



Our county's waterbirds

Despite freezing weather, harassed farmers and complex paperwork, at least one dedicated volunteer has been busy keeping track of Lincolnshire's wildlife

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Below: Moorhen

*Opposite top to bottom, left to right:
Little grebe; Grey heron; Mallard; Mute swan*



There are several species of waterbirds whose dispersed populations are inadequately covered by the regular Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) Core Counts and other occasional special WeBS surveys. Typical of such species, which have less than fifty per cent of their estimated Great Britain populations currently counted by WeBS, are grey heron, mute swan, mallard, moorhen, coot and little grebe. For some species, such as snipe, there were no valid population estimates. The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) co-ordinated a survey of wintering waterbirds using habitats such as small rivers, streams, ponds, flooded fields and wet meadows.

The Wetland Bird Survey is the monitoring scheme for non-breeding waterbirds (wildfowl and waders) in the United Kingdom, which aims to provide the principal data for the conservation of their populations and wetland habitats. WeBS is a joint scheme of the BTO, Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Joint Nature Conservation Committee. WeBS has been running for more than fifty years.

Over a period of five years I have been recording birds for the BTO, including the Garden Bird Watch and a survey of naturalised geese and mute swans. I receive a BTO newsletter and a list of ongoing and forthcoming surveys. One in particular took my eye, so I telephoned and asked for further details. A couple of weeks later, the organiser of the survey contacted me.

My address was plotted on the BTO Geographic Information System and located the one-km squares that have been pre-selected for this survey, within my area. A single visit would need to be made to each square, between 9am and 2.30pm. Keeping within these periods whenever possible was important as some species head toward nearby roosting sites from mid-afternoon onwards. I was sent eight count forms with instruction sheets, letters of introduction, and a photocopy of a map highlighting the squares. I had requested eight survey

areas but was told not to feel obliged to do them all. I was told to send the completed forms back to the survey organiser. The BTO hoped I would enjoy the survey and wished me luck.

The aim of the survey was to count waterbirds at each of the 750 selected, one-km square sites. The methods used were new to WeBS, even though adapted from existing tried-and-tested methodology used to monitor terrestrial species. Each selected site was a randomly selected one-km square, encompassing a mix of habitats. It was important to provide a description of the habitats present in each patch distinguished on the map, irrespective of whether I was able to cover the patch or not. River habitat included the riverside vegetation up to twenty-five metres either side. If the habitat was open water, it had to be indicated if it was frozen at the time of the survey and if a dry habitat or a river, whether it was flooded or not. Any patches not counted because of lack of time, refused access or unsuitable weather conditions were still assigned a patch letter.

All the species normally recorded for WeBS were of interest but the target species of this survey are those not properly monitored by WeBS, with populations away from the regularly counted sites. All waterbirds were counted. If the count was grossly underestimated then the figure was shown in brackets. Birds flying over the site were excluded unless seen to land.

Before attempting to go onto privately owned land, permission was always sought. Counters were advised not to put themselves in a position of any danger. When allocated the eight squares in my area, I was surprised to find I was the only volunteer carrying out the survey in North Lincolnshire.

Day one didn't start too well; on arriving at the first site on a snowy winter's morning, I was confronted by a harassed none-too-pleased farmer who had been called back to his house to see what I wanted. I was already wondering if I had volunteered for something I couldn't handle. As it turned out, it was possible

to do the count from the roads which bordered on the farmer's land. The day ended with a count of twenty-four lapping and six black-headed gulls: at least I'd made a start. On day two I visited two sites: Twigmoor Woods and the River Ancholme at South Ferriby. At Twigmoor, twenty mallard and one moorhen were seen. At South Ferriby, as we walked alongside the river in a southerly direction, a grey heron came into view. Thankfully it landed within the area being covered. Day three proved to be quite frustrating: a site at Calcethorpe and one near Corringham produced no waterbirds.

The final day turned out to be cold and blustery. I arrived at the first site and went to ask permission to go onto the private land. Once again I came across an irate farmer. He was having problems with his tractor. I informed him that he didn't give permission for me to go onto his land, I'd leave straight away. Finally I left him an introduction letter and asked him to ring the BTO for any further information. Driving back along the track, I noticed seven mute swans in one of his fields. After checking the other fields, no further birds were seen. The next site was almost fruitless, except for three mute swans, which graced a private fishing pond. The pond wasn't shown on the map, so I pencilled it in. At the final site, I hoped to see at least a few more birds but once again, there were none. This day had proved to be most frustrating.

At the end of this fourth day my task was completed. All the relevant details transferred to the forms and dispatched to the BTO which is now in possession of new facts. But I too had gained a lot.

When filling in the first couple of forms I found it difficult to subdivide them and to give each habitat a unique letter. But as I progressed it became easier. A friend of mine helped me on all the days - two pairs of binoculars and telescopes are better than one.

Walking alongside the River Ancholme and seeing the magnificent Horkstow Bridge on a wet and windy day, and other interesting things, made me realise what gems are to be found in the Lincolnshire countryside. I enjoyed the fresh country air, even in winter time, and I met a number of new people who, for the most part, proved very helpful. Again, a new experience has opened up for me and I have gained more in-depth knowledge.

Although this survey was a detailed one and a challenge, it also was a most enjoyable one.

