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Curlew in Montgomeryshire

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Key words: *Numenius arquata*, population, conservation, Gylfinir Cymru

Abstract

The history and status of Curlew in Montgomeryshire is reviewed. The eastern half of the county held 176 pairs in 1986 but by 2000 only 42 pairs at 30 sites were identified. The story is brought up to date with the results of a survey in 2021 locating a total of 45 potential breeding pairs of Curlew in the county.

Introduction and History

Eurasian Curlew (*Numenius arquata*) are found throughout the year in Wales, frequenting coastal and some farmland areas in winter, and breeding on upland grassland and moorland and in lowland grasslands (Pritchard et al. 2021). The Curlew is listed as globally Near-Threatened on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species and is a Red-listed Bird of Conservation Concern in both Wales and the UK. Curlew are also listed as being of Principle Importance for the Purpose of Conserving Biological Diversity under Section 7 of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016. Formerly widespread across Wales, breeding Curlew is now undergoing a sustained and chronic decline in both numbers and range. Breeding population estimates are from 400 to no more than 1,700 breeding pairs and is declining at a rate of 6% per year (Gylfinir Cymru 2021).

Mongomeryshire has long been known as a stronghold for breeding curlew where they are found in a wide variety of habitats, from moorlands to lowland silage fields. A review of the history of this species in the County is given by Holt and Williams (2008). In summary, Forest (1907) gave the North Wales (including Montgomeryshire) status as 'resident and common, breeding on all

the moorlands and some lowland bogs'. Forest also noted that in the County, and along the English Border, curlew were tending to descend from the moors to lower habitats. This trend was noted by other authors, such as Condry (1966) who observed evidence that more birds were breeding on lower ground at that time than earlier in the 20th century, and fewer on the hills. There appears to have been general decline in Wales from the 1950's onward and Lovegrove et al (1994) concluded that while the Curlew was still "common and widespread" in Wales, the trend in the three decades to 1990 had been one of decline and diminution of range. Although a survey in 1986 (Mcfadzean and Tyler 1987) found 176 pairs in the eastern half of the County, by 2000 a survey found only 42 pairs at 30 sites across the County (Hughes, 2000, quoted in Holt and Williams 2008). This drastic decline was confirmed by Johnstone et al (2007) who showed a 69% decline in the County between 1993 and 2006. Further surveys at specific, mainly upland, sites in the mid 2000's driven by proposed windfarm developments confirmed this trend as shown by Green (2012) who summarised sites where repeat surveys had been undertaken (table 1)

Although these declines have been dire, overall Montgomeryshire remains important in a Welsh context and it has been identified as an 'Important Curlew Area' (ICA) in the Wales Action Plan for the Recovery of Curlew (Gylfinir Cymru, 2021). The County also has interesting numbers of wintering and passage flocks such as on the Severn near Caersws and at Dolydd Hafren. The maximum counts at the latter were between 50 and 100 between 2016 and 2019 (Montgomeryshire Bird Reports 2016, 2018 and 2019).
2021 survey and the Important Curlew Area

Table 1. Declines in Curlew at three sites in Montgomeryshire (from Green 2012)

| Size | Date of prev survey | Pairs | Pairs 2012 |
|------------------|---------------------|-------|------------|
| Trannon | 1995 | 13 | 1-2 |
| Mynydd yr Hendre | 2005 | 5-6 | 1-2 |
| Nant yr Eira | 2006 | 10 | 2 |

In 2021 a wider survey was attempted to try and update our knowledge of the curlew population in this area and help define the boundaries of an 'Important Curlew Area' as part of the Wales Recovery Plan (Gylfinir Cymru 2021).

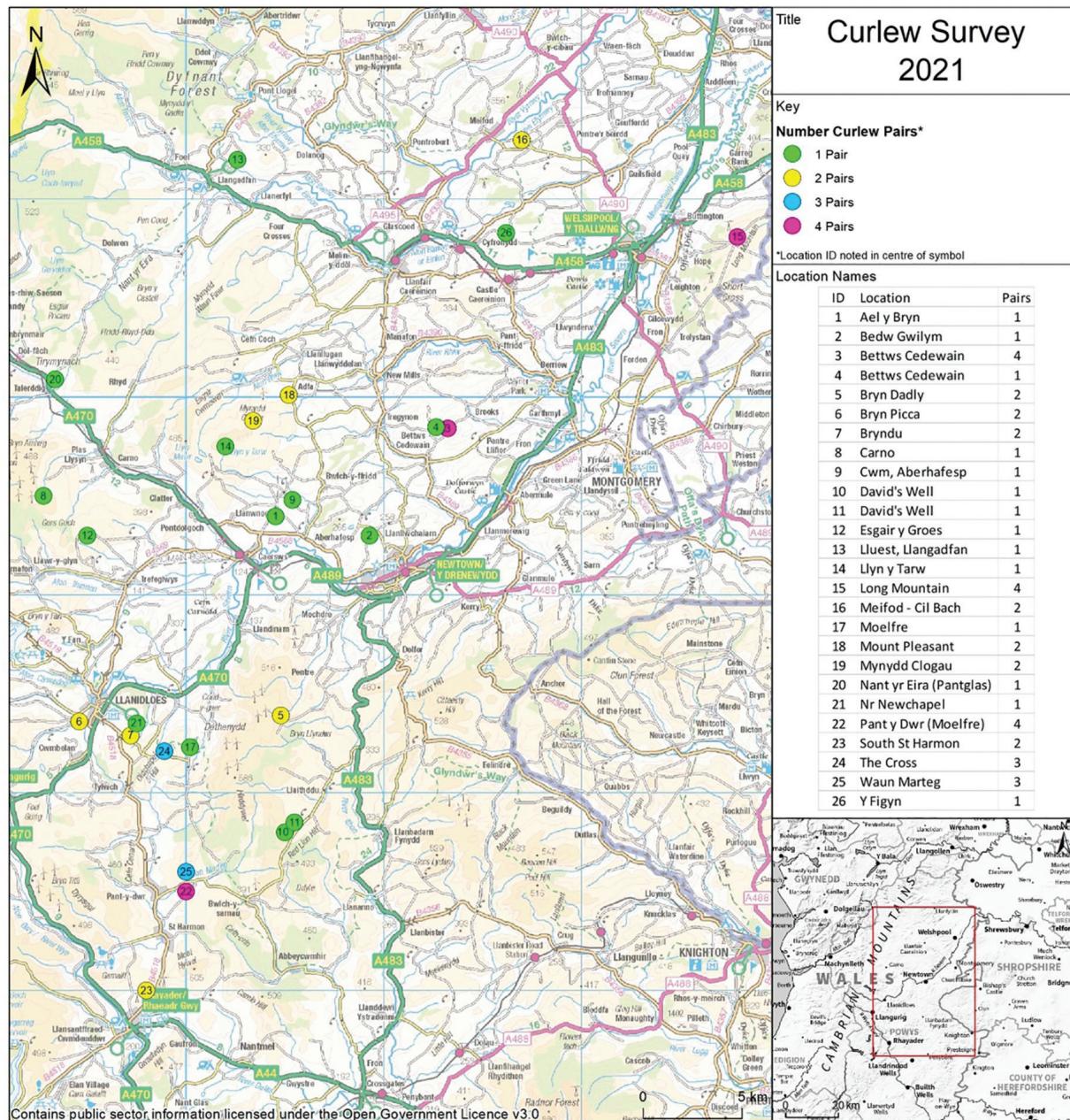
Methods

No formal survey method was employed, and surveys were undertaken from roads, public rights of way and open access land. This was due to the limited time and funding. Birds were recorded

where seen or heard and surveyors expertise used to decide on the potential number of breeding pairs in any area. A tape of curlew calls was used to elicit responses at some sites. No effort was made to locate nests or look at productivity due to lack of time and funding and to avoid disturbing birds.

Areas known from previous surveys, sites where we had received records and, where time allowed, other areas of potential habitat, were all visited at least twice during the breeding season between March and June 2021. More lowland areas were

Figure 1. Results of the 2021 Curlew survey.



covered than in other recent surveys as these had concentrated on upland windfarm areas.

Results

A total of 45 potential breeding pairs were located in this survey. The results, and the survey area (which included part of North Radnorshire) are shown in Figure 1. A further three pairs, not shown on the map, were found in the Churchstoke area by the Camlad Valley Community Wildlife Group (L Smith, *pers. comm.*) The results show a broad spread of Curlew across the area and birds were found in a wide variety of habitats, from upland moorland, through grazed pasture down to intensive silage fields.

Upland pairs, found during previous windfarm related surveys and shown in Table 1, had declined considerably. For example, in Nant y Eira, heading North from Talerddig no pairs were found. This valley contained 11 pairs in 2005. A windfarm at Mynydd y Hendre, north of Carno, held no birds having previously holding up to five pairs. This is despite extensive habitat management done as part of the development. The site at Trannon held no birds either, although there was an early record of calling birds there in 2020. No comparison was available for the lowland sites.

Discussion

The results confirm that Montgomeryshire (and North Radnorshire), despite declines, continues to be an important area for Curlew that should be targeted for curlew conservation funding. It is unclear why the upland pairs seem to have declined but it may be that we just have more recent surveys from these sites than the lowland ones which, while still well distributed, may have declined just as much. From those sites for which we have historical records it is clear that there is a long-term decline in the areas Curlew population, although it retains a significant and important population. The numbers found justify the areas designation as an 'Important Curlew Area' and the population here is contiguous with pairs found across the border in Shropshire which are the subject of a separate conservation project (Gylfinir Cymru 2021). Conservation efforts are urgently required to save this important population and will require continued cross-border co-operation.

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