



MILFORD HAVEN WATERWAY
ENVIRONMENTAL SURVEILLANCE GROUP

GRŴP CADW GOLWG AMGYLCHEDDOL
AR DDYFRFFORDD ABERDAUGLEDDAU



**A REVIEW OF THE STATUS OF WETLAND BIRDS
IN THE MILFORD HAVEN WATERWAY AND
DAUGLEDDAU ESTUARY**

Annie Haycock

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A review of the status of wetland birds in the Milford Haven Waterway and Daugleddau Estuary

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A report to the Milford Haven Waterway Environmental Surveillance Group

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Milford Haven Water - Cleddau Estuary complex (“the estuary complex”) is an important wintering ground for waders and wildfowl because of its sheltered location and open mudflats.
- The estuary complex is of International Importance by virtue of hosting an average of over 20,000 waterbirds each winter.
- It is of National Importance for its populations of wintering wigeon, teal and greenshank, and for migrating curlew.
- Other species have reached nationally important levels here in past winters, but either they have declined, or the threshold for national importance has been raised, and they no longer reach that threshold.
- The estuary complex holds some 13.5% of the Welsh waterbirds (on WeBS sites) in mid-winter, and just under 1% of the UK waterbirds on WeBS sites.
- Almost all the **Shelduck** in Pembrokeshire in winter are found on the estuary complex. Numbers of wintering shelduck have fallen, both here and across the UK.
- **Wigeon** numbers have increased dramatically over the past five years, particularly on Pembroke River. They move on, either to other parts of the estuary system or out of the estuary system altogether, as soon as the food supply is exhausted in mid-winter.
- **Teal** numbers have declined over the past decade, but are still within the limits of previous fluctuations. The cause is thought to be the recent run of mild winters and an increase the protected areas on mainland Europe allowing birds to remain further north and east.
- Mid-winter peak counts of **curlew** have decreased both on the estuary system and in Carmarthen Bay, although the UK trend shows an increase. However, data indicate that the estuary system is an important migratory stopover for curlew.
- **Redshank** numbers dropped by half in the early 1990s, but have been reasonably stable since then. The cause is almost certainly that warmer winters mean fewer birds using the west coast estuaries.
- **Greenshank** numbers have increased following a period of low counts in the 1990s. The estuary complex holds the fourth largest wintering population in the UK, and almost half of the birds wintering in Wales are found here.
- **Little egret** numbers have increased rapidly during the past decade, but seem to be levelling out somewhat now.
- **Little grebe** numbers have declined, despite an increase in the Pembrokeshire breeding population. The trend for both Wales and the whole of the UK is for increasing numbers in winter.
- The **Canada Goose** population rose considerably in the 1990s, in line with the trends for the Welsh and the UK populations. Birds are most often found between Llangwm and Boulston, though they also feed away from the estuary. There is no evidence that they are affecting the numbers or distribution of other species.
- **Grey Herons** breed at two main sites on the Cleddau complex, totalling 20-30 nests each year. However, counts are sporadic and no conclusions can be drawn about the breeding population.

Most of the changes in bird populations are reflected in other sites, either in Wales or in the UK as a whole. Some of the observed changes in numbers using the estuary system in winter may reflect the recent run of mild winters (which may or may not suggest long-term climate change), so birds do not have to travel so far south and/or west to escape harsh winter weather. Data suggest that large numbers of birds are more likely to visit the estuary complex during periods of extreme weather, but during normal weather would prefer the conditions (including a better food supply) on the east coast.

Winter distribution may also be affected by the increase in protected areas on the European mainland, which have resulted in birds, eg teal that are susceptible to hunting pressure, to remain in those areas.

The data collected during the annual shelduck surveys in July and early August since 1992 have demonstrated the importance of the estuary system as a migration stopover for several species, notably curlew.

The estuary system is clearly of national importance for wintering and migrating wetland birds, and it is vital that the full range of their requirements (eg undisturbed good quality feeding habitat and high tide roosts) continue to be met within the estuary system.

It is important to continue with annual surveillance of wetland birds within the estuary system, both as part of the UK dataset and in terms of SSSI monitoring.