

Brown, D. & Douglas, D. 2014.

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POSTER

Developing an international conservation plan and a domestic recovery programme for a species of global conservation concern

DANIEL BROWN* & DAVID DOUGLAS

RSPB Centre for Conservation Science, RSPB Scotland, 2 Lochside View, Edinburgh Park, Edinburgh, EH12 9DH, UK

* Email: daniel.brown@rspb.org.uk

In 2008, the Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* was uplisted to globally Near Threatened (NT) on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, in response to widespread declines across its core breeding range.⁶ Whilst still considered a widespread species in many upland areas of the UK, recent publications have highlighted steep breeding population declines² and range contraction,⁴ and the global significance of the UK population.³

The United Kingdom represents a global stronghold for Europe's largest wading bird. With a recent population estimate of 68 000 breeding pairs¹, we support 16-24% of the global breeding population.³ Similarly, with 150 000 wintering birds we host one of the largest wintering populations.¹ However, the breeding population declines witnessed in the UK are amongst the steepest of anywhere within the Curlew's range, having declined by 43% between 1995 and 2012.²

Excluding species found on UK Overseas Territories, if we were to prioritize the conservation status of species on the basis of (1) global conservation status, (2) proportion of the global population in the UK and (3) status and trends of that UK population, then the Curlew is arguably our highest priority bird species.. As a stronghold for Curlew, actions we take to slow and reverse range contraction and population decline across the United Kingdom could go a long way to securing the Curlew's global conservation status.

RSPB are currently co-ordinating the *International Single Species Action Plan for the Conservation of the Eurasian Curlew* under the framework of the African–Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA), the intergovernmental treaty dedicated to the conservation of migratory waterbirds and their habitats along the African–Eurasian flyway.

A 2013 AEWA workshop attended by experts from several key countries confirmed that declines are principally being caused by low productivity. The key drivers of this poor breeding success include: high levels of nest loss and chick mortality primarily to predators and additionally to agricultural operations; the widespread fragmentation and degradation of breeding habitats due to land use change, including the drainage and conversion of wet grasslands to agriculturally improved grasslands, abandonment of farming activity, homogenization of mixed farming systems, and the loss and degradation of peat bogs. Further fragmentation of breeding habitats, due to afforestation of open landscapes and (potentially) wind farm developments, are additional threats to the UK population.

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There have been notable successes in the field of avian conservation in Britain in recent decades, such as the Corncrake *Crex crex* and Cirl Bunting *Emberiza cirlus*. However, these successes mostly involve species with small populations and/or ranges, where resources can be highly targeted. Reversing the trend of relatively widespread but declining species remains a significant challenge, as demonstrated by the continued decline in many of our priority farmland and upland bird species. The Curlew provides us with an increasingly urgent focal species to attempt to find a solution to this problem.

To do so will require a better understanding of the land management practices that support stable or increasing populations. Enhanced analysis of existing bird monitoring data will be needed to identify the status of different populations, to aid targeting of limited conservation resources in the future and to ensure a co-ordinated approach to planning in important breeding areas. Other tools may be required, including emergency intervention in areas at risk of regional extinction, such as the Republic of Ireland, where there may now be fewer than 100 breeding pairs, and ensuring the designated site network adequately delivers for Curlew conservation.

RSPB are currently developing proposals along these lines, in partnership with government agencies and conservation non-governmental organizations, as part of a recovery programme across the British Isles, to complement and aid implementation of the emerging AEWA plan. The scale of the task is huge, and will require both a vast increase in resources and strong partnerships between conservation bodies, land managers and their representative organizations, and wider rural land use interest groups.

When considering the Eurasian Curlew, it is mindful to consider the fate of two of its closest relatives. The Eskimo Curlew *Numenius borealis* of North America was considered one of the most abundant shorebirds in North America, and is now widely believed to be extinct, whilst the Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* has not been seen since 1995 and no regular breeding, passage or wintering population is known. For now, the Eurasian Curlew remains a relatively widespread species, but the situation in Ireland alone provides evidence that this can change quickly. As a recent edition of *BTO News* stated: 'It is not enough for Bird Atlas 2007–2011 to set the agenda for conservation-related research; it has to create momentum too or we will lose breeding species such as Curlew.' Add to that our global responsibility for the species, and the urgency of creating that momentum is beyond doubt.

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