

Curlew Action



June newsletter 2024

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Norton Free Primary School



EMAIL: admin@curlewaction.org

SOCIAL MEDIA: @CurlewAction

WEBSITE: curlewaction.org



Curlew chick in hand in Belgium. (Photo by Ellen Bradley)

Curlew Action is a small charity that largely depends on individual donations. We need your support to continue our unique work for Curlews and the wildlife that shares their habitats.

By donating to us, you are helping us act quickly and efficiently, ensuring these beautiful endangered birds survive into the future.

DONATE TO SUPPORT CURLEW ACTION

A message for Labour

Curlew Action sends congratulations to Keir Starmer and the new Labour government. We are depending on you to reverse the terrible declines in wildlife and habitats we have seen over the last few decades. Without a healthy Earth we will all fail, and you have the chance to enact sweeping improvements.

Please make change happen for wild creatures and wild places.

European trips overview

This year, we have continued our trips to parts of the Eurasian Curlew's European breeding range with visits to Poland and Belgium - two countries where the Curlew population is on its knees. The aim of this work is to build a clearer image of Curlew conservation across Europe and to forge stronger connections between fieldworkers.

Both Poland and Belgium have a mere 200 pairs left and they face similar threats to those that breed in the UK, although differences in financial support and policies have created diverse approaches to conservation.



*Pulwy Marsh is a Special Bird Protection Area in Poland.
(Photo by Mike Smart)*



*Mike discussing the complexity of land ownership
around the River Bug in Poland with field ecologist
Dominik Krupiński. (Photo by Mary Colwell)*



Three Curlew eggs in a nest. (Photo by Ellen Bradley)

Polish Headstarting is tailored to a low-budget. It is the longest-running programme in Europe and is vital to keeping the population going.

Our visit to Poland has been summarised in two blog posts on our website – [by Mary](#) and [by Mike](#).



The River Bug in Poland, flowing through farmland – and alongside Curlew nesting sites. (Photo by Mary Colwell)



Curlew Black White Orange which breeds in Poland and winters in south Wales



Griet Nijs, a Curlew conservationist in Belgium, with a 11-day-old Curlew chick. (Photo by Mary Colwell)

Our visit to Belgium also highlighted the importance of headstarting to a struggling population. Here, rescued Curlew eggs are taken to a local wildlife rescue centre which rears them alongside other species, including Oystercatchers and Redshanks. So far, they have incubated 30 Curlew eggs and released over 90% back into the wild at various locations - an important injection into a population that only naturally fledged an estimated 20 chicks in 2023.

Predation of chicks and eggs is the biggest threat to Curlews in Belgium. High levels of nitrogen from intensive farming is also having an impact, an issue that affects much of Europe. ([see our blog from our trip to The Netherlands in 2023](#)).

For a full account of our Belgium trip, read the two blog posts by Mary on our website – [a diary of the trip](#) and [a reflections piece](#).



A Fox fence erected at Turnhouts Vennengebied. (Photo by Mary Colwell)

European Curlew Headstarting Workshop



The wildlife rescue centre in Belgium.

(Photo by Mary Colwell)



Curlew chicks at the wildlife rescue centre.

(Photo by Yentl Nijs)

From our European visits it is becoming increasingly clear that headstarting is crucial for keeping dwindling populations afloat, but there are varying approaches to how it is done.

Following on from our successful inaugural European Curlew Fieldworker Workshop in Norfolk earlier this year, we are planning an online European Curlew Headstarting Workshop. Please pencil in Friday 7th February 2025 for this event. We will be sharing more details over the coming months.



Curlew eggs incubating in the wildlife rescue centre in Belgium. (Photo by Mary Colwell)

Curlew survey for farmers



Curlew LIFE is calling on all UK farmers to take part in their survey:

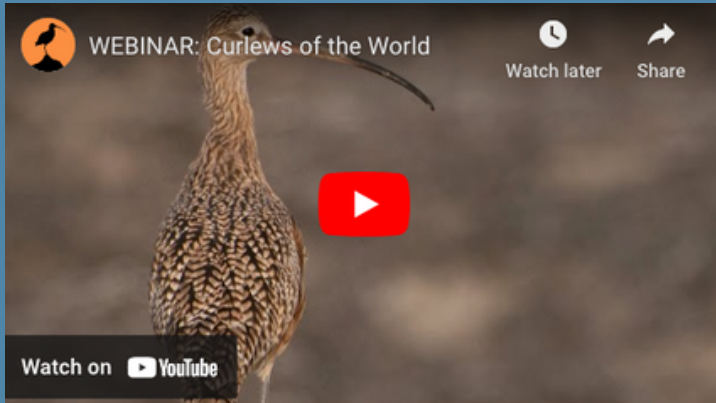
“If you are a farmer, please could you spare a few minutes to fill in our survey about Curlews. Whether you know anything about Curlews or not, we’d love to hear from you.

We carried out a similar survey back in 2022, towards the start of the Curlew LIFE project, and now we’re repeating it to gauge whether there’s been any change in awareness about Curlews.

We’re also keen to hear farmers’ views on whether managing their land in a Curlew-friendly way might bring benefits or opportunities for the farm. Thank you very much for your help.”

Webinars

The recordings of our May and two June webinars are all now available to watch on the [Curlew Action YouTube channel](#). Featuring presentations from experts around the world, these webinars provided a range of thought-provoking talking points for attendees.



After our summer break, we will return in autumn for the remaining three webinars of 2024, which are all available to book now via Eventbrite:

- [11th September: Curlews & social science](#)
- [16th October: 2024 UK breeding season](#)
- [13th November: 2024 Europe breeding season](#)

As ever, our webinars remain free to attend, and we welcome [donations](#) to support us in the cost of hosting them.

Upcoming events

Come and say hello to us at [Global Birdfair](#) next week, held at its new Rutland location at Lyndon Top. Our stand will be in the Robin Marquee, and Mary will be appearing in three talks and events:

- Friday 12th July, [Curlew Lecture Stage](#), 11.30: Eurasian Curlews in the UK and Ireland.
- Friday 12th, [Osprey Events Stage](#), 16.00: Nature Room 101 recording with [Into The Wild](#) podcast.
- Sunday 14th, [Avocet Lecture Stage](#), 14.30: What's happening with the Natural History GCSE?



Waitrose Farming 2024 Conference

In early May, Trustees John Miller and Mike Smart, and team member Megan Shersby, attended the annual Waitrose Farming Conference, hosted at their [Leckford Estate](#) in Hampshire, with the key topic being 'The regeneration of soil'. This follows the theme of the original visionary retailer John Spedan Lewis who purchased the private estate in 1929.

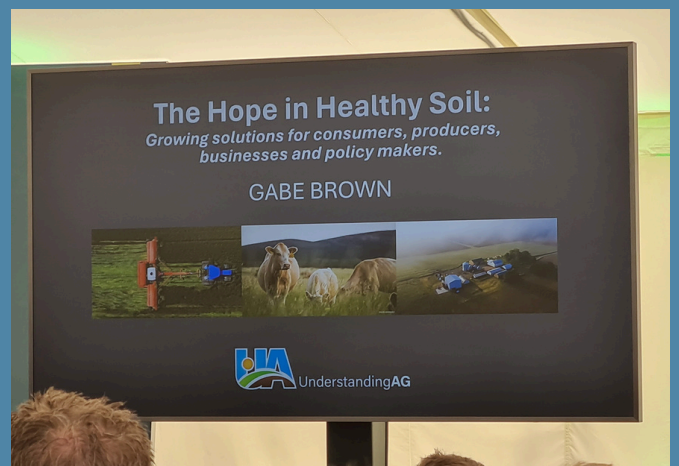
We were given a stand, enabling us to speak with interested farmers about the Eurasian Curlew. With most of the discussion centred around the transition of the Waitrose supply chain (the farmers in this case) to regenerative farming, the conversation often involved those agricultural payment schemes supporting grassland management favouring the successful fledging of Curlews. There are a lot of farmers out there who want to help. Typically, this involves schemes with reduced fertiliser input and a later cut of grass for either silage or hay, no earlier than July 15th.

While attended by Waitrose executives including Dame Sharon White, the keynote speaker was an American farmer called [Gabe Brown](#), which is summarised here:

Gabe recounted the story of how he had inherited his family farm in North Dakota from his father-in-law and how he has brought it back to life upon realising that the soil was completely impoverished.

Gabe explained in depth the negative effects of global warming that he is already witnessing on his farm, and how this has been exacerbated by poor-quality soil that is depleted of organic matter. This soil no longer absorbs rainwater efficiently, leading to an increase in flash floods, quickly followed by drought.

Along with water, soil is one of the cornerstones of life on earth, the foundation of the food chain. Yet so often it is overlooked, sometimes even referred to as 'dirt'. How far from the truth!



Cry of the Curlew exhibition

A celebration of the Curlew through original artwork, photography, poetry sculpture and conservation. This new free exhibition at Kendal Museum is on show until the 17th of August, open Thursdays to Saturdays 9am-5pm.

The exhibition celebrates the return of the iconic birds to upland habitats for the breeding season and explores the meanings we ascribe to having such beauty in our lives and in these times. It also explores what we will lose if or when these ground-nesting birds disappear forever from the sight and soundscape of our lives.

The Cry of the Curlew exhibition co-ordinators are Barbara Murray and Paco Valera. For more information, see [their website](#).



Natural History GCSE

Although the first teaching of the Natural History GCSE was promised for September 2025, that is now not possible. It has been stalled in a “write-around” process – whereby any new policy has to have the agreement of all senior ministers for collective responsibility. Someone, or some ministers, didn't agree to it and it was not progressed to the next vital stage – a public consultation.

If a GCSE in Natural History is to become a reality then the incoming government has to progress it quickly. If not, then even a teaching date of 2026 is not possible.

There is no obligation for the new administration to carry it through – and Labour may see it as a Conservative initiative and therefore not something they will progress.

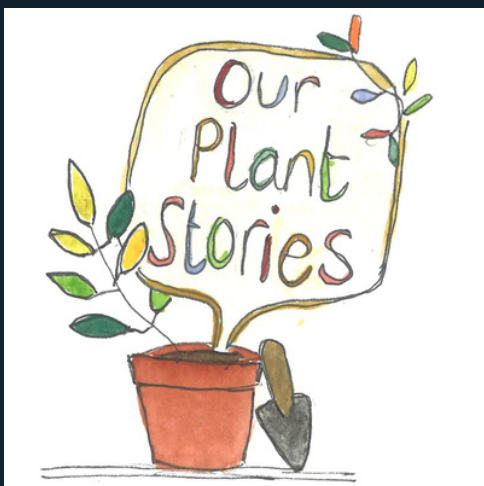
Producing a nature-literate society is too important to be left to party politics. Everyone, no matter what our personal alliances, needs a healthy planet to thrive. We need wise, informed, nature-centred citizens to make the right choices for all of us.

So please - whoever your MP is now - press them to keep this qualification alive and offer future generations the chance to study nature. It is vital.



Caroline Lucas, Mary Colwell and Tim Oates at the announcement of the Natural History GCSE on World Curlew Day in April 2022.

Podcast



In June, Mary appeared on the Our Plant Stories podcast, hosted by the former BBC Radio Producer Sally Flatman, which brings Sally's decades of audio production together with her passion for gardening. Sally and Mary discussed the GCSE in Natural History, and the [Nature Pathway](#).

[Listen to the episode here](#), and catch up on all the podcast episodes that Curlew Action has appeared on [via our website](#).

Fieldworker's notes

Mike Smart is Curlew Action's in-house Curlew expert, and is heavily involved in Curlew conservation in his home area of Gloucestershire. In addition to this Curlew conservation work, Mike has also been busy for Curlew Action. As well as attending the Waitrose Farming Conference (mentioned earlier in the newsletter), he took our newest Trustee John Miller to see Curlews, and visited a local school to share his love of Curlews with the next generation.

To keep us all up to date, Mike produces a circular of his Curlew observations which we have summarised below:

The winter and spring flooding in the Severn and Avon Vales meant that many of the riverside meadows where Curlews nest were under water when the birds returned from their wintering areas, so that the onset of nesting was delayed. Comparisons have been made to the situation after the infamous July 2007 summer flood, with almost bare ground, sometimes covered by a mat of dead vegetation, and limited grass growth. Some farmers have decided that it is not worth trying to cut hay on such fields and instead are putting animals out to graze early; others are reseeded their fields; there will probably be a shortage of hay next winter.

Curlews are obviously affected, some nesting in areas outside the Severn and Avon Vales where nests have not been recorded for years, others trying to hide their nests in the small areas of green vegetation emerging from the mud. On the other hand, it may be that late or no hay cutting will allow a larger number of young Curlews to reach the flying stage; we shall obviously be looking at this issue in the coming weeks.



Replacement Curlew nest in a patch of docks in a muddy field, May 2024. (Photo by Dan Gornall)

For a long time, the number of nesting Curlews occurring in the Vales has remained steady at 35-40 occupied territories; some of these are sites with a genuine nesting pair, some are single birds (usually a male) holding a territory in the hope of attracting a partner.

The preliminary total for this year is 36 occupied territories, and the number of nests found so far stands at 31 (a highly satisfactory figure, comparing well with results from previous years of the project, given that nests may be hidden in long vegetation in large fields and that the nesting birds are very secretive). Some of these nests are replacements for earlier nests that have been flooded or predated, but the preliminary figure for the number of genuinely nesting pairs is 23.



First chick of the year. (Photo by Dan Gornall)



A chick just over a week old, found in long grass thanks to its radio tag. (Photo by Dan Gornall)

Of the 31 nests found, eight have been abandoned (often because of weather conditions), 13 have been predated, one has been trampled by cattle and one failed for unknown reasons. Of the remaining eight, seven have hatched and one nest is still being incubated. Of the seven that have hatched, the chicks have already been lost in three of these broods. The earliest chick to hatch was on 23 May.

Chicks are independent almost as soon as they emerge from the egg and run around on their own from day two. Their natural instinct is to lie doggo on the ground at the approach of any danger, so that they are very difficult to find in the grass. As soon as possible after hatching therefore, chicks are fitted with small radio tags so that they can be found as they grow; permanent rings are then fitted just before they reach the flying stage.

Fitting of GPS tags on adults earlier in the season has made monitoring of their movements much easier. On one hand GPS tagged birds make nest finding easier by repeatedly returning to the same spot; on the other they may reveal unusual behaviour: if a pair of Curlews lose their nest and then make a replacement nest, the replacement is usually very close to the original nest site; this year one pair of Curlews (both carrying GPS tags) lost their first nest and made their replacement nest several miles away – the first definite proof in the project area of such movements, though it has previously been suspected.

Colour rings also allow fascinating insights into Curlew movements. For some years WWT has been “headstarting” young Curlews. Fifty youngsters were raised and released at Slimbridge in 2019, and five of these birds are nesting this year in the Severn and Avon vales. Young headstarted Curlews have also been released by WWT for several years on Dartmoor to reconstitute the drastically reduced breeding population there.

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Dartmoor headstart J5 near its nest in the Severn and Avon Vales. (Photo by Dan Gornall)

This year one of the Dartmoor headstarts (ringed J5 and released in 2022) appeared in the Vales and proceeded to nest at an age of only two. Sadly, its nest was not successful, but its further movements have been traced thanks to its ring, and it has appeared at one of the evening roosts round water bodies, where failed breeders often congregate before departing to estuarine or coastal moulting and wintering sites.

Another visitor from outside the area was Black 79, originally colour-ringed at its nesting site in Herefordshire. However, not all breeding birds were born as far off as J5 and Black 79. One bird reared as a chick in 2019, the first year of the SAV project, and ringed 08 was glimpsed briefly in the area in 2021 and suspected in 2022 but was well seen and photographed this year.



A chick born in 2019 back home in the Severn and Avon Vales in 2024. (Photo by Dan Gornall)

In summary a great deal of information has been gathered in this unusually wet year. Many nests have proved unsuccessful; the next few weeks will show just how many flying young are produced by the 30 or more pairs of Curlews. Watch this space for further information!

The WWT has produced [a video showing Dan and Andy at work.](#)

Norton Free Primary School

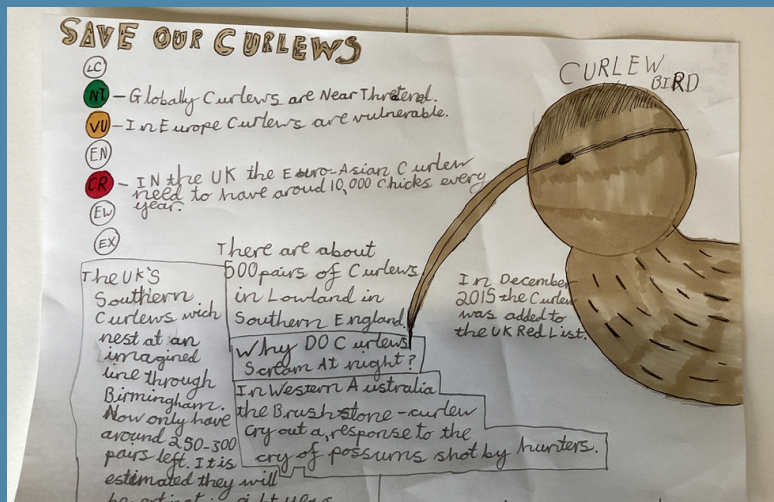
We would like to say a huge thank you to the students and teachers at Norton Free primary school in Sheffield for their Curlew work. The students took part in a Curlew art competition and a 'Wear Brown for Curlew Day' to raise funds for Curlew conservation!

Matilda in Y3 raised over £11 selling tomatoes with a pop up stall at home. Emma in Foundation wore a Curlew t-shirt designed by her mum. Noah in Y5 had an amazing t-shirt with a message on the back.



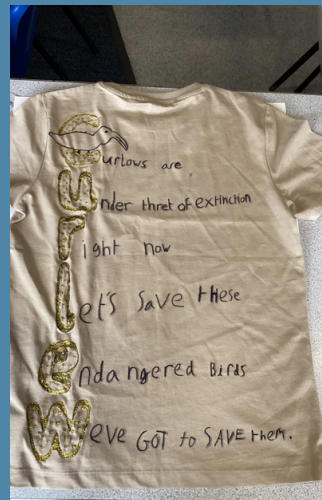
1st place: Charlotte Y5

"Curlews are endangered and need our support."



3rd place: Ben Y4

"I like the uniqueness of the curlew but I'm worried about their future."



2nd place: Molly Y4

"Curlews are wonderful but they are rare."

