

Introducing the Upper Thames Wader Group

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The wonderful sound of a Curlew's 'bubbling' call slicing through the early morning mist in our river valleys is one of the most evocative sounds of springtime in Oxfordshire. Something we cherish, but which is sadly under threat. Many of the Curlew's grassland breeding sites have become more intensively grazed or more frequently mown, and the numbers of generalist predators have increased, making nests more vulnerable. Each year most Curlew nests are lost before hatching, and few young survive to fledging.

The need for urgent action to help our local Curlews is a major driving force behind the creation of the Upper Thames Wader Group, established earlier this year. The group aims to bring together everyone involved in action to support our threatened wading birds and their habitats. This includes farmers, landowners, volunteer fieldworkers, local groups and other interested individuals and organisations.

The Upper Thames Wader Group is led by a partnership of organisations and currently comprises RSPB, Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust, Natural England, Environment Agency, River Thame Conservation Trust and Banbury Ornithological Society. Each organisation focuses on a particular part of the Upper Thames, co-ordinating volunteer fieldworkers, as well as supporting farmers with advice. We also link into national working groups, including the well-established Curlew Forum.



2020 was, of course, a challenging year for fieldwork, but the group were able to establish that at least 32 pairs of Curlews were present – in a normal survey year we would expect to locate about 50 pairs. The good news is that ten young birds are known to have fledged at Otmoor (6) and Chimney Meadows (4) - those at Otmoor benefitting from the protection of temporary electric fencing around their nests.

The group's vision is to see curlew, lapwing, snipe, and redshank populations increasing across a network of extensive wetlands and grasslands in the Upper Thames. Our goals are, firstly - to halt the long-term decline in breeding curlews and lapwings and promote a sustainable recovery of their populations across the Upper Thames. And secondly - to enable redshank and snipe to continue to increase at Otmoor and colonise sites elsewhere in the Upper Thames.

Membership of the group is open to everyone interested in wading birds, their habitats, and their conservation. We are planning our first general meeting in January 2021, so now is a great time to get involved. Volunteers are needed to help with running the group and fieldwork (surveys, nest finding and temporary fencing). If you would like to join the group, or find out more, please make contact me mike@wildoxfordshire.org.uk