

## **Wallshield Breeding Bird Report: Summary and evaluation**

### **Summary**

The additional breeding bird survey requested by the Commissioners for Wallshield has been completed and the results shared with Natural England (NE) and considered against the revised breeding wader guidance<sup>1</sup>. In the absence of any clearly defined measure of impact and having considered the views of Natural England we conclude that the proposals do have the potential to impact on breeding waders and it would be difficult to justify the public funding for this site given the wider investment in the area targeted at breeding wader recovery. There remains a concern that any decision includes the relevant context to avoid the perception of setting a threshold/benchmark which could significantly impact on wider delivery in other non-priority areas. It is worth highlighting that in this particular case, the Curlew Life project and related investment into wader conservation in the area is a significant consideration and would not apply to most other woodland creation proposals.

### **1. Background**

- 1.1 The Commissioners agreed the need for a further breeding bird survey (BBS) at Wallshield to address concerns that the data did not meet the revised survey guidance, which was changed in 2021 to include consideration of a buffer area. Further changes to the survey method and guidance were made in late 2021 and early 2022 respectively.
- 1.2 Five ecological consultancy firms were selected to tender for the work in January 2022 on the basis of prior experience of and known competence in similar ornithological work. From these five, E3 were selected on the basis of cost, quality of quote and knowledge of previous good quality work. The survey was carried out between March and June 2022 and followed the most up-to-date guidance.
- 1.3 Ecological consultants have a set way of assessing significance, largely developed around commercial developments going through the planning system, which is not always particularly applicable to our type of work. Thus, although we take into account the consultant's comments when assessing schemes, we also provide our own interpretation, supported by comments from other relevant bodies e.g. NE.
- 1.4 This paper provides a summary of the BBS and an interpretation of the survey results, with consideration of the current and emerging wader guidance, and NE's comments on the report. Due to timescales, NE were provided with an early draft of the report and thus some of their comments may relate to matters that have been subsequently slightly altered. However, there are not considered to be any significant changes. The

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the latest iteration of the guidance is, at the time of writing, still in the process of development and may change.

results have not been shared with any other stakeholders at this time but given the joint nature of the breeding wader guidance it was felt appropriate to seek NE's views.

1.5 The full survey report and NE's response are provided as appendices.

## 2. Summary of results: all species

2.1 To aid interpretation, results were provided for the forestry site (planting footprint) and buffer separately. Numbers in brackets represent the number of pairs; however, where territories significantly overlapped the forestry site and buffer, these were counted in both. Thus, for some species (including curlew and snipe) the numbers given in 2.2 & 2.3 will appear to add up to a larger number than the total number given for forestry site plus buffer (given in the table in 3.1). The tabular Total figure is the correct total.

2.2 The forestry site supported approximately 29 pairs of 10 species including two Birds of Conservation Concern (BOCC) red listed species: curlew (2) and skylark (7). Six were amber listed species.

2.3 The buffer area supported approximately 345 pairs of 38 species. 10 of these were red listed: cuckoo (1), curlew (8, including the two overlapping with the forestry site), grasshopper warbler (1), house martin (2), house sparrow (3), lapwing (2), lesser redpoll (2), mistle thrush (4), skylark (77) and starling (3). 14 were amber listed species, including snipe and oystercatcher.

## 3. Summary of results: waders

3.1 Four species of wader were considered to have bred within the survey area: curlew (red listed), lapwing (red listed), snipe (amber listed) and oystercatcher (amber listed). Their distribution (no. of breeding pairs) and density per km<sup>2</sup> in the forestry site and buffer is given in the table below (noting comment above in 2.1). In total there are 8 pairs of curlew, 2 of which are considered to be nesting within the forestry site.

Species	Forestry site		Buffer		Total	
	No. pairs	Density (km <sup>2</sup> )	No. pairs	Density (km <sup>2</sup> )	No. pairs	Density (km <sup>2</sup> )
Curlew	2	6.04	8**	1.8	8	1.8
Snipe	1	3.02	7*	1.5	7	1.5
Lapwing	-	-	2	0.44	2	0.44
Oystercatcher	-	-	1	0.22	1	0.22

\*\* includes two overlapping from forestry site

\*includes one overlapping from forestry site

#### **4. Interpretation of results and impact assessment – consultant**

- 4.1 The consultant concludes that none of the wader populations are likely to be significant at County level. Snipe and curlew may be significant at District level but will certainly be significant at Parish level. However, as population figures are not available below County level, these assessments are by no means certain. The ornithological value of the survey area for all species is considered to be of District value based on cuckoo, stonechat and grasshopper warbler. It is worth also noting the large number of territories of skylark, a red listed bird.
- 4.2 Territories of birds that depend on open habitat for breeding (curlew, meadow pipit, skylark, snipe and stonechat) will mostly be lost from within the forestry site. Smaller numbers of meadow pipit and stonechat may continue to nest within the plantation but the other species require larger areas of open habitat and will be lost. In terms of the buffer area, the loss will be mostly of the four wader species.
- 4.3 There may be positive effects of the new woodland by attracting new territories and species to the site including nightjar, cuckoo, tawny owl, jay, willow warbler, grasshopper warbler, song thrush and lesser redpoll.
- 4.4 Various mitigation/compensation measures are suggested, many of which are included already in the design, such as incorporation of open space and native broadleaves.

#### **5. Interpretation of results and impact assessment – NE**

- 5.1 NE considers the principal species of concern to be curlew but notes the recent steep decline not just of this species but also lapwing and snipe. A significant factor in this decline has been a loss of open habitats and increase in predation level. They consider this location has good densities of breeding pairs and is situated within a wider area of open habitat known to support concentrations of breeding waders; noting that the BTO Wader Zonal Map gives scores of 4-5 for curlew in this area, and that the proposal is located within the only English site of the Curlew Life project.
- 5.2 NE does not agree with the assessment of Parish-level significance for curlew, as the evaluation is based on data that is over 10 years old. Recent national analysis indicates typical curlew population density to be 1-2 pairs per km<sup>2</sup>
- 5.3 They note that this area was removed from the original Wallshield 1 application due to concerns from NE and RSPB relating to the detrimental impact on curlew in an area that was supported by state funding through the LIFE project. The reasons for those concerns are still relevant.
- 5.4 NE conclude that the creation of new woodland here will have a significant negative impact on breeding curlew both directly in the short term, and indirectly in the medium

to long term, and that it is not appropriate to spend state funds to support the creation of new productive conifer woodlands in this location. In their response NE do not refer to any positive biodiversity benefits of the scheme.

## 6. Interpretation in relation to current and emerging wader guidance

6.1 The current guidance (January 2022) includes a list of factors against which a decision should be made. A summary of these is provided in the table below.

<b><i>Conservation or landscape designations</i></b>	Site lies within Northumberland National Park
<b><i>Breeding wader species, territories and numbers present, conservation status, other key species present</i></b>	4 species in total, 2 red listed, 2 amber listed. 8 pairs curlew, 7 pairs snipe, 2 pairs lapwing, 1 pair oystercatcher
<b><i>Local bird records (forestry site boundary plus 2 km buffer zone).</i></b>	27 curlew, 9 lapwing, 3 oystercatcher, 13 snipe
<b><i>Habitat suitability</i></b>	Highly suitable wader habitat to west and south of site
<b><i>Existing woodland proximity, cover and distribution</i></b>	Wallshield 1 plantation located immediately to east of site. Existing productive forestry to north-east, mostly 1-2 km away.
<b><i>Existing schemes promoting wader recovery</i></b>	Site lies within Curlew LIFE area
<b><i>BTO WZM strata</i></b>	Strata 4-5 for curlew.
<b><i>Positive benefits for biodiversity and the natural environment</i></b>	Predominantly productive conifer scheme. Benefits in terms of carbon sequestration and for a few species dependent upon coniferous/mixed woodland such as red squirrel and the bird species listed in para 4.3

6.2 Defra, FC and NE are currently developing revised wader guidance, which includes a flow chart (to be used once breeding bird survey results have been received) to assess whether a woodland creation scheme should go ahead, taking account of the presence of breeding waders, woodland cover and distribution, and biodiversity benefits. It will not necessarily completely rule out site-specific considerations in every eventuality, but it is hoped that in most cases it will enable us to come to a robust conclusion.

6.3 An assessment of the proposed scheme against the current version of the flow chart indicates that it would not be approved; however, the flow chart is not finalised (although in the late stages and in the process of being tested) and may change; e.g. the use of density of breeding pairs, rather than absolute numbers, is being considered.

6.4 In addition to the population density information provided by NE (5.2 above) RSPB surveys in 2021 and 2022 within part of the Curlew Life area have provided figures per km<sup>2</sup> of 1.22 (22.84 km<sup>2</sup>) and 1.16 (49.63 km<sup>2</sup>) respectively (though the latter survey is awaiting some further data). Thus the overall breeding density for this site (1.8) falls at

the top end of the expected range. The breeding density for the footprint only is significant, at >6. (The BTO modelling gave a “high” average density as 5 individuals (2.5 pairs)).

6.5 By way of comparison, based on numbers alone the scheme would be allowable in Scotland, where up to 5 or 7 pairs (depending on local circumstances) can be displaced from the footprint. However, curlew numbers and densities are higher in Scotland, and this is a devolved matter.

## **7. Conclusion**

It is understood that Defra officials are seeking the views of the Minister on the acceptable levels of impact on breeding waders associated with woodland creation projects, in the context of the significant loss of pipeline woodland creation schemes that this could cause. A Ministerial steer on this has not yet been received. In the absence of this and based on the developing guidance, considering the total number and density of breeding curlew and the feedback received from NE, it is considered that it would be difficult to justify providing public money to support the proposed planting scheme given the potential impact on breeding waders.

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