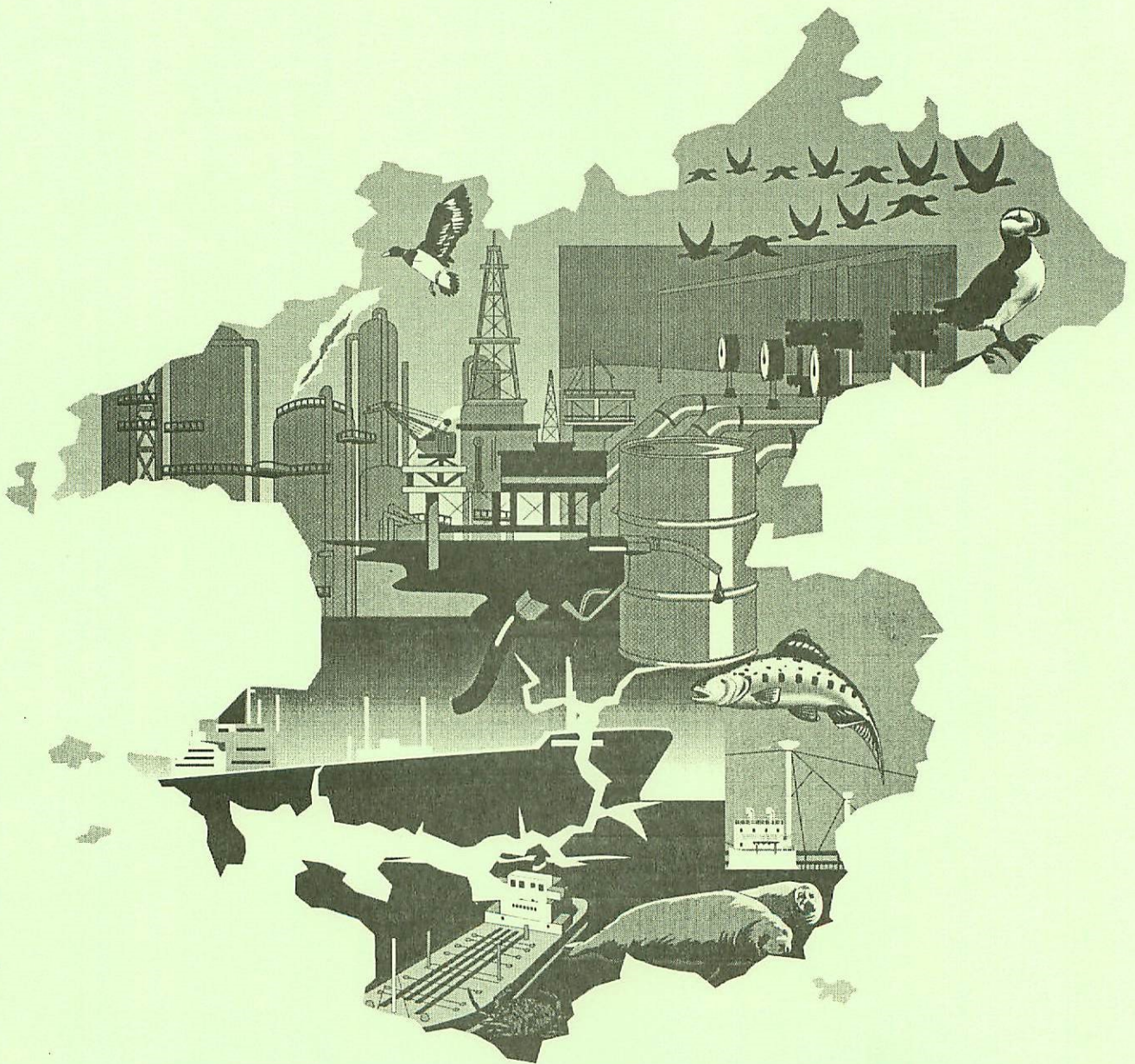


Report of the
**MILFORD HAVEN
WATERWAY ENVIRONMENTAL
MONITORING
STEERING GROUP**



MHWEMSG
WETLAND BIRD SURVEY
1996-7

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Part 1

Milford Haven and Cleddau Estuary

Wetland Bird Survey

1996-97

Report prepared for the Milford Haven Waterway Environmental Monitoring Steering Group
by Annie Poole

on behalf of the Wildlife Trust West Wales
and the Pembrokeshire Ornithological Research Committee.

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MILFORD HAVEN WATERWAY AND CLEDDAU ESTUARY: WeBS COUNTS 1996-97

Executive Summary

1. Introduction

The Cleddau Estuary and Milford Haven Waterway hold large numbers of waterfowl (wildfowl and waders) during the winter months, with numbers of Shelduck, Teal, Dunlin, Curlew and Redshank reaching levels of "national importance" in most years.

Monthly counts of waterfowl are carried out throughout the autumn and winter as part of the national Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS). Since the winter of 1993-94 these counts have also been incorporated into a rolling programme of research and survey initiated by the MHWEMSG.

2. Methods

The dates of the counts are determined by WeBS to coincide with high spring tides. The estuary is divided into fifteen sectors and is counted by a team of observers. Counts normally take place within two hours either side of high tide when most species are assembled in high tide roosts. Sectors are counted by a combination of walking the shore and counting from fixed points depending on accessibility. Complete coverage of all sites was achieved between September 1996 to March 1997.

3. Results

During the peak period between November 1996 and February 1997 mean monthly totals of 5472 wildfowl and 8909 waders were present. The peak monthly count for wildfowl was 6896 in January, and for waders was 11,869 also in January. Curlew (max. 1283 in December), Shelduck (max. 1023 in January), Wigeon (max. 3351 in November), Teal (max. 2217 in December) and Dunlin (max 8561 in January) exceeded levels of national importance. Dunlin were the most numerous wader, being present in almost double their usual numbers.

Fifty-five species of waterfowl were recorded (excluding gulls), including sixteen species of duck and twenty-three of waders. Divers, grebes, herons, cormorants and geese were also represented, together with mute swan, water rail and moorhen. Unusual species included red-necked and Slavonian grebes, and a vagrant American wigeon (first record for Pembrokeshire).

4. Discussion

The mean midwinter monthly totals of waders and wildfowl were higher than in recent years, although the maximum counts of curlew, shelduck, wigeon and teal were slightly down on 1995-96. Interestingly, wigeon arrived slightly earlier than usual, and stayed for slightly longer. The large number of dunlin was unexpected, and any explanation must wait until figures for other estuaries are available for comparison. Great crested grebes were present in relatively large numbers (28 in January), probably due to the cold weather. The cold weather also accounted for the presence of 364 common gulls, 218 grey plovers and 80 knot during the later part of the winter. Shoveler, Scaup, pochard and tufted ducks, were also present in larger numbers than usual. Mute swan numbers increased by about 20 birds in the later winter, due to birds moving to Carew Millpond when Pembroke Millpond was drained for maintenance work. Redshank numbers continued to decline.

The 1996-97 winter showed no firm evidence of any decline due to the Sea Empress oil spill. However, it should be noted that any effect may have been masked by cold weather movements, increasing the numbers of birds wintering this far southwest. Interpretation of any changes in numbers cannot be made until figures for other estuaries become available.

Annie Poole

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2 June 1997