

# Northern Ireland Species Action Plan

## Redshank

### *Tringa totanus*

March 2005

#### 1. Current Status and Condition

- 1.1 The redshank *Tringa totanus* is a ground-nesting wading bird, with long red legs and bill. Like other waders which breed in Northern Ireland such as curlew, *Numenius arquata*, snipe *Gallinago gallinago* and lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*, the redshank is a ground nesting bird of unimproved, damp grasslands, lakeshores, saltmarsh, marginal uplands and pastoral farmland.
- 1.2 Redshank are relatively site faithful, nesting semi-colonially, returning to their breeding areas from late February onwards. Nesting begins in April. Redshanks have just one brood and young are generally fledged by the end of June. They require a mosaic of habitats, including tussocky areas within shorter vegetation for concealing nests, a high water table providing damp or muddy areas where adults feed communally, and wet areas with some taller vegetation which provide a source of invertebrates and cover for chicks.
- 1.3 In Northern Ireland, their distribution is very restricted and they breed almost exclusively on extensively grazed, lowland wet grassland areas. This habitat is also important redshank breeding habitat in other parts of the UK, but in western Scotland there are high densities on machair and in England, large numbers breed on coastal saltmarshes.
- 1.4 Outside the breeding season, they are a predominantly coastal species frequenting bare mud in estuaries, inlets and sheltered bays as well as rocky shores. In Northern Ireland Strangford Lough and Belfast Lough are of international importance for wintering redshank. At least seven other sites around the Northern Ireland coast support nationally important (1% of the all-Ireland) populations outside the breeding season.
- 1.5 Redshank breed in most European countries, but are most abundant in Britain, Ireland, Iceland, Scandinavia and the Low Countries (Hagemeijer & Blair, 1997). The European population has been estimated at 300-600,000 pairs (Tucker and Heath, 1994), but has shown a moderate decline in abundance, mainly since the 1970s.
- 1.6 The redshank breeding population in the UK was considered to have declined by 11% between the two Breeding Atlases (Sharrock, 1976 and Gibbons *et al.*, 1993), and was estimated at just over 30,000 pairs in the mid to late 1980s (Gibbons *et*

*al.*, 1993). The most significant losses were in north-eastern and central Scotland and inland southern England. More recently, a survey of breeding waders of wet meadows of England and Wales recorded overall declines of 16% between 1982 and 2002. In contrast, O'Brien *et al.*, (2002) estimated that there was no significant change on Scottish farmland between 1992 and 1997, with the population estimated at 6,500 pairs.

- 1.7** The Irish breeding population was estimated at between 4-5,000 pairs in the late 1980s, a decline of 15% from the early 1970s (Gibbons *et al.*, 1993). The most important concentrations were on lowland wet grassland and marshy areas in the midlands and west. However more recent survey information from the Shannon Callows indicates marked declines, with falls of almost 70% in the breeding population recorded between 1987 and 2001 (Tierney *et al.*, 2002).
- 1.8** In Northern Ireland, the population was estimated at 550 pairs in 1987, 80% of which occurred on the lowland wet grassland complexes of Lough Erne, Lough Neagh and Lough Beg. The Glenwhirry valley in County Antrim held the largest proportion of the remaining pairs, but very small numbers were also recorded on flooded cut-over bog and coastal hay fields (Partridge and Smith, 1992).
- 1.9** A resurvey of key sites in 1992 recorded declines of 35% at Lough Neagh and Lough Beg, but little change on Lough Erne sites (Partridge 1992). However, more recently, Stanbury *et al.*, (2000) present results of further resurveys from the key sites, and indicate a highly significant decline in overall numbers since 1985-87. For example at Lough Neagh/Beg, just 69 pairs were recorded in 2000, as compared with 214 in 1985-87. On Upper Lough Erne, numbers declined from 104 to 31 pairs between 1992 and 2000 and on Lower Lough Erne from 76 to 40 pairs over the same period; a significant number (27 pairs) were on the RSPB Lower Lough Erne Islands Reserve. Since then, numbers on the reserve have increased, with 50 pairs recorded in 2004, but this now comprises the entire Lower Lough Erne population (B. Robson, pers comm.).
- 1.10** By 1999, a survey of breeding waders in the wider countryside by Henderson *et al.*, (2002), recorded just five pairs of redshank in 106 tetrads (four 1 km squares), equivalent to a decline of 66% since 1987. The restricted distribution of redshank in the wider countryside means that it is not possible to provide an accurate estimate of the breeding population using a random survey based on tetrads. However, based on a 66% decline the Northern Ireland population is now likely to be under 180 pairs.
- 1.11** The Northern Ireland Countryside Survey 2000 indicated a decline in the area of habitat potentially used by redshank between 1987 and 1998 including a 20% decline in the area of fen marsh and swamp (Cooper & McCann, 2000).

**1.12** The redshank is protected under Article 4.2 of the *European Community (EC) Council Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds (79/409/EEC)* (the Birds Directive) and Appendix 3 of the Berne Convention. Redshank are also protected under Article 4 of the *Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985*. It is an Amber Listed species in both Birds of Conservation Concern in the UK, Channel Islands and Isle of Man (Gregory *et al.*, 2002) and Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland (Newton *et al.*, 1999). It is listed as a species requiring close monitoring in the Irish Red Data Book (Whilde, 1982) and is a Species of European Conservation Concern, Category 2 (unfavourable conservation status (declining) and concentrated in Europe) (Tucker and Heath, 1994).

## **2. Current Factors Affecting the Population**

**2.1** Loss of habitat - the declines recorded in the UK were largely attributed to the loss of wet grassland, as coastal saltmarsh populations continued to do well. Given that redshank is almost exclusively a wet grassland species in Northern Ireland, the loss and fragmentation of this habitat is a key factor in its decline.

**2.2** Intensification of land management - as a result of land improvement, livestock numbers rose by almost 50% in 35 years between 1960 and 1995 (Donaghy and Mellon, 1998). Heavy spring stocking can lead to nest trampling, with 40% of nests lost at densities of 2 cows/ha (Lack, 1992). In addition, more frequent agricultural operations such as rolling and fertilizer application inevitably lead to increased nest losses. A shift from cattle to sheep grazing in some areas has also had an impact, as intensive sheep grazing creates a more uniform sward with few tussocks which are important for redshank.

**2.3** Predation - no data is available on the level of predation of redshank nests or chicks in Ireland. Grant *et al.*, (1997) and Herbert (1997) have shown that curlew and lapwing (respectively) can suffer high rates of nest failure as a result of predation at wet grassland sites in Ireland. It is thought that this may be related in part to habitat loss and fragmentation, which concentrates breeding birds into smaller areas, where they are less effective at driving away predators. Stanbury *et al.*, (2000) suggest that this effect may be compounded by a parallel increase in the populations of crows and foxes. It is therefore highly likely that the twin factors of habitat fragmentation and possible increases in crow and fox populations are affecting the breeding productivity of redshank as well as other waders.

**2.4** Development - many wetlands have recently been damaged or lost to housing, and other developments.

### **3. Current Action**

- 3.1** *Council Directive (79/409/EEC) on the conservation of wild birds*, the Birds Directive, was adopted in 1979 and requires member states to identify areas to be given special protection for rare or vulnerable species, and for regularly occurring migratory species. Three sites have been classified as Special Protected Areas (SPAs) under Article 4.2 of the Directive for their winter waterfowl assemblage (>20,000) with redshank as one of the species. These are Belfast Lough SPA, Strangford Lough SPA and Lough Foyle SPA.
- 3.2** Under the *Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985*, Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) are identified and declared by the Department of the Environment (DOE) through the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS). *The Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002*, strengthened the protection of ASSIs, recognising the importance of working in partnership with owners and occupiers and facilitating the positive management of these sites. The lowland wet grassland complexes of Upper Lough Erne, Lough Neagh and Lough Beg have been declared as Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs), partly because of their importance for breeding waders including redshank. These areas are currently the main strongholds for breeding redshank in Northern Ireland.
- 3.3** The Management of Sensitive Sites Scheme (MOSS), launched in 2002 by EHS, is a voluntary scheme designed to ensure the positive management of ASSI features to maintain their extent and favourable condition. Under the scheme, landowners can receive payment for carrying out conservation work within the framework of a written agreement. MOSS covers issues such as dumping, grazing and control of invasive species.
- 3.4** A five year management trial to assess the effects of predator control on nesting success of breeding curlew has been initiated by EHS, in partnership with the RSPB and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC). A monitoring programme of both the experimental and control sites within the study area has been implemented by RSPB with start-up funding from EHS. Whilst curlew are the key study species, it is anticipated that it will also benefit other waders.
- 3.5** Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's DARD, through its Countryside Management Branch (CMB), has developed a series of agri-environment schemes including the Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) scheme (revised in 2000) and the Countryside Management Scheme (CMS). Their objective is to protect and enhance semi-natural habitats and species by encouraging more sensitive management practices. Both these schemes have similar management provisions, are voluntary and apply to the whole farm. These

schemes provide a mechanism for delivering some of the targets listed in action plans for many species and habitats, targeting areas of as little as 0.1 ha of semi-natural habitat in order to maintain or improve their present conservation value. Both contain a range of prescriptions which have potential to be of benefit to redshank. A further revision of both ESA and CMS was approved recently and includes habitats/features termed Breeding Wader Sites.

- 3.6** The Wet Pasture prescription in the West Fermanagh and Erne Lakeland ESA, although not specifically targeted at redshank, are intended to conserve and enhance areas of lowland wet grassland. The West Fermanagh and Erne Lakeland ESA Wet Pasture prescription has not been replicated in CMS. The original ESA scheme was replaced with a revised ESA in 2000, which also does not contain a Wet Pasture prescription. Farmers in Fermanagh who entered 10 year ESA agreements prior to 2000 will still have the “wet pasture” habitat and are required to comply with the management prescriptions as listed on their agreement. Transfer to the revised scheme is voluntary.
- 3.7** DARD and RSPB jointly employ an Agri-Environment Project Officer to contribute to the effective delivery of agri-environment prescriptions for key species, including breeding waders.
- 3.8** Under DARD’s current Vision E Plan, due to end in 2005, provision has been made for a 3 year Capital Works Scheme for agri-environment participants to carry out work such as creating wader scrapes and raising water levels.
- 3.9** RSPB manages and monitors several key islands in Lower Lough Erne as a reserve for breeding waders, including redshank. Redshank numbers have increased significantly since 2000 and the instigation of new management practices. RSPB also manages part of its Belfast Lough Reserve for breeding waders, including redshank.
- 3.10** The wintering population is monitored through the Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) and Irish Wetland Bird Survey (IWeBS) counts on all major wintering sites.
- 3.11** The UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS Steering Group, 2000), a voluntary certification standard, requires that valuable semi-natural habitats are being treated in a manner that does not lead to further loss of biodiversity. Forest Service is certified against this standard and is undertaking a survey of its lands to identify valuable semi-natural habitats which include grasslands.
- 3.12** *The Environmental Impact Assessment (Forestry) Regulations ( Northern Ireland) 2000* require anyone who wishes to carry out a project including afforestation, deforestation, forest road works or forest quarry works that is likely to have

significant effects on the environment to obtain consent for the work from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

- 3.13** Forest Service acquisition policy is outlined in *Afforestation – the DANI Statement on Environmental Policy* (DANI, 1993). It states that there should be a presumption against afforestation of botanically rich sites, which have undergone little disturbance for many years.
- 3.14** Forests and Water Guidelines (Forestry Commission, 2003), sets out water protection and riparian management standards with which forest managers are required to comply in relation to forest design planning and management of forestry operations which might effect water bodies

## **4 Action Plan Targets**

- 4.1 Maintain the Northern Ireland breeding redshank population at 180 pairs
- 4.2 By 2010 increase the Northern Ireland breeding redshank population to 225 pairs.
- 4.3 By 2015 restore the Northern Ireland breeding redshank population size to 1986/7 levels (550 pairs).
- 4.4 By 2010, maintain the range of the breeding redshanks.
- 4.5 By 2015 restore range to 1986/87 range.
- 4.6 Maintain the numbers of wintering redshank in coastal habitats at 8,000 individuals.

## **5. Proposed Actions with Lead Agencies**

### **5.1 Policy and legislation**

- 5.1.1 By 2006, seek to encourage positive environmental change through the reformed Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), for example, by promoting sustainable agricultural management of marginal and wetland habitats.  
(ACTION: DARD, EHS)
- 5.1.2 By 2010, monitor the effects of decoupling, particularly on extensive livestock and mixed farming systems, for changes which may have implications for redshank and other key species of pastoral ecosystems.  
(ACTION: DARD)
- 5.1.3 By 2008, target positive management through MOSS, agri-environment schemes, the LBAP process and grant aid for biodiversity to secure favourable management on suitable redshank sites.  
(ACTION: EHS, DARD)
- 5.1.4 By 2007, ensure that agri-environment scheme prescriptions relevant/appropriate to redshank are contributing to maintaining and enhancing the population across Northern Ireland.  
(ACTION: DARD, EHS)
- 5.1.5 By 2006, ensure that all farmers receiving agri-environment scheme payments and LFA Compensatory Allowance Payments are complying with GFP.  
(ACTION: DARD, EHS)

- 5.1.6 Ensure implementation of Good Agriculture and Environmental Condition (GAEC), in order to prevent either under or over grazing in key breeding wader areas, either of which could decrease the suitability of breeding areas for redshank.  
(ACTION: DARD)
- 5.1.7 By 2006, review *Planning Policy Statement 2 (PPS2) – Planning and Nature Conservation*, to include policies relating to priority habitat and species.  
(ACTION: Planning Service, EHS)
- 5.1.8 By 2005, produce *Planning Policy Statement (PPS14) on Sustainable Development in the Countryside* which incorporates objectives to minimise the impact of housing development on the environmental resources of habitat, water quality and biodiversity of the rural area, thereby contributing to the conservation of biodiversity in Northern Ireland.  
(ACTION: DRD, Planning Service, EHS,)
- 5.1.9 By 2006, produce *Planning Policy Statement (PPS15) on Planning and Flood Risk*. This includes an objective to promote an integrated sustainable approach to the management of development and flood risk that, among other matters, will contribute to the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity in Northern Ireland.  
(ACTION: Planning Service, EHS, DRD).
- 5.1.10 By 2005, produce a Planning Policy Statement (PPS) on the coast to manage coastal development in a sustainable manner and protect the natural character and landscape of the coast.  
(ACTION: DRD)
- 5.1.11 Ensure that important redshank habitats and their conservation management requirements are recognised and site protection policies are included in statutory and non-statutory plans e.g. Development Plans, Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAP's) and appropriate management strategies.  
(ACTION: Planning Service, EHS, DARD, District Councils)

## **5.2 Site safeguard and management**

- 5.2.1. By 2006, produce ornithological selection criteria for ASSIs.  
(ACTION: EHS)
- 5.2.2 By 2006, produce conservation objectives for all statutory sites including cSACs, ASSIs and NNRs ensuring that the objectives do not conflict with the requirements of redshank.

(ACTION: EHS)

- 5.2.3 By 2008, review breeding redshank sites within SPA, ASSI and NNR series and notify further sites, if required, to fill significant gaps.

(ACTION: EHS)

- 5.2.4 By 2007, establish agreements with landowners, where possible for the positive management of areas important for breeding redshank within ASSIs through the MOSS scheme.

(ACTION: EHS)

- 5.2.5 By 2007, ensure that the CMS/ESA measures relevant to redshank are carefully targeted at key areas.

(ACTION: DARD)

- 5.2.6 By 2007, where appropriate, enhance management of relevant Nature Reserves/National Nature Reserves for breeding redshank.

(ACTION: EHS, District Councils)

- 5.2.7 By 2008, consider the development of new agri-environment measures to benefit redshank e.g. raising water levels and the reversion of improved pasture.

(ACTION: DARD)

- 5.2.8 By 2010, consider whether predator control measures need to be integrated into the long term management of farming systems and of designated sites.

(ACTION: EHS, DARD)

### **5.3 Species management and protection**

- 5.3.1 By 2006, encourage landowners and site managers to avoid carrying out farming operations during the breeding season, in the vicinity of identified breeding wader territories.

(ACTION: EHS, DARD)

### **5.4 Advisory**

- 5.4.1 By 2006, ensure that those responsible for implementing and supporting agri-environment schemes and MOSS agreements continue to receive effective training and up-to-date advice on appropriate land management practices which benefit breeding redshank.

(ACTION: EHS, DARD)

5.4.2 By 2006, ensure that farmers and landowners are aware of the presence of redshank on their land and mechanisms available to instigate appropriate management.

(ACTION: EHS, DARD)

5.4.3 By 2006, ensure that information on redshank in Northern Ireland is available to all those who could play a role in their conservation and recovery.

(ACTION: EHS, DARD)

## **5.5 International**

5.5.1 Further develop links with the Republic of Ireland and other European and international organisations and programmes such as the European Environment Agency and the European Centre for Nature Conservation, to promote the exchange of information and experience in research, management techniques, education and conservation strategies.

(ACTION: EHS)

## **5.6 Future research and monitoring**

5.6.1 By 2007, initiate research to investigate the factors underlying long term population declines at key sites.

(ACTION: EHS)

5.6.2 Monitor the response of redshank populations to the predator control management trial in Co. Antrim.

(ACTION: EHS)

5.6.3 Continue to carry out a regular monitoring programme of redshank and other breeding waders at key sites to assess changes in response to management.

(ACTION: EHS)

5.6.4 By 2007, monitor and review the effectiveness of agri-environment schemes, in maintaining and enhancing redshank habitats and populations across Northern Ireland.

(ACTION: DARD, EHS)

5.6.5 Continue to support WEBS/IWEBS counts on all important wintering sites and ensure all data is centralized and monitored for ongoing trends.

(ACTION: EHS)

## **5.7 Communications and publicity**

5.7.1 By 2006, raise awareness of the reasons for redshank declines throughout Northern Ireland.

(ACTION EHS, DARD)

5.7.2 By 2006, ensure the provision of high quality advisory materials to landowners and seek opportunities to promote and publicise mechanisms for delivering positive management.

(ACTION EHS, DARD)

## **5.8 Links with other action plans**

5.8.1 It is likely that the implementation of this plan will also benefit the Northern Ireland populations of the following UK and/or Northern Ireland priority species:-

- Curlew *Numenius arquata* (Northern Ireland)
- Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* (Northern Ireland)
- Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* (UK & Northern Ireland)
- Skylark *Alauda arvensis* (UK & Northern Ireland)
- Pennyroyal *Mentha pulegium* (UK & Northern Ireland)
- Irish Lady's Tresses *Spiranthes romanzoffiana* (UK & Northern Ireland)
- Irish hare *Lepus timidus hibernicus* (Northern Ireland)

5.8.2 This plan should be considered in conjunction with the following UK and Northern Ireland Habitat Action Plans:-

- Coastal and floodplain grazing marsh
- Coastal saltmarsh
- Mudflats
- Saline lagoons
- Fens
- Purple moor grass and rush pasture

## **6 Costings**

6.1 A table showing the global costs for this and other SAPs is available on the EHS/Biodiversity web page.

## 7 References

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**List of Useful Acronyms**

ASSI	Area of Special Scientific Interest
BAP	Biodiversity Action Plan
CEDaR	Centre for Environmental Data and Recording
CMD	Countryside Management Division
CMS	Countryside Management Scheme
DARD	Department of Agricultural and Rural Development
DCAL	Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
DETI	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Industry
DOE	Department of the Environment
DRD	Department for Regional Development
EHS	Environment and Heritage Service
ESA	Environmentally Sensitive Area
ESCRs	Earth Science Conservation Review Site
HAP	Habitat Action Plan
JNCC	Joint Nature Conservation Committee
MAGNI	The National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland
NIBG	Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group
NICS	Northern Ireland Countryside Survey
NNR	National Nature Reserve
PPG	Planning Policy Guideline
PPS	Planning Policy Statement
RA	Rivers Agency
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
SAC	Special Area of Conservation
SAP	Species Action Plan
SLNCI	Sites of Local Nature Conservation Importance
SoCC	Species of Conservation Concern
SPA	Special Protection Area
WFD	Water Framework Directive
WWT	Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust