

## The state of the UK's birds 2020 — a summary

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Since 1999, a partnership of the UK's bird monitoring, research and conservation organisations have published annual summaries of the latest monitoring results for birds in the UK and its overseas territories: *The state of the UK's birds* (SUKB) reports. After hiatus, with no reports since 2017, *SUKB 2020* (Burns *et al.* 2020) was published in December, and here we give a brief summary of the findings.

The UK is fortunate to have a long tradition of ornithology, with structured monitoring programmes dating back as far as 1928, when the British Trust for Ornithology's Heronries Census began. Standardised monitoring of common breeding birds and wintering waterbirds began in the late 1960s, and of rare breeding birds from the early 1970s, so we have well-established volunteer-based monitoring programmes, some of which involve thousands of observers. While there remain some species for which data on population size and trends are sparse, these monitoring efforts means SUKB has a wide range of survey updates to cover in its 80 pages.

### New population estimates for the UK's birds

Reporting for Article 12 of the Birds Directive — while the UK was still in the European Union — has resulted in the publication of new population estimates for all of the UK's regularly occurring bird populations (Woodward *et al.* 2020). A synthesis of these estimates in *SUKB 2020* reveals that the UK has around 83 million pairs of native breeding birds, with the Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* being the commonest with 11 million pairs; this and ten other species contribute 60% of all the UK's breeding birds. The total is approximately 19 million pairs fewer than in 1966, owing to a rapid net loss of birds in the late 1970s and 1980s, driven largely by declines in numbers of House Sparrows *Passer domesticus* and Tree Sparrows *P. montanus*, Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris*, Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* and Skylark *Alauda arvensis*. Total native bird biomass has risen slightly over the same period, however, mainly due to the increase in Woodpigeons *Columba palumbus*. Meanwhile, due to the release of approximately 47 million individuals per annum,

the biomass of non-native Pheasants *Phasianus colchicus* in September is estimated to be more than the post-breeding biomass of all native species combined, with largely unquantified ecological impacts (see Mason *et al.* 2020).

### Population trends

*SUKB 2020* gives summary tables for trends derived from all the UK's main bird monitoring programmes. The Breeding Bird Survey ([www.bto.org/our-science/projects/bbs](http://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/bbs)), and its predecessor the Common Bird Census, provide trends from 1970 onwards covering 117 species. In addition, for the first time in SUKB, we present trends in survival and productivity for a subset of species covered by demographic studies based on ringing and nest-recording. Many of the individual species' trends will seem familiar to readers across Europe, for example marked declines in birds of agricultural habitats, such as Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* (down by 98% since 1970), whereas many generalist woodland species have increased, e.g. Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* (up by 335% since 1970).



Rare and scarce breeding birds are monitored by the Rare Breeding Birds Panel ([www.rbbp.org.uk](http://www.rbbp.org.uk)); it is notable that many of the UK's rare and scarce breeding birds are increasing. Thirteen new species have become established as regular breeding birds in the UK since the 1970s, and another 24 species have increased by over 50% over the same period. This is in marked comparison with the declines in many common and widespread species.

The UK has internationally important populations of many seabirds, and a section on the Seabird Monitoring Programme ([www.jncc.gov.uk/our-work/seabird-monitoring-programme/](http://www.jncc.gov.uk/our-work/seabird-monitoring-programme/)) gives the latest results from annual monitoring of 14 species in a sample of 500 colonies. We await the results from a complete census of Britain and Ireland's seabirds, the first for 20 years, which will give a more robust assessment of populations and trends, and cover all 25 of our breeding seabird species including those difficult-to-study species such as Leach's Petrel *Hydrobates leucorhous*, Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus* and Black Guillemot *Cephus grylle*.

In international terms, the other significant element of the UK's avifauna is the populations of wintering waterbirds that migrate from further north and east to winter on our coasts. The volunteer-based Wetland Bird Survey ([www.bto.org/our-science/projects/wetland-bird-survey](http://www.bto.org/our-science/projects/wetland-bird-survey)) provides robust annual population trends for most of these species. Whilst many species of wintering waterbird have shown long-term increases, in recent years population declines have become more prevalent. In some cases recent declines in species' numbers wintering in the UK are thought to be related to climate driven changes in wintering distri-

bution, rather than flyway-level population declines. In other instances, however, these declines, such as for Bewick's Swan *Cygnus columbianus* and Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*, are known to be related to declines on a much wider scale.

### Not just the UK

The UK is unusual in having four constituent nations, and as in recent years responsibility for the delivery of conservation has been devolved to national governments, the reporting of the status biodiversity at national level has assumed greater importance. As a consequence, *SUKB 2020* is the first report in the series to include dedicated sections for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, reporting species' trends for these nations, although reporting at these smaller spatial scale (particularly for the smaller nations of Northern Ireland and Wales) means that sample sizes are smaller and population trends can be produced for fewer species. The Welsh section is provided in the Welsh language as well as English.

Of course, the report gives a brief overview of the European Breeding Bird Atlas 2 (Keller *et al.* 2020), with a few examples given of species of particular interest to UK readers, such as the advancing Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* and retreating Redwing *Turdus iliacus*.

Finally, looking even further afield, *SUKB 2020* gives a selection of updates on birds across the UK's 14 Overseas Territories (OT's), which are scattered across the globe. These OT's contain extremely important bird populations, including a substantial number of endemics and huge numbers of penguins, albatrosses and other seabirds, and include 69 globally threatened species. Efforts





highlighted, including on Gough Island, part of the Tristan da Cunha group in the South Atlantic, where species such as the Gough Finch *Rowettia goughensis*, MacGillivray's Prion *Pachyptila macgillivrayi* and even the mighty Tristan Albatross *Diomedea dabbenena* are threatened by predation by introduced house mice; a project to eradicate the mouse population before it drives endemic species to extinction is now underway. The full *SUKB 2020* report can be downloaded at [here](#), and all previous reports are available from [here](#). If you have any questions or comments on the report the lead author, Fiona Burns, can be contacted on [fiona.burns@rspb.org.uk](mailto:fiona.burns@rspb.org.uk).

to help vulnerable island populations through the removal of non-native invasive predators are

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