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Wading Bird Monitoring of the Thanet Coast SPA in Jan/Feb 2020

A Report to Bird Wise East Kent (Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay SAMMS)



Bar-tailed Godwits, Grey Plovers, and Dunlin by John Buckingham

Summary

This report presents the results of wading bird surveys of the Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay Special Protection Area (SPA) in early winter 2020 by Sandwich Bay Bird Observatory Trust (SBBOT). The area concerned was surveyed twice, on 25th January and 8th February 2020, and a total of 12 species of wading bird were recorded (Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*, Redshank *Tringa totanus*, Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*, Sanderling *Calidris alba*, Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*, Purple Sandpiper *Calidris maritima*, Curlew *Numenius arquata*, Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*, Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*, Dunlin *Calidris alpina*, Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*, and Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*). The total number of wading birds ranged between 1,860-2,288 with Sectors 6, 9, 13, 14, and 20 containing the highest numbers. No Golden Plovers *Pluvialis apricaria* were recorded and low numbers of Turnstone were noted. Disturbance to wading birds at high tide remains an ongoing issue with pro-active management needed to reduce its effect on the wintering wader populations.

Introduction

The Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay SPA is known for its internationally important wintering numbers of Turnstone and Golden Plover. SBBOT have co-ordinated Turnstone surveys along the Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay SPA for the last 20 years and have shown an ongoing decline in wintering numbers (Walton & Hodgson, 2018). In 2019 Footprint Ecology provided baseline data of common wading bird species along the same stretch of Thanet coastline and confirmed a further decline in the wintering Turnstone population (Saunders & Liley, 2019). SBBOT repeated this survey on 25th January and 8th February 2020 with the aim to detect changes in the wading bird population.

Method

This study focussed entirely on counts of wading birds. Wintering waders were surveyed using standard BTO WeBS protocol (Bibby et al, 2000). All counts were undertaken according to Health and Safety guidelines.

The survey area was divided into 21 Sectors of roughly 2km in length. Each sector was identical to the sectors surveyed by SBBOT and Footprint Ecology in previous years. These were:

1. Pegwell Bay
2. Pegwell - West Cliff
3. Ramsgate Harbour & Beach
4. Dumpton/Dumpton Gap
5. Broadstairs
6. North Foreland/Kingsgate Bay
7. Botany/Palm Bay
8. Margate (East)
9. Margate
10. St. Mildred's Bay
11. Westgate Bay
12. Grenham Bay/Birchington
13. Minnis Bay
14. Plumpudding Island
15. Coldharbour/Reculver East
16. Reculver West
17. Herne Bay East
18. Herne Bay
19. Hampton/Hampton Pier
20. Long Rock/Hampton
21. Whitstable/Tankerton

All 21 Survey Sectors were surveyed at the same time, by 21 separate observers, beginning half an hour before high tide and ending half an hour after, on both 25th January and 8th February 2020. The whole length of the allocated stretch of coastline was counted and all data logged on a sheet in the field (see Appendix 1). Double-counting was kept to a minimum by noting the time, number, and species, of any movements in and out of each Sector. Optics such as binoculars and telescopes were used as necessary.

Results

The weather on 25th January was grey (8/8) but reasonably calm (SW 2-3) and with no rain. Conditions were similar on 8th February but with less wind (8/8, SW 1-2). High Tide at Margate on 25th January was 12:24 (6.3m) and 11:02 (6.4m) on 8th February.

Table 1 The number of wading birds recorded in 21 sectors along the Thanet coastline on 25th January 2020

Sector	Turnstone	Redshank	Ringed Plover	Sanderling	Oystercatcher	Purple Sandpiper	Curlew	Grey Plover	Lapwing	Dunlin	Snipe	Black-tailed Godwit	Total
1	12	95	0	0	0	0	310	0	285	0	9	7	718
2	0	49	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	50
3	37	0	0	0	0	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	45
4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	9	0	0	0	19	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	28
6	48	0	73	115	72	0	21	0	0	0	0	0	329
7	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
8	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
9	35	0	0	290	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	325
10													0
11	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
12	0	35	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	35
13	29	17	0	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	60
14	0	0	0	35	120	0	28	0	12	0	0	0	195
15	9	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	14
16	9	2	25	24	0	1	0	11	0	0	0	0	72
17	35	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	37
18	12	40	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	52
19	18	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	18
20	48	18	38	80	22	1	0	0	1	50	0	0	258
21	40	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	45
Total	348	262	137	558	238	10	360	11	298	50	9	7	2288

Due to unforeseen circumstances there were no counts undertaken in Sector 10 on 25th January 2020.

Table 2 The number of wading birds recorded in 21 sectors along the Thanet coastline on 8th February 2020

Sector	Turnstone	Redshank	Ringed Plover	Sanderling	Oystercatcher	Purple Sandpiper	Curlew	Grey Plover	Lapwing	Dunlin	Snipe	Black-tailed Godwit	Total
1	2	60	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	64
2	5	49	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	55
3	21	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	21
4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	9	0	0	0	39	5	4	0	0	0	0	0	57
6	36	0	52	488	38	0	19	1	0	0	0	0	634
7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
9	34	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	36
10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
12	0	38	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	38
13	72	51	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	126
14	0	150	10	0	250	0	17	0	0	0	0	0	427
15	5	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9
16	11	6	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	31
17	23	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	24
18	12	40	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	52
19	36	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	36
20	53	10	32	42	26	0	0	0	3	19	0	0	185
21	43	0	0	0	22	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	65
Total	362	407	110	535	375	5	41	1	3	19	0	2	1860

A total of 2,288 wading birds of 12 species were recorded on 25th January 2020 (see Table 1). There were three-figure counts of seven species. Most numerous were Sanderling with 558, followed by Curlew with 360, and Turnstone with 348. Sector 1 held the highest number of birds with 718 individuals. Also, of note were 329 birds in Sector 6, 325 in Sector 9, and 258 in Sector 20. There were no wading birds recorded in Sectors 4 and 11. Sectors with the highest species diversity were 20 (eight), 1 (six), and 16 (six).

A total of 1,860 wading birds of 11 species were recorded on 8th February 2020 (see Table 2). The most numerous species was Sanderling with 535, Redshank with 407, and Oystercatcher with 375. There were no Snipe recorded in this second survey. Sector 6 was the busiest Sector with 634 birds recorded, followed by 427 in Sector 14, 185 in Sector 20, and 126 in Sector 13. Seven species were recorded in Sector 20 and six species in Sector 6. Sectors 4, 7, 8, 10, and 11 held no wading birds.

Discussion

The two surveys performed in January and February produced broadly similar results. Despite this, there was a difference of 428 birds comprising a 18.7% decrease in the total number of birds recorded on 8th February compared to 25th January. An average of 2,074 birds were recorded with averages of 109 birds per Sector in January and 89 in February. This drop in number on the second survey is thought to be mostly explained by the large decrease in Sector 1, from 718 birds to just 64. Sector 1 (Pegwell Bay) is a core feeding and roosting area for many species but because of exogenous factors, such as weather and disturbance, it is known for its variability and many birds often use the adjacent nature reserve at Shellness Point, Sandwich Bay (pers. comm SBBOT).

Sectors 6 and 20 were in the top three sites for total number of birds on both surveys and also feature high for species diversity. Sectors 13, 14, and 9 also held considerable numbers of birds. The 2019 study by Footprint Ecology (Saunders & Liley, 2019) also recognised Sectors 6, 20, 14 for their key wading bird assemblages. This consistency suggests these Sectors may include the top feeding and roosting opportunities within the survey area. Despite its variability, the potential for very large numbers of birds to use Sector 1 also means this site should also be considered as a priority site. In contrast, Sectors 4, 7, 8, 10, and 11 were consistently poor sites for wading birds. However, it is worth acknowledging that there is some degree of movement between Sectors and these 'lesser' sites may be more useful to wading birds when disturbance is high elsewhere, or in certain inclement weather conditions, for example.

The species composition between the two surveys was similar. Sanderling, Turnstone, Redshank, Oystercatcher, and Ringed Plover were numerous on both surveys, with Curlew and Lapwing only numerous on the January survey (both recorded in Sector 1). Besides from Curlew and Lapwing, the biggest difference between the two surveys came from Redshank and Oystercatcher, with a 55% increase and 58% increase, respectively. Compared to the Footprint Ecology survey of 2019 there were two new species, Snipe and Black-tailed Godwit, but no Golden Plovers. The numbers of each species were generally similar to the Footprint Ecology results. The main exceptions were Ringed Plover and Dunlin with, on average, 50% and 78% reductions in 2020 than 2019, respectively. Though Purple Sandpiper and Grey Plover showed on average 77% and 84% reductions, both species had particularly small sample sizes. Conversely, Curlew and Lapwing showed, on average, 234% and 4,900% increases, respectively. However, as mentioned previously, this is largely due to the high degree of variability in Sector 1. By repeating the survey on a yearly, or biennial basis, the annual variability of each species would be better understood.

Turnstone and Golden Plover are important species in the Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay SPA. There were no Golden Plovers recorded during the survey period. However, the coastal areas, particularly the shingle and rocky habitats along the Thanet coastline, are not always the favoured habitat for this species with large flocks often found inland on arable land (Henderson & Sutherland, 2017). The wintering population of Turnstone has been declining along the Thanet coastline for the last 20 years (Walton & Hodgson, 2018). Both the SBBOT and Footprint Ecology survey produced counts of Turnstone in the range of 348-372. This represents another decrease in number from the last co-ordinated count (500-570 in 2018) (Walton & Hodgson, 2018). It, however, still remains close to the 1% threshold of wintering birds in Great Britain (Frost et al, 2019).

This survey did not monitor the frequency or the effects of disturbance. However, disturbance has become impossible to avoid along the Thanet coast. Almost all participants in the survey remarked on the number of people and the number of dogs off the lead in their Sector at high tide, and their combined effect on the counts obtained. The regularity of disturbance and minimal impact of signage suggests more mitigation and management is needed. Wading birds need refuges at high tide and Baynes & Hyland (2014) acknowledged the recreational impact on Turnstones in the Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay SPA. Areas such as Bishopstone undercliff (Sector 16) show obvious signs of recent landslides (a public health hazard) and so restricting public access to such Sector would also provide respite to wading birds at high tide. Whittingham et al (2020) has also shown that offshore roost platforms can potentially slow the wintering population decline in Turnstone, and may be applicable to use along the Thanet coastline.



Bishopstone cliff by S.Walton

Recommendations for future surveys include trialling a mid-week survey (with potentially less disturbance) to give a greater idea of what wading birds utilise each Sector, and to include birds at Shellness point, Sandwich Bay in the survey of Pegwell Bay (Sector 1). Hopefully, the results of this, and future, surveys can be used to highlight core areas where on-site wardening would be beneficial and where legal protection and ramifications can be increased to protect the wintering wading bird population in the Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay SPA.

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By Steffan Walton, Warden, Sandwich Bay Bird Observatory Trust, August 2020.

Appendix 1: Participant Count Form

Two co-ordinated Wading bird counts of the NE Kent (mainly the NE Kent Marine Protected Area) will be undertaken in the winter of 2019/20. The first will take place during high tide on Saturday **25 January 2020**, with the second on Saturday **8 February 2020**.

Surveyors should walk the whole length of their allocated stretch of coastline - **commencing ½ hour before high tide** - counting all Waders occurring in that section and ensuring that double-counting is kept to a minimum. Please note any movements & direction (west or east, etc.) and times of birds leaving the sector in the remarks column.

Details of Co-ordinated Wader Count Sectors			
Sector No.	Sector	From	To
1	Pegwell Bay	TR342628: South end of Pegwell Bay Nature Reserve, where coastal path turns sharply north along bay	TR354644: Opposite old hoverport road, west of Little Cliffsend Farm
2	Pegwell to West Cliff	TR354644: Opposite old hoverport road, west of Little Cliffsend Farm	TR377642: Western limit of Ramsgate Harbour, eastern limit of West Cliff
3	Ramsgate (harbour & beach)	TR377642: Western limit of Ramsgate Harbour, eastern limit of West Cliff	TR392655: By large groyne at north end of Ramsgate main beach
4	Dumpton / Dumpton Bay	TR392655: By large groyne at north end of Ramsgate main beach	TR398673: South end of Louisa Bay south of Viking Bay
5	Broadstairs	TR398673: South end of Louisa Bay south of Viking Bay	TR401694: South of Joss Bay & North Foreland Lighthouse, opposite Convent
6	North Foreland / Kingsgate Bay	TR401694: South of Joss Bay & North Foreland Lighthouse, opposite Convent	TR393711: Botany Bay, by public toilet block
7	Botany Bay to Palm Bay	TR393711: Botany Bay, by public toilet block	TR372715: Bathing Pool / Jet Ski hire
8	Margate east	TR372715: Bathing Pool / Jet Ski hire	TR354712: Main Pier at Margate Harbour
9	Margate (Westbrook Bay & Margate Bay)	TR354712: Main Pier at Margate Harbour	TR335705: Small slipway at west end of Westbrook Bay, east of 'Sunken Gardens' by shelter
10	St Mildred's Bay	TR335705: Small slipway at west end of Westbrook Bay, east of 'Sunken Gardens' by shelter	TR321705: Westgate Pavilion ('Ledge Point' on O/S map)
11	Westgate Bay	TR321705: Westgate Pavilion ('Ledge Point' on O/S map)	TR308699: Eastern limit of Epple Bay
12	Grenham Bay / Birchington	TR308699: Eastern limit of Epple Bay	TR291701: Western limit of Grenham Bay
13	Minnis Bay	TR291701: Western limit of Grenham Bay	TR273694: Western end of small groynes at 'Plum pudding Island', opposite mussel bed & public path leading south
14	Plum pudding Island to Cold Harbour	TR273694: Western end of small groynes at 'Plum pudding Island', opposite mussel bed & public path leading south	TR252694: Cold Harbour, opposite mussel beds & lagoons
15	Cold Harbour to Reculver east	TR252694: Cold Harbour, opposite mussel beds & lagoons	TR230694: Western end of shellfish hatchery
16	Reculver west	TR230694: Western end of shellfish hatchery	TR211687: Car park near 'Bishopstone Manor'
17	Herne Bay east ('Beltinge Cliff')	TR211687: Car park near 'Bishopstone Manor'	TR191685: Half-way along cliff, opposite 'Wantsum Walk' on O/S map
18	Herne Bay	TR191685: Half-way along cliff, opposite 'Wantsum Walk' on O/S map	TR172683: Herne Bay Pier
19	Hampton / Hampton Pier	TR172683: Herne Bay Pier	TR157679: Small slipway to west of Hampton Pier
20	Long Rock (Swalecliff) to Hampton	TR157679: Small slipway to west of Hampton Pier	TR137678: Long Rock, opposite sand spit
21	Whitstable / Tankerton	TR137678: Long Rock, opposite sand spit	TR108670: Whitstable Harbour

