

MILFORD HAVEN WATERWAY AND CLEDDAU ESTUARY

WETLAND BIRD SURVEY

1997 - 98



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

WILDFOWL AND WADER COUNTS 1997-98

Executive Summary

1. Introduction

The Milford Haven Waterway and Cleddau Estuary hold large numbers of waterfowl (wildfowl and waders) during the winter months, with numbers of Shelduck, Wigeon, Teal, Dunlin, and Curlew 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. Almost complete coverage of all sites was achieved between September 1997 and March 1998.

3. Results

During the peak period between November 1997 and February 1998 mean monthly totals of 4572 wildfowl and 8741 waders were present. The peak monthly count for wildfowl was 6878 in December, and for waders was 10,717 in January. Curlew (max. 1338 in November and 1330 in February), Shelduck (max. 939 in January), Wigeon (max. 3058 in December), Teal (max. 2594 in December) and Dunlin (max 5318 in January) exceeded levels of national importance. Dunlin were the most numerous wader, with their second highest peak count since recording began.

Fifty-two species of waterfowl were recorded (excluding gulls), including eleven 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, black-necked and Slavonian grebes.

4. Discussion

The mean midwinter monthly totals of waders and wildfowl were lower than in 1996-97, with curlew and teal numbers showing slight increase over 1996-97, and shelduck, wigeon and dunlin numbers showing a decrease. Wigeon reverted to their usual pattern of attendance (c/w slightly earlier arrival and longer stay in 1996-97). Numbers of both wigeon and teal dropped dramatically between December and January, possibly the mid-winter gales may have caused birds to move on early, or to seek alternative sites. Less common species such as shoveler, pochard and tufted ducks were present in small numbers, perhaps a sign that the winter was mild, despite the wind. Great crested grebes were again present in relatively large numbers (28 in January). Curlew were again present in large numbers on autumn migration (2,200 in August) though subsequent figures were similar to previous years. The return of large number of dunlin was welcome, though there were not as many as in 1996-97.

The warm weather in mid-February may have encouraged some birds to return early to their breeding grounds, certainly there were large numbers of grey herons near their rookeries on the estuary in that month. Numbers of little egrets increased again, but although they were present in one of the heronries, breeding was not proved in 1997.

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