

New report highlights climate change impact on UK's wintering birds

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A new report examining bird population trends has highlighted a doubling of the overall numbers of 39 species of waterbirds, ducks, geese, swans and wading birds spending the winter in the UK in the last three decades. However, the State of the UK's Birds 2006 also shows that the wintering populations of some species are declining, principally, it is suggested, because of climate change.

Every winter the UK receives two million ducks, geese, swans and wading birds, from northern Europe, Greenland, Siberia and Arctic Canada. These birds are attracted to spend the winter in Britain and Ireland because of the relatively mild climate and ice-free conditions.

According to the State of the UK's Birds 2006 report, the populations of some species, notably wading birds including the black-tailed godwit and the avocet, have increased markedly since the late 1970s, largely as a result of conservation action. However, concerns are growing over the decline in the populations of seven other regular visitors, including the *Greenland white-fronted goose*, *European white-fronted goose*, *shelduck*, *mallard*, *pochard*, *ringed plover*, *dunlin* and *turnstone*.

The precise reasons for the decline of each species vary, but a common theme appears to be climate change. As winters become milder both in the UK and elsewhere, it appears that some birds are not forced to fly as far as the UK to find suitable conditions: this trend has been particularly noted in Northern Ireland with declines of pochard and Bewick's swan.

Dr Baz Hughes, head of species conservation at the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, said: *"Every winter, the UK's estuaries, marshes and wetlands throng with the arrival of ducks, geese, swans and wading birds, making the UK one of the most important countries in the world for some of these birds.*

"However, we are becoming increasingly concerned about the declining numbers of some populations. While some are simply taking advantage of milder winters by staying on the continent, others like the Greenland white-fronted goose, are in real and rapid decline. Conservation action is needed urgently to reverse these declines."

Dr Mark Avery, the RSPB's conservation director, said: *"The UK has had both the perfect climate and perfect habitats for these birds, but the evidence is growing that climate change impacts are starting to bite. Sea level rise and warmer winters are reducing their numbers, undermining our importance for birds."*

The BTO's Dr Mark Rehfisch, one of the report's authors, said: *"For over 30 years, teams of volunteers have braved the worst conditions a British winter can muster to count the numbers of birds visiting each of the UK's most important sites for wetland birds. This huge effort has not only contributed to one of the best sources of bird*

information in the world, it is also vital in helping us to understand climate change impacts on the natural world.”

Natural England's Chief Scientist Tom Tew said: *“Sympathetic and effective management of the UK's world-renowned network of internationally important waterbird sites and the surrounding countryside is vital if we are to minimise the adverse impacts of climate change on our overwintering birds.*

“Agri-environment schemes have a crucial role to play by encouraging land management practices that benefit birds and other wildlife.”

Natural England has been formed by bringing together English Nature, the landscape, access and recreation elements of the Countryside Agency and the environmental land management functions of the Rural Development Service.

Tarr Steps clapper bridge, River Barle, Exmoor

Natural England will work for people, places and nature, to enhance biodiversity, landscapes and wildlife in rural, urban, coastal and marine areas; promoting access, recreation and public well-being, and contributing to the way natural resources are managed so that they can be enjoyed now and in the future.

Natural England is working towards the delivery of four strategic outcomes, which together deliver on our purpose to conserve, enhance and manage the natural environment for the benefit of current and future generations.

- **A healthy natural environment: England’s natural environment will be conserved and enhanced.**
- **Enjoyment of the natural environment: more people enjoying, understanding and acting to improve, the natural environment, more often.**
- **Sustainable use of the natural environment: the use and management of the natural environment is more sustainable.**
- **A secure environmental future: decisions which collectively secure the future of the natural environment.**

For further details about Natural England, its objectives, targets, and ways of working:
http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/pdf/about/Natural_England_Strategic_Direction.pdf

The State of the UK’s Birds 2006 report

<http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/press/docs/State-of-UK-Birds.pdf>

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