

Recent counts of breeding waders along the north-eastern Italian coastline

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Counts and estimates for the period 1992-1994 are presented for waders breeding in the most important wetlands along the NE Italian coastline. The study area is of national relevance for four species (Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*, Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*, Redshank *Tringa tringa*) and one of the most important along the Mediterranean basin for Oystercatcher and Redshank.

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INTRODUCTION

The status and distribution of breeding waders in the Mediterranean Region is largely unknown. Data are lacking also about many Italian breeding sites, for which only estimates of population sizes are available (see Tinarelli & Baccetti 1989 for a review).

This paper presents new data, together with a synthesis of the most recent literature, concerning the waders of the north-eastern Italian coastline, which encompasses one of the most important wetland complex of the whole Mediterranean (Dijkema 1984).

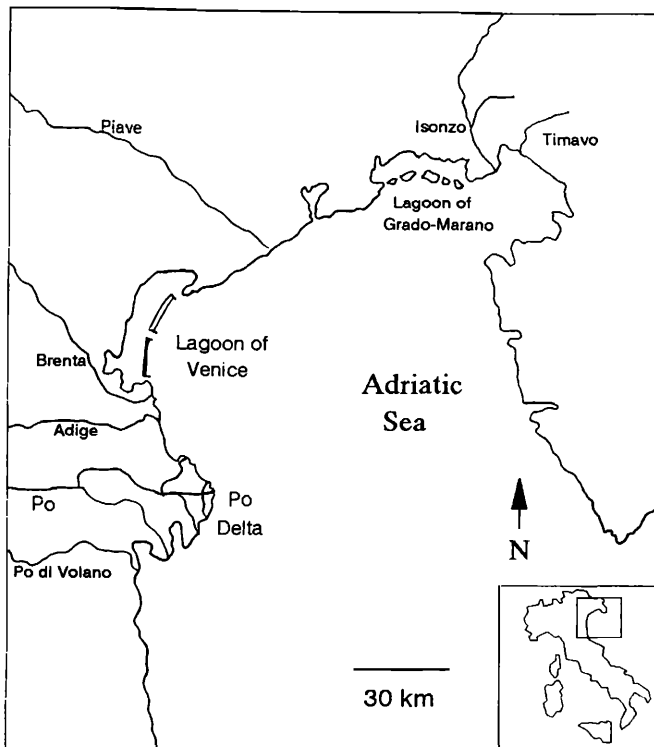


Figure 1. Location of study area and sites mentioned in the text.

STUDY AREA AND METHODS

We undertook censuses and made estimates mostly during 1992-1994, studying the coastal area (Figure 1) between the mouths of Timavo (45°46'N, 13°33'E) and Po di Volano rivers (44°46'N, 12°15'E). This coastline stretches for about 200 km and includes several of the most important Italian wetlands; the lagoon of Grado-Marano (ca. 20,000 ha), the lagoon of Venice (ca. 55,000 ha) and the Po Delta (ca. 60,000 ha). For this last site, we refer only to the area encompassed by the barrier islands and the shallow lagoons lying behind them; the fish-farms have not been included here, even if some waders can breed in that area (see Tinarelli 1990; Valle *et al.* in press b). Seven species of waders breed in the study area: Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*, Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*, Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*, Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*, Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* and Redshank *Tringa totanus*.

Data on each species are reported below, and numbers are summarized in Table 1; moreover, a comparison of the 1992-1994 results with published and unpublished data for the years 1987-88 is reported, in order to highlight, where possible, populations trends.

RESULTS

Oystercatcher

The study area supports the whole Italian population of Oystercatchers, with 59 pairs in 1994 (pers. obs., unpubl.). Breeding pairs occupy regularly the sandy barrier islands of the Po Delta, those of the Lagoon of Grado-Marano and (more irregularly) a sand-gravel island at the Isonzo mouth. In the Lagoon of Grado-Marano, the species is clearly increasing with one pair in 1988 (Utmar 1989), three in 1991 and four in 1992 (Scarton *et al.* 1993), and six pairs since 1993 (Utmar, pers. obs.). In

the Po Delta the species is also increasing, from 20-25 pairs estimated in 1987 (Tinarelli & Baccetti 1989) to 53 counted in 1994 (Scarton & Valle unpubl.). Overall, the population is in steady increase, despite the lack of protection accorded to the very few breeding sites.

Table 1. Number of breeding waders (pairs) at four coastal wetlands in north-east Italy.

	Isonzo Mouth	Grado-Marano Lagoon	Venice Lagoon	Outer Po Delta
Habitat	S	S	S	
Oystercatcher <i>H. ostralegus</i>	1 ⁽¹⁾	6 ⁽³⁻⁵⁾	-	53 ⁽⁴⁾
Black-winged Stilt <i>H. Himantopus</i>	2 ⁽³⁾	25 ⁽³⁾	200-250 ⁽³⁾	-
Avocet <i>R. avosetta</i>	+ ⁽³⁾	-	40-60 ⁽²⁾	-
Little Ringed Plover <i>C. dubius</i>	+ ⁽³⁾	+ ⁽³⁾	? ⁽³⁾	-
Kentish Plover <i>C. alexandrinus</i>	-	31-43 ⁽²⁾	139-151 ⁽²⁾	73-100 ⁽²⁾
Lapwing <i>V. vanellus</i>	-	+ ⁽³⁾	+ ⁽³⁾	-
Redshank <i>T. totanus</i>	-	0-20 ⁽³⁾	982-1032 ⁽³⁾	-

S = Saltmarsh habitat. + = present, - = absent, ? = probable breeding. Superscript indicates year of breeding: 1 = 1991, 2 = 1992, 3 = 1993, 4 = 1994, 5 = 1995.

Black-winged Stilt

In 1993 we estimated an occurrence of 200-250 pairs in the Venetian Lagoon, with another 25 counted in the Lagoon of Grado-Marano. Colonies were located in salt-marshes, in fish-farms and in flooded meadows. Breeding has not been recorded in the outer Po Delta. In 1987 and 1988, Manzi *et al.* (1992) counted respectively 178-229 and 235-279 pairs in the Venetian Lagoon, while in the Lagoon of Grado-Marano the species was reported breeding only since 1989, with eight pairs (Utmar pers. obs.). Therefore the population of the study area, with its 225-275 breeding pairs in 1993, seems stable, even if year-to-year fluctuations are likely.

Avocet

The species does not breed in the Grado-Marano Lagoon and in the outer Po Delta. In the Venetian Lagoon in 1992 we censused all the colonies occurring in the saltmarsh islets, whereas some of those in the fish-farms could only be estimated; a total population of 40-60 pairs was assessed (Valle *et al.* 1994a). In 1987 & 1988, Manzi *et al.* (1992) undertook a censuses in the same area and found, respectively, 23-24 and 64-69 pairs; therefore the population appears stable.

Little Ringed Plover

Rare. Isolated pairs breed in reclaimed islands in the Venetian Lagoon and at the mouth of some rivers along the coastline. In the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region less than 15 pairs breed in reclaimed areas and in the company of Kentish Plovers, as at Timavo and Isonzo river mouths.

Kentish Plover

The Kentish Plover is widespread along the coastline of the study area (apart from the areas most used by tourists), which supports about 20% of the Italian population, estimated by Bricchetti & Meschini (1993) at 1,300-2,000 pairs. Mainly isolated pairs are found in the saltmarsh habitats (Valle *et al.* in press a). In 1992, 256-307 pairs were found: 73-100 in the Po Delta (Valle *et al.* in press a), 139-151 in the Venetian Lagoon (Cherubini & Panzarin 1993; Valle *et al.* in press) and 44-56 pairs along the coastline of the Friuli - Venezia Giulia Region. In 1989 the whole study area supported about 300 pairs (Valle *et al.* in press a), so these data suggest a decrease of the population.

Lapwing

Rare; in the study area few pairs breed in fish-farms, reclaimed islands and rivers mouths.

Redshank

In the Venetian Lagoon 982-1032 breeding pairs were found in 1993, mostly located in salt marsh islets; up to twenty pairs are likely to breed in some fish-farms of the Lagoon of Grado-Marano. The species does not breed in the outer Po Delta (pers. obs.), while it occurs in some fish-farms (Tinarelli & Baccetti 1987). A previous estimate available for the Venetian Lagoon (300-600 pairs; Rallo in Tinarelli & Baccetti 1989) was too low and excluded "at least 1 000 non-breeding birds". Indeed, in the same years we censused about 400 pairs in a small sub area only and we have found no evidence of non-breeding birds over the last ten years of observations (Valle & Scarton 1995). The Venetian population, which shows an unusual aggregation in dense colonies (Valle *et al.* 1994a; Valle & Scarton 1995), accounts for 90% of the Italian population, and is one of the most important of the whole Mediterranean (Valle *et al.* in press b). The breeding sites are currently threatened by natural and man-induced processes such as erosion, natural subsidence and sea-level rise (Day *et al.* 1995).

CONCLUSIONS

Our study confirms the importance of the north-east Italian coast, which supports the whole of the Italian Oystercatcher breeding population, 90% of Italy's breeding Redshank and 20% of breeding Kentish Plover.

Moreover a significant part of the Italian population of Black-winged Stilt (estimated at 900-1700 pairs by Brichetti & Meschini 1993) breeds in this area. The Po Delta is also one of the most important breeding coastal areas for Oystercatchers in the Mediterranean Region, while the Venetian Lagoon is the most important for Redshank. Two very important breeding areas, the barrier islands of the Po Delta and saltmarshes of the Venetian Lagoon, lack any detailed studies or conservation efforts.

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Slender-billed Curlew Memorandum of Understanding

The Memorandum is intended to safeguard the Slender billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris*, which is thought to have declined to fewer than 400 individuals. As of 1 January 1996, fifteen Range States (Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Egypt, Georgia, Hungary, Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakstan, Morocco, Oman, Romania, Spain, Ukraine and Uzbekistan) as well as BirdLife International, the International Council of Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC) and the UNEP/CMS Secretariat had signed the Memorandum of Understanding. The Secretariat is still seeking signatures from some important Range States.

Various efforts are being made to initiate projects to support this species in several of the Range States. Experts from the Belgian Royal Institute of Natural Sciences and the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation are developing a project concept for measures to be planned and implemented in several key Range States. With the funds allocated from the CMS Trust Fund and hopefully from other sources, the projects should now be developed and passed to the countries concerned for implementation.

Range States were asked to send national status reports about the species to the UNEP/CMS Secretariat. Subsequently a synthesis was

completed and submitted to the Range States, interested scientific institutions and NGOs for comment.

In the third quarter of 1997 a meeting of experts and government representatives from key range States and specialist NGOs will be organised, subject to the availability of funds.

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