

Conservation case study: stone curlews

The purpose of studying stone curlews is to discover:

- How a living thing is suited to a particular environment.
- How it is part of a food chain and a web of feeding relationships.
- How recent changes to its environment are threatening its existence.
- What actions are being taken in the Brecks.

This leads to considering the question of giving special protection to particular species and raises the following issues:

- What threatens these birds?
- How necessary is it to carry out this particular activity here?
- What protection do the birds need?
- How is it best given? (compulsorily? voluntarily?)
- What is the financial cost of these measures?
- Who should pay?
- How do we decide what to spend?
- Who should decide what is to be done?

- Why should such a species be protected?

The stone curlew is a symbol of nature conservation in the Brecks. The decline of the stone curlew was one of the major spurs to intense conservation effort in the Brecks.

It is a large brown and white bird belonging to the group known as "waders". This one is unusual in that it breeds and hunts for food on dry, open, stony land. On such land, the adults are well camouflaged, and so are the eggs and chicks. These birds favour open areas, where there is a good all-round view when nesting. The nest is a shallow scrape in the bare earth, and the females lay two eggs. It is a migratory bird that arrives in March to breed in Britain after over-wintering in Spain or North Africa and remains until about October.

Stone curlews feed primarily on beetles, earthworms and woodlice but will eat larger prey like baby birds, frogs or lizards if they can catch them. Their enormous eyes give you the clue that they are nocturnal - and this is true, especially in winter. Their main predators are foxes but hedgehogs, crows and stoats will also eat the eggs.

The threat to the stone curlew

The number of stone curlews in Britain has declined by some 85% since 1940. They are largely restricted now to the Brecks region of East Anglia and parts of the West Country. It was once possible to see flocks of hundreds of them on the Brecks heaths, but by the early 1990s less than 100 pairs were breeding here.

Nesting sites

These need to be on open dry land with short vegetation. Traditionally Stone Curlews nested on the short turf of closely grazed chalk down-land or grass heath.

Today much of this type of land has been turned over to agriculture or commercial forestry. More than half of the Stone Curlews now nest on arable land in spring-sown crops. Here they face uncertainty



If the crop they are nesting in quickly grows tall, it will obscure their view and they may desert the nest.

Their effective camouflage makes it difficult for farmers to see them and they are at risk from tractor-drawn machinery.

They need a dry site – arable land may be irrigated and the nest can become water-logged or even washed away.

They are shy and dislike disturbance – so if vegetables are being picked by hand, the presence of the workers is likely to upset them.