

10-YEAR AGRICULTURAL PLAN FOR SHETLAND

by J. D. Okill

Recent announcements indicate that Scotland's outer isles are about to receive massive financial aid for agricultural development. The EEC Integrated Development Programme for the Western Isles was discussed recently in relation to its impact on breeding waders (see W.S.G. Bulletin No. 35:5). Earlier this year, the Shetland Islands Council announced their Ten-year Plan for Shetland Agriculture. The proposals are part of the local authority's plan to safeguard traditional industries in the face of the large oil-related developments in the islands, and the strategy for the agricultural industry aims "to maintain its validity and support its expansion".

Most aspects of the agricultural industry are covered in the plan, and proposals include schemes for stock-improvement, land tenure, rationalisation of milk production, training programmes, and steading grants. However, it is in the central part of the plan, with its proposals for land improvements, that the greatest potential conflicts with conservation interests lie. The plan suggests that a maximum of 38,000 acres could be improved, and that an area of at least 20,000 acres should be achieved in the period of the plan. The improvements will be implemented through a system of grants and cheap loans both to agricultural contractors and to farmers/crofters.

The hill land or scattald of Shetland is used mainly for sheep, with a few herds of Shetland ponies, and is worked by a system of common grazing. The land improvement programme will include the apportionment of the common grazing to the individual crofter, the fencing-in of the hill and the driving of new roads into the scattald so that better access can be achieved. The moorland will be changed into grassland by systems of hill-ploughing, drainage, fertilising, liming and re-seeding.

The funding for the plan will come directly from the Islands Council, the monies to be used coming from revenue collected in various ways from the oil-related industries. The cost of the project is difficult to determine, but it has been suggested that it will cost in excess of £10 million.

Shetland has 13 breeding species of waders. Oystercatchers Haematopus ostralegus, Lapwings Vanellus vanellus, Curlews Numenius arquata, Snipes Gallinago gallinago and Redshanks Tringa totanus nest commonly, Ringed Plovers Charadrius hiaticula nest where the habitat is suitable, a few pairs of Common Sandpipers Actitis hypoleucos breed along burns and around the edges of lochs. On suitable moorland, Golden Plovers Pluvialis apricaria and Dunlins Calidris alpina are regular. The county probably holds about 300 pairs of Whimbrel Numenius phaeopus. These are restricted mainly to moorland heath and become common on the serpentine uplands of the northern isles. Recent surveys have shown that two of the outer isles hold no less than 70 pairs each (M.G. Richardson pers. comm.). These represent, of course, the major proportion of the British population. One or two pairs of Black-tailed Godwits Limosa limosa nest annually - unique in Britain in that they are of the Icelandic sub-species. There is a small but stable population of Red-necked Phalaropes Phalaropus lobatus, most breeding in one restricted area. In at least two of the last three years Greenshanks Tringa nebularia have nested. Whilst it is possible that some species will actually benefit from changes in land use, most of the more important species can only be detrimentally affected.

Shetland's moorland also provides breeding habitats for important populations of Red-throated Divers Gavia stellata, Merlins Falco columbarius, Arctic Terns Sterna paradisaea, Bonxies Stercorarius skua and Arctic Skuas Stercorarius parasiticus.

One of the most worrying features of the Ten-year Plan for Shetland Agriculture is that the conservation bodies have not been consulted. In fact, to date the conservation bodies have shown little interest in the proposed development and as yet the plan has received no publicity in any of the natural history journals. The EEC plan for the Western Isles states that "the measures proposed are compatible with the protection of the environment", but there is not even a protection clause such as this in the Shetlands Island Council's plan. It is the aim of the plan to spread the funding as widely as possible through the agricultural community and no account has so far been taken of any natural history interests. It therefore appears that since the only control on development will be within National Nature Reserves, and possibly on Sites of Special Scientific Interest, the plan is a serious threat to the wildlife of Shetland.

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WSG PROJECT ON MOVEMENTS OF WADER POPULATIONS IN WESTERN EUROPE: SEVENTH PROGRESS REPORT

by M. W. and Ann Pienkowski

Our last progress report gave details of the proposed marking programme for this season, which started in August. At the time of writing (October 1982) the following information on totals marked are to hand. Approximately 1000 Oystercatchers Haematopus ostralegus were marked in the Netherlands Delta in August, together with some Grey Plovers Pluvialis squatarola, Ringed Plovers Charadrius hiaticula, Curlews Numenius arquata, Turnstones Arenaria interpres and Dunlins Calidris alpina.

The Wash Wader Ringing Group had successful catching attempts in mid-August, mid-September and mid-October, resulting in the marking of 182 Oystercatchers, 53 Grey Plovers, 384 Knots Calidris canutus, 821 Dunlins, 124 Redshanks Tringa totanus, 184 Bar-tailed Godwits Limosa lapponica, 67 Curlews and smaller numbers of Turnstones and Sanderlings Calidris alba. SCAN Ringing Group (North Wales) in August and September marked approximately 125 Oystercatchers, 20 Ringed Plovers, 110 Dunlins, 20 Curlews, 170 Redshanks and some others. The German Waddenzee suffered bad weather in August but Beringer-gemeinschaft Nordfrisches Wattenmeer managed to mark over 60 Dunlins and approximately 20 Grey Plovers and 20 Knots. In the Danish Waddenzee about 100 Dunlins were marked in late summer by Vildtbiologisk Station, Kalø. Next week a team from France and Britain will be visiting Mont St Michel in northern France to try and mark waders there, with the help of CRBPO, the University of Rennes, and IWRB France.

Judging from past seasons, it is a little early to record large numbers of sightings away from the marking areas. However, we have already received a number of sightings showing movements of birds marked this season.

One Ringed Plover, marked in the Netherlands Delta on 17 or 28 August 1982 was seen in Vendée in France on 14 September 1982. Several birds marked in North Wales by SCAN Ringing Group have shown surprisingly varied movements already. One Ringed Plover marked on 7 August 1982 or 4 September 1982 was seen at the Hayle estuary, Cornwall, on 12 September 1982. One Dunlin marked on 7 August 1982 or 4 September 1982 was seen at Seahouses, Northumberland, on 9 September 1982. Another Dunlin from one of these two catches was seen by 2 observers at Havergate Island, Suffolk, around 7-10 September 1982. There have also been local sightings in North Wales of Dunlin, Oystercatcher and Redshank.

We have, to date, received no sightings away from the Wash of Wash-marked birds, although there have been many sightings within the Wash. Rowena Cooper is co-ordinating the "Wash" observers this year, and is herself spending time on the Wash actively looking for marked birds, in order to investigate movements between feeding areas within the Wash. However, more help at the Wash is always welcome. In previous years we have been unable to get much information on movements within the Wash, as it is such a large and difficult area to cover adequately when looking for marked birds.

On the ringing data collection side, the collection and checking of data proceeds all the time. We have recently been allocated extra computing 'file-space' which means that more data can now be run through the checking programs whilst new data is being transferred to the computer. Previously 'file-space' was more limited so that only one of these processes could take place at a time. This has meant that whilst we have put a lot more data onto computer file, relatively little of this new input has, as yet, been checked. We now plan to proceed with the checking of this data more rapidly, so ringers who have been eagerly awaiting print-outs to check should soon have their wish fulfilled!

Another important development taking some of our attention recently has been discussions with the organisers of various related projects, such as the renovated BTO/RSPB Birds of Estuaries Enquiry, and the new WSG project on The Effects of Severe Weather on Waders. Working together, these projects should produce very valuable information on the conservation needs of our coastal waders.

Finally, we would like to say 'thank you' to all the people who, by their voluntary help, make this project feasible; the ringers who catch and dye the birds, and send us their ringing data; the observers who go out and look for the marked birds, and send us the results; the people who receive sightings of marked birds and forward them to us; and everyone else helping in many ways.

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POSTSCRIPT: The visit to Baie du Mont St. Michel resulted in the marking of about 800 Dunlins, 70 Grey Plovers, 30 Knots and 8 Oystercatchers.

THE BIRDS OF ESTUARIES ENQUIRY

by Mike Moser

Following a break of several years, a full-time Birds of Estuaries Officer (Mike Moser) has been appointed by the BTO with financial aid from the RSPB and the NCC. The main objective of recreating the post is to develop and extend the scope of the Birds of Estuaries Enquiry and its use by conservation bodies.

A shortage of land, coupled with fast economic growth, in the mid 1960s brought a spate of proposals for massive barrage and land reclamation schemes for our estuaries. The habitat losses resulting from such schemes formed a serious threat to our wintering wildfowl and wader populations, and this was a major factor in firing the enthusiasm of ornithologists to study these habitats and their spectacular bird populations. The Birds of Estuaries Enquiry (BoEE), initiated in 1969 with funding from the Nature Conservancy Council, was a pioneer project involving the co-operation of hundreds of estuary enthusiasts around the country. The basic information collected comprised the monthly count totals of waders and wildfowl present on each estuary in Britain and Ireland. The achievements of the initial BoEE programme (1969-1975) are summarised by the organiser, Tony Prater, in his book Estuary Birds of Britain and Ireland (1981, Poyser, Calton). Since 1975 the enquiry has been run by part-time organisers - Phil Hyde followed by John Marchant. During this period information was particularly requested for the midwinter months, and three reports were produced.

These results have put the Enquiry at the forefront of estuarine conservation, and have been used as evidence leading to the protection of several threatened sites, for example on the Ribble estuary, the Wash (Gedney Drove End) and Morecambe Bay. With all these results available, why is it so vital for us to continue to count estuarine birds? The reasons are straightforward: the threats to estuaries have not diminished, and conservation bodies must have sound, up-to-date, information at their disposal. The presence of a full-time Estuaries Officer at Tring will ensure a comprehensive and rapid feedback of such information to NCC, RSPB, County Trust and Local Authority Planning staffs, upon which they can build their cases for protecting threatened sites. In addition, it will allow a more detailed analysis of seasonal changes in the abundance and dispersion of our wintering shorebird populations. Long-term monitoring of population levels will also provide a warning of man- or naturally-induced changes in abundance.

In two major areas the BoEE will integrate very closely with projects organised by the Wader Study Group. One such project is the Movements of Wader Populations in Western Europe (see Pienkowski and Pienkowski, this Bulletin). At present, BoEE counts allow us to estimate only the peak number of birds using an estuary. This is a very important measure, but by combining these results with estimates of turnover from the WSG project, we should obtain a more accurate measure of the total number of birds using each estuary. The difference between the peak and total numbers is analogous to the number of visitors in a hotel in a whole year, and the number present on a bank holiday.