of 7 territorial males in 2020 was substantially more than recorded in previous years, and slightly more than the 6-7 in 2022, and 5 in 2021. In 2019, up to three males were recorded, and probably only one in 2018 and 2017.

The first successful breeding of Red Kite in Shropshire for 130 years occurred as recently as 2006, but 58 nests, and another nine breeding pairs, were found in the County in 2022, mainly in the south-west hills, but there have been nests north of Shrewsbury each year

since 2017, and the most easterly nest to date was reported in 2019 from near the Staffordshire border.

In the Strettons area too, Red Kites have increased rapidly. The first nest east of the A49 road was found in 2012, and, in 2022, five nests were found: two failed, but the other three were successful, fledging at least five young. The female at one of the failed nests was wing-tagged in north Dorset, 186km, two years previously, the only known example of a Kite from outside of the Wales/Shropshire/Herefordshire tagging scheme breeding in Shropshire.. There are likely to be other pairs nesting at unknown locations, as wing-tagged birds that are old enough to breed have been photographed in the area.

On the bird survey, at least 17 Red Kites were recorded in 13 squares, more than in all previous years except 2021, also reflecting the spread of this species.

Apart from the five main Target Species listed above, members were asked to record observations of 19 Other Target species: Barn Owl, Bullfinch, Dipper, Dunnock, Grey Partridge, Linnet, Meadow Pipit, Red Kite, Reed Bunting, Skylark, Snipe, Spotted Flycatcher, Stonechat, Swift (nest sites only), Tree Sparrow, Wheatear, Whinchat, Yellow Wagtail and Yellowhammer.

Table 1. Other Target Species - Summary

Tetrad	Max. Number of Each Species Recorded											
	Red Kite	Barn Owl	Skylark	Meadow Pipit	Cuckoo	Dunnock	Wheat-ear	Stone-chat	Tree Sparrow	Linnet	Bullfinch	Yellow-hammer
SO49 J	None of these species recorded											
SO49 P	1					4					2	
SO49 Q												
SO49 R	1		6		2	3	1	3		10		
SO49 S												
SO49 T					1							
SO49 U												
SO49 V	3	1	8			6			6		2	5
SO49 W	1		2	4	1	1		3		5	1	2
SO49 X	2											
SO49 Y				8	1	1		7		3		4
SO49 Z	1				2	1		1				1
SO59 A			3		1	2					3	2
SO59 B	1	1				1					2	1
SO59 C	1		1								2	
SO59 D	1		3								2	
SO59 E			3		1		2				2	
SO59 F	None of these species recorded											
SO59 G	None of these species recorded											
SO59 H	2											2
SO59 I	None of these species recorded											
SO59 J	Square not surveyed											
SO59 K	1											1
SO59 L	None of these species recorded											
SO59 M			2									
SO59 N		2	10		1	7					1	8
SO59 P	1		13		1	6						3
SO59 Q	None of these species recorded											
SO59 R	Square not surveyed											
SO59 S	1		2			3			4			3
SO59 T			5			6				2		2
SO59 U			3		1	2					1	1
Birds (Max)	17	4	61	12	12	43	3	14	10	20	18	35
Tetrads	13	3	13	2	10	13	2	4	2	4	10	13

Four species were not recorded at all: Grey Partridge, Snipe, Swift (nest sites) and Spotted Flycatcher. Two species were found in one square only, Dipper in SO59U and Reed Bunting in SO49R. The results for the other species are shown in Table 1.

There is a separate Swift project, and details can be found elsewhere in the Community Wildlife Group's Annual Report.

Save our Curlews Campaign Nest Finding and Protection Project

The Shropshire Ornithological Society (SOS) has been carrying out research with other Community Wildlife Groups to find nests, put an electric fence around them to protect the eggs from predators, and then fix radio-tags to the chicks and track them to see how they use the landscape, and what happens to them. Not enough young birds fledge to replace the older birds dying off. We need to know why.

This innovative research was extended to the Strettons area in 2021, with landowners help. The project is expensive, and has been funded by Shropshire Ornithological Society (SOS), the Strettons area Curlew Appeal (featured in several Stretton Focus articles), and several grants, including substantial ones

from the Stepping Stones project and the Stretton Focus Community Awards Scheme. The Green Recovery Challenge Fund financed the whole project in 2022, via a grant from the Stepping Stones project.

Almost all the landowners we approached were pleased to have Curlews on their land, supported our efforts to protect them, and gave permission for us to look for, and fence, the nests. We are grateful for their support.

Three nests were found and fenced. The fences worked well, but one of the nests was abandoned. Four chicks hatched in each of the other two, and all eight were radio-tagged. All died within 8 days, three of natural causes, and 5 were predated.

Chicks usually leave the nest within a couple of days of hatching, and are on the ground for 5-6 weeks before they can fly. They are vulnerable for the whole of this period. Failure of chicks to survive and fledge is a major cause of the Curlew population decline, locally and nationally, and we need a better understanding of the reasons so we can develop effective conservation measures.

There is a full description of the project on the SOS website www.shropshirebirds.com/save-our-curlews/. This describes the results in detail, our future plans, and the overwhelming evidence that predation by foxes and other predators is the main cause of Curlew's continuing decline. It is clear that the annual release of millions of pheasants for shooting, only a third of which are actually shot, results in an over-abundant food supply which maintains the numbers of the Curlew's main predators well above naturally sustainable levels.

The project is continuing in 2023, partly funded by the Strettons area Save our Curlews appeal. You can find more information, including details of how to make donations and where to send them, on our website www.shropscwgs.org.uk/all-events/save-our-curlews-strettons-area-2023-appeal/



The campaign is also encouraging a network of 10 Community Wildlife Groups across Shropshire, including ours, to monitor Curlews. The Groups cover 137 tetrads where the vast majority of the County's Curlew population was found in the recent 2008-13 Bird Atlas project. A map showing the area covered by each group, overlain on the Curlew distribution map, can be found on the SOS website. Around 90-110 pairs were found altogether in 2022. Over 270 people participated, and put in nearly 2,300 hours, a clear indication of the commitment of local people to saving our Curlews.

Participants

Thanks to the following people, who undertook the survey work and / or supplied records:-

Chris Amass, John Arnfield, Meg Bacon, Steve Baker, Alison Bennett, Cathy Bowler, David Bowler, Lucy Callwood, Phil Constable, Belinda Cousens, Mags Cousins, Julie Cowley, Adrian Cullis, Gill Davies, Ruth Dennis-Jones, Alistair Edie, Greg Forster, Sue Forster, Beth Furlong, Rob Furlong, Joe Gomme, Alyson Harrison, Jackie Harrison, Melanie Houlder, Pat Houlder, Peter Houlder, Helen Howes, Jim Jarrett, Tony Jones, Claire Kelly, Denis Kelly, John Knowles, David Matthews, Andrew May, Shirley McNichol, Andrew Morton, Ron Parnell, Adrian Pickles, Sue Pinsent, Ian Plumridge, Jill Plumridge, Robert Plumridge, Jane Potts, Will Priestley, Anne Schofield, Ray Slack, Dee Snape, Carol Thickers, Caroline Uff, Dick Ward and Dan Watkins.

Thanks also to:-

- Gill Davies, for making several additional survey visits to monitor the Curlews, and helping with the training of new participants.
- Terry Moore, for information about the successful Lapwings near Ticklerton.
- Lorna Taylor, for making contact with landowners with breeding Curlews, to seek permission for nest finding.

Full Report

A detailed report of the methodology and results will be supplied to all the participants, and will be on the website, www.shropscwgs.org.uk/strettons-area-wildlife-group/lapwing-and-curlew-survey/

Acknowledgements

The *Save our Curlews* Nest Finding and Protection project received a grant from the Green Recovery Challenge Fund, via Stepping Stones.

Plans for the Future

The survey will be repeated in future years, so we can get a better picture of the population and distribution of Lapwing and Curlew. In 2023, we will also continue to work with the SOS Save our Curlews campaign, which, in co-operation with farmers, will continue to promote conservation, and organise nest protection for Curlews.

New participants are needed for the survey in 2023. It's easy and enjoyable and simple instructions will be provided.

A joint meeting of the Strettons area Community Wildlife Group and the Church Stretton SOS branch will be held at 7.30pm on Wednesday 22 March, at the Methodist Church Hall, Watling St., Church Stretton, for a presentation of the 2022 results, and plan the 2023 survey. New members, and anyone interested in birds, will be very welcome.

For those that want to come, there will be a practical training session, explaining how to go about the survey, and record what you see, around the end of March.

Leo Smith
February 2023