

Exe Observers Group

Notes from Meeting - 20th November 2016

Despite the short notice there was a good turnout for the WeBS meeting last month. It was nice to see some new faces, and good that some folk who were unable to make the previous meeting back in March were able to come along on this occasion.

Gavin Bloomfield and Kevin Rylands played host to the meeting at the RSPB's excellent offices in Boardwalk House, Southernhay, and many thanks to them both for assisting with arranging things (and not least letting us into the place through the security system!).

Exe Webs - General

The main focuses of the meeting (or should that be foci?!) were to continue the review of counts over the last 12 months, and to discuss the forthcoming Low Tide Count on 29th November.

Penny welcomed everyone, and there was a brief introduction session so that everyone knew who everyone else was. Most counts had gone off well since March, though I guess from Penny's perspective it would be good if observers didn't all chose to disappear off on holiday to exotic parts of the world in the same month - particularly September!

Exe WeBS Counts : Recent Results in Context

At the March meeting earlier in the year it was felt that rather than simply going through the Exe counts and commenting on changes, trends etc, it would be useful to explore more widely and in more detail the context of the birds using the Exe. For most of the key species on the estuary national trends and monthly occurrences were brought in for comparison, and in some cases (with some trepidation) ideas about possible reasons for changes and divergences from the national picture were suggested. As a result of this my scheduling was sufficiently awry that by the time we were getting towards the end of the meeting it was apparent we were only going to have covered the wildfowl. So this current meeting it was time to turn our attention to the waders.

This report will therefore mainly cover waders over the past season on the Exe, but firstly there was a general look at the overall pattern for the year, and also a quick dip into a few highlights on the wildfowl front which weren't necessarily apparent last March

[In previous meetings the pattern of going through counts has been one of me dodging about between national and international data, with graphs typically copied into PowerPoint, and local Exe data. The latter requiring me to dig down into the extensive Excel charts and spreadsheets to show comparative Exe data (going back over the last 40-odd years). I found with this approach I was starting to get a bit irritated with myself, (and I'm sure it must have been a bit distracting for the audience). So this time I chose to extract potentially pertinent Exe data and charts which might be useful to illustrate things within a total PowerPoint presentation¹. This felt a little smoother to me, except that I didn't want it then to simply become a presentation from me to you, - so hope you didn't feel inhibited in raising discussion points and making your own observations - even perhaps disagreeing with me!].

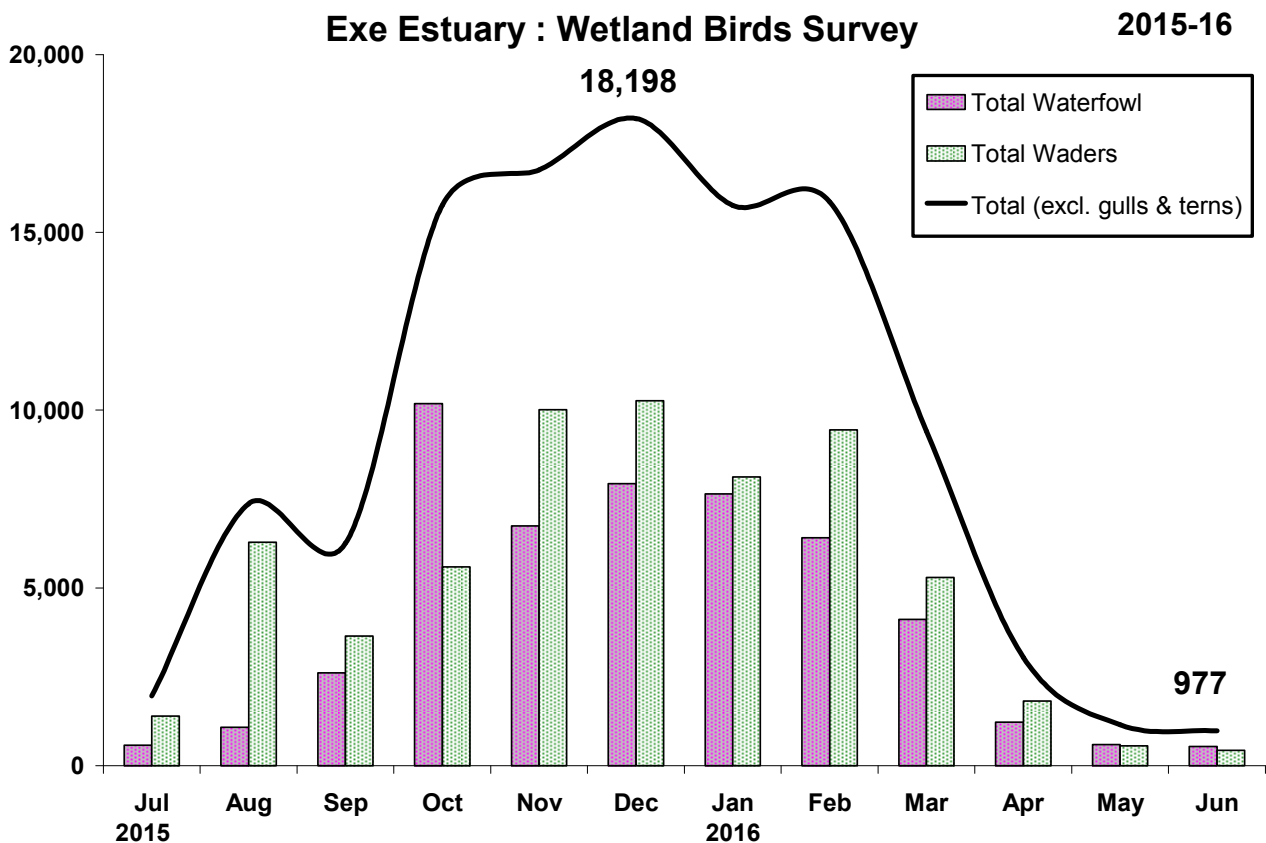
¹ If anyone would like a copy of the PowerPoint presentation to look at or to use as they wish I'd be happy to send it through to them. It's a big file so would need to be done via some transfer system rather than e-mail.

Exe WeBS Counts Overall : July 2015 - June 2016

The main period under review was the WeBS season running from July 2015 right round to June 2016 a few months back in the summer. This effectively took in the autumn migration period, the whole of the winter build up of numbers, through to the end of the "season" when most birds were disappearing off again to foreign parts for the breeding season. Though the main focus was on July 2015 to June 2016, one or two interesting counts from the four months since then (July -October 2016) were also highlighted - though some of the counts count were at the time incomplete.

Fig 1 shows the overall number of waders and wildfowl each month through the 2015-16 season. There was an obvious build up through to December, though the "untidy" blip in August which spoilt the smooth increase was due to those species which particularly migrate through at this time of the year (eg Curlew & Whimbrel, Ringed Plover, Sanderling)

Fig 1: Annual Monthly Pattern for Waders & Waterfowl on the Exe - July 2015 - June 2016



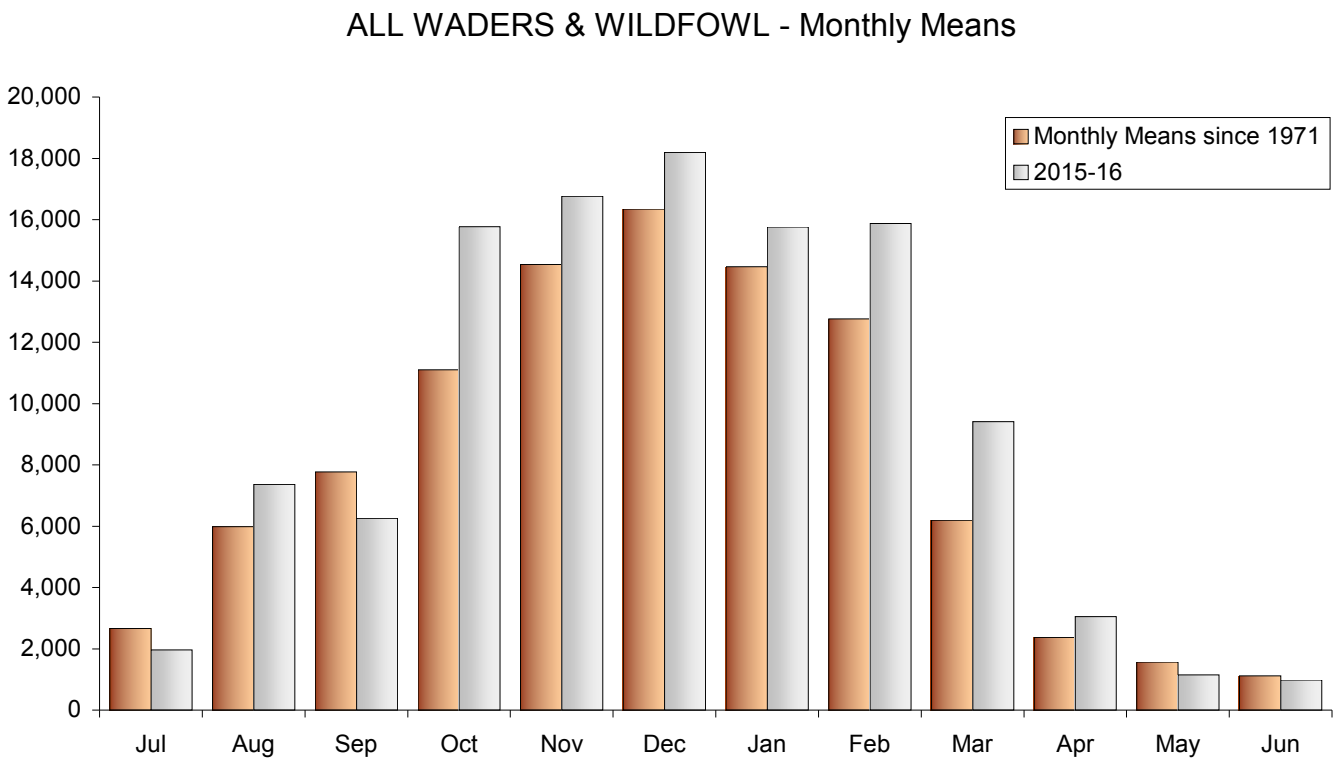
The peak month for the year was December 2015, with just over 18,000 waders and wildfowl, though if gulls are included this total would have probably been well over 30,000 birds. By June 2016 only a few species that breed on the Exe were left, along with young birds in their first year, which had chosen not to head off to their breeding grounds.

Whilst the peak of 18,198 is a creditable total, one of the criterion for designation is that the estuary should hold over 20,000 waders and wildfowl - but this figure is the total of each species maximum through the year. (So for example though Dunlin are usually at their maximum in December, Curlew normally peak in August so that figure would be used in the calculation). On this basis I calculate that the maximum total for all species in 2015-16 comes out at around 26,200 - well above the 20,000

threshold. In fact the average "maximum" over the five years up to the 2014/15 season sits at around 20,500, so last season's numbers should improve this average considerably.

The peak month being December last season is in line with most previous year's counts, and indeed looking at the monthly counts throughout the 2015-16 season they present a reasonably typical picture. However, as Fig 2 shows, there were very encouraging signs that in virtually every month total numbers of birds were well above the average.

Fig 2: Comparison of Average Annual Monthly Pattern since 1970 with Jul15-Jun16



A Few Wildfowl Highlights:

A quick "flip" through the summary count sheets for the waterfowl produced the following:

- Cormorant peaked in Aug-Nov 2015 period, though so far in 2016 only the Sept count had exceeded 100 birds.
- Shag as usual were less common in the estuary, and despite one or two 50+ counts throughout 2015-16 seemed to be in short supply since June 2016
- Little Egret's peaks were again in Aug-Sep, though not as high as some of the counts in the previous decade which often exceeded 130.
- The pattern for Mute Swan was familiar with numbers swelled in Aug-Oct by young birds and adults that had bred elsewhere.
- We're doing something right on the estuary and in particular on the marshes to encourage Canada Geese (if that's what you want!). The peak of 1,303 in Nov 2015, and a count the previous month of over 1,000 way exceeded the previous maximum of 929 in 2014/15. There were certainly plenty of goslings produce and reared, free from the attention of foxes and the like, within the "secure compound" of the electric fenced area on Powderham Marshes. (What about changing the RSPB's Avocet symbol to a Canada Goose!)

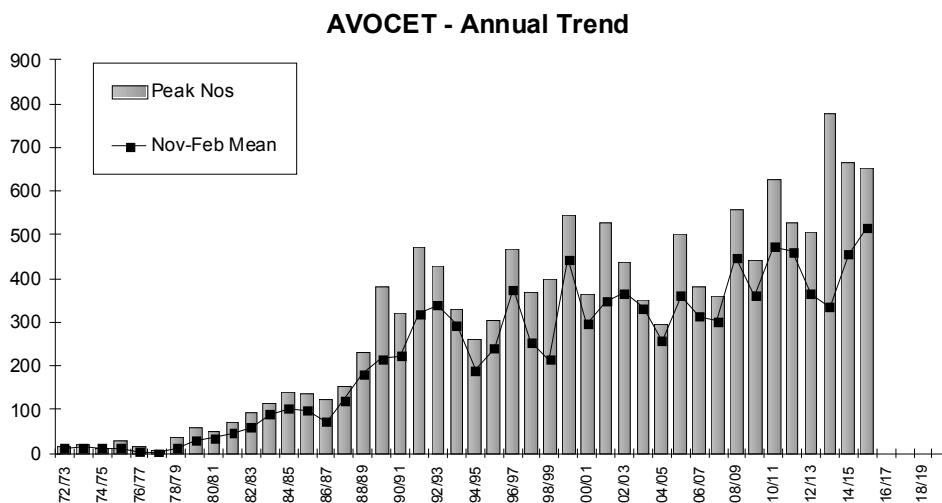
- Brent Geese numbers showed yet another improvement in 2015/16 with the peak of 2,163 in February 2016 the highest since the mid 1990's.
- We commented on the encouraging peak of Wigeon in October 2015 of almost 6,000 birds, a level last recorded back in the mid 1970s. Well, this wasn't a "flash in the pan" as over 6,000 were recorded again this autumn, also in October - the month in which the species has been peaking on the Exe over the last 6-7 years.
- As if an excess of Wigeon wasn't enough Teal have been showing a steady increase recently with monthly winter counts regularly exceeding 1,000 birds. Well, looking at October 2016 (which is really a sneak preview of the current season!) an astonishing 2,173 were recorded on the estuary, of which 1,250 alone were in Cockwood Corner. This peak count is the highest ever recorded on the Exe for WeBS, exceeding the previous maximum in 1995/96 by several hundred.
- Continuing with wildfowl good news stories Pintail reached their highest ever peak of 208 in November 2015, and if on the October 2016 count we'd only tried a bit harder to find 5 more birds we could have improved the count of 204 to another all time high.
- And we haven't finished yet, - February 2016 produced the highest ever WeBS peak for Shoveler as well.

So with that taster of mostly good news from the wildfowl we moved on to see whether the waders could match them

Wader Numbers and Trends

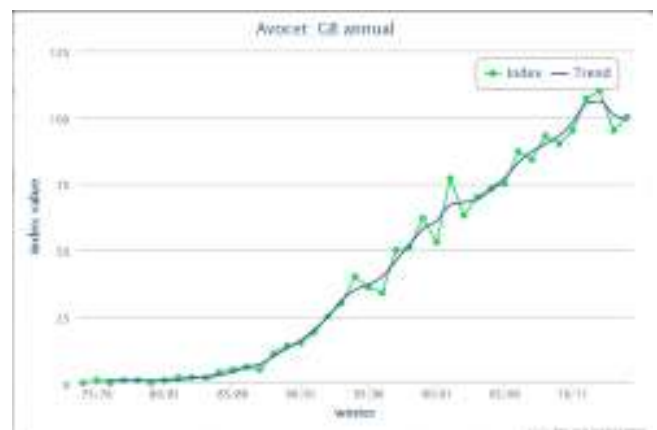
Avocet numbers and trends were looked at first as they represent a straightforward pattern of steady increase both on the estuary and nationally

Fig 3: Avocet annual trend on the Exe - 1970 - 2015



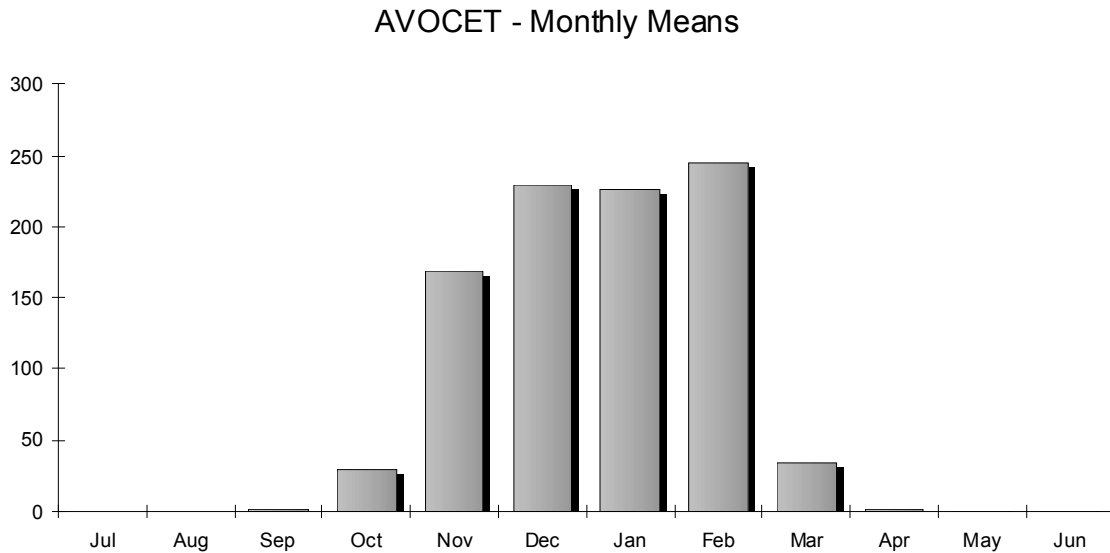
. . . (and for those less familiar with the somewhat daunting array of graphs and charts produced from Exe WeBS data these perhaps provide a more gentle introduction as to what they portray)

Fig 4: Avocet national trend 1975 - 2015



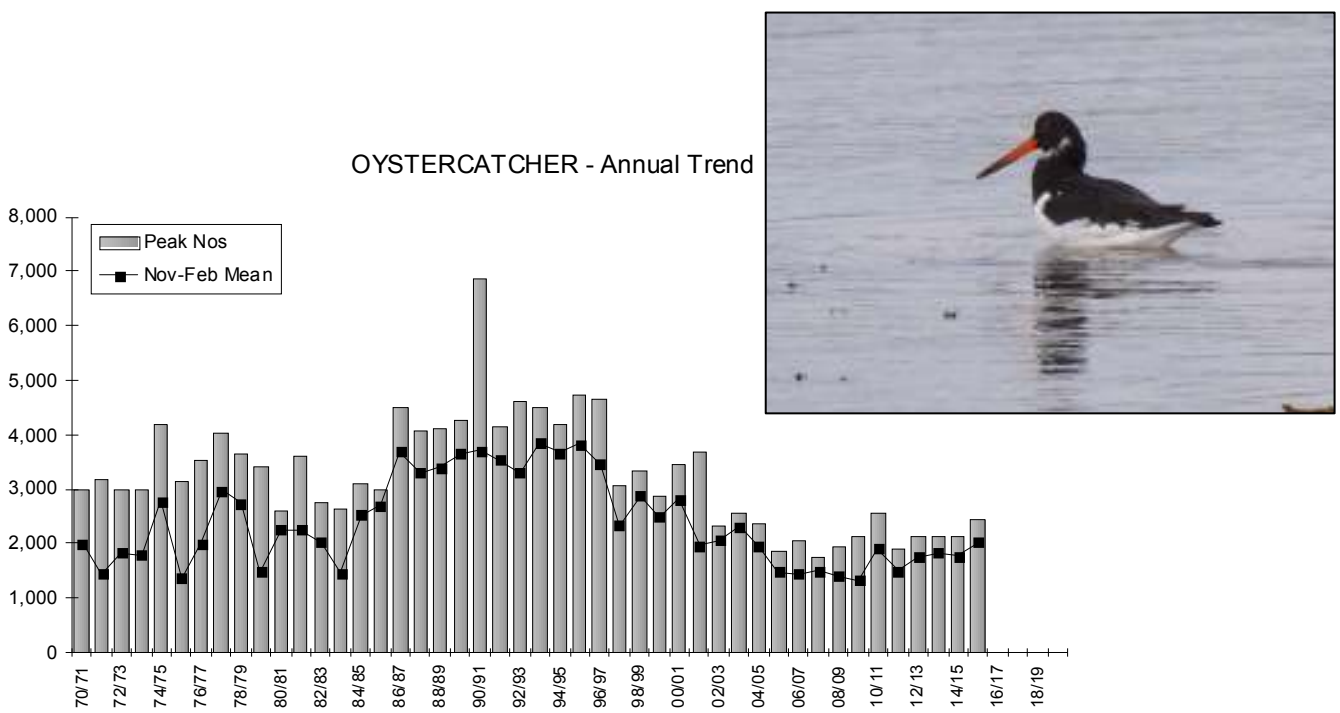
The Exe is nationally important for Avocets, and on some occasions in recent years (not necessarily on WeBS count dates) numbers have exceeded 730 which is the level for international importance. An article in the WeBS Annual Report 2012/13 states that in 2011, taking into consideration movement between estuaries, the wintering population nationally was estimated at around 7,500. Despite this high level of wintering birds the species does not spread far north. There have only ever been 10 records in Scotland. On the Exe it is very much a wintering bird as Fig 5 shows, with numbers not really building up appreciably until November, and then birds leaving rapidly at the end of February and beginning of March for their breeding areas.

Fig 5: Avocet mean monthly counts over the period 1970 to 2016



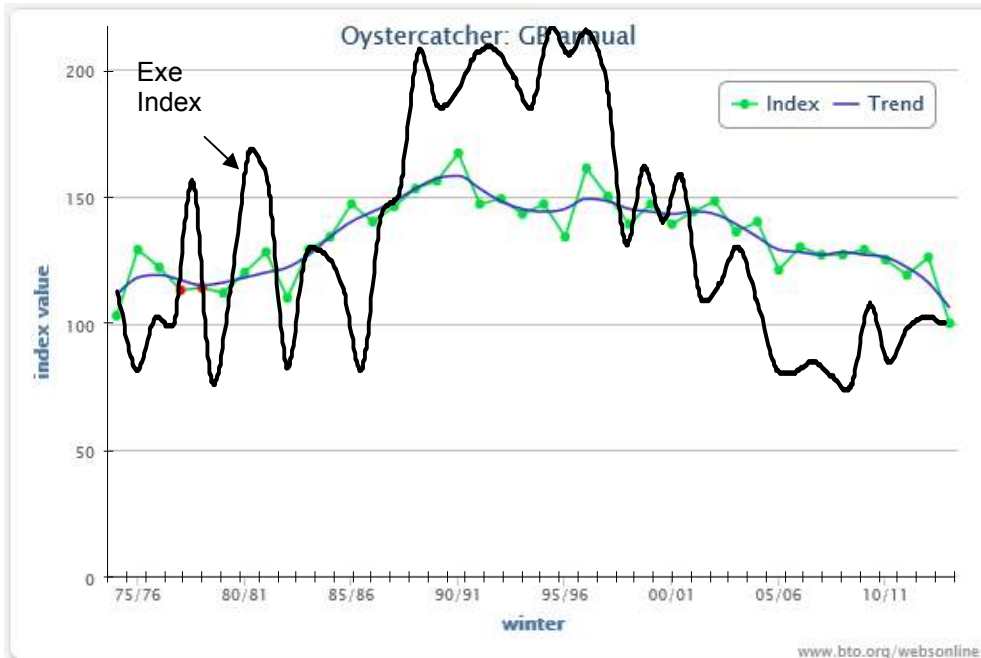
Having dealt with a fairly straightforward species on the Exe, we turned to **Oystercatchers**, the trends for which have posed some puzzling questions. On the Exe there was an abundant wintering population in the 1980s, but through the 1990s and early 2000s numbers fell steeply. Since 2010 there has been something of a recovery, but the species is still well below the levels for earlier decades. (Fig 6)

Fig 6: WeBS Trends for Oystercatcher on the Exe - 1970 - 2015



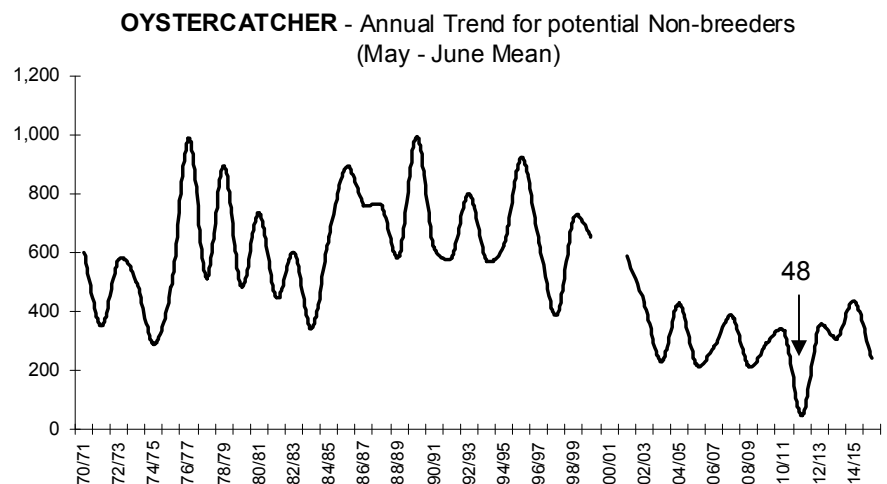
These ups and downs of Oystercatcher numbers on the Exe have been similar to those nationally. However, looked at more closely, the changes have been more volatile, and in particular the rate of decline on the Exe from the early 1990s was much steeper. (Fig 7) This inconsistency has resulted in the Oystercatchers on the Exe being designated as a WeBS "Alert" species, and following on from this there has been more detailed investigation of the potential reasons for this decline. I'm not sure a clear answer has emerged and the assessment of what is happening to the species is still on-going.

Fig 7: Oystercatcher : National Index overlaid with Exe Index



It is certainly the case that the number of birds present in May and June on the estuary, which largely involves first year birds that do not breed, also declined worryingly during the 1990 and 2000 decades. Numbers bottomed out at an all time low of less than 50 birds in May and June 2012. Did this indicate a breeding season issue perhaps to do with poor productivity, or poor survival of inexperienced young birds? Was it to do with limited food resources on the estuary? Such an apparent reduction year on year in new recruits to the population must surely have some impact on the total numbers.

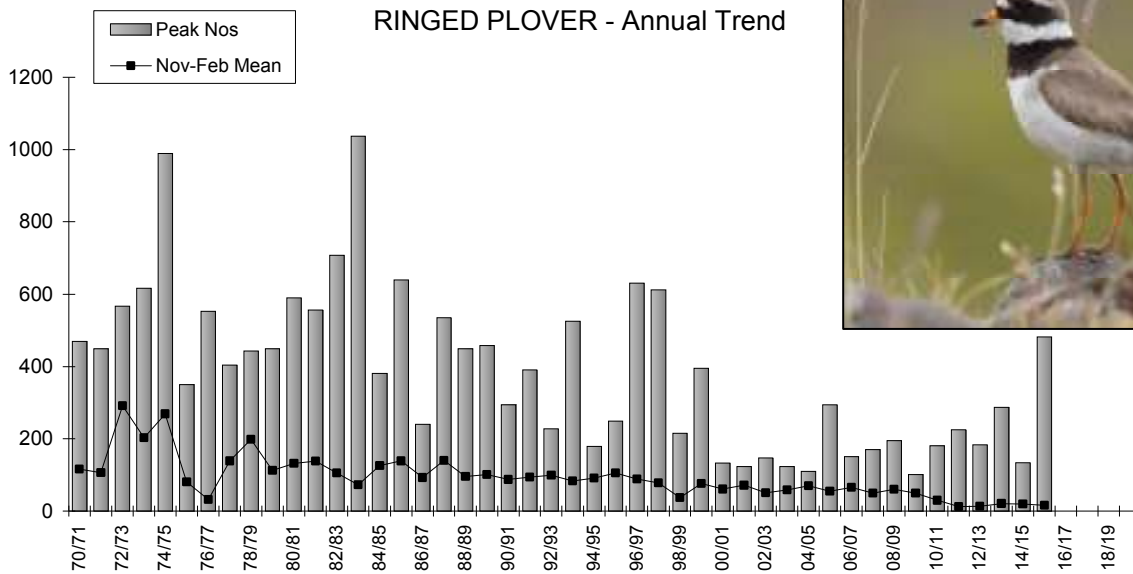
Fig 8: Oystercatcher : May-June means, largely representing non-breeding birds in their 1st year



There was some discussion regarding evidence that Oystercatchers are now apparently much more likely to suffer cleptoparasitism - which basically means that when the birds are feeding, the shellfish they have diligently struggled to extract from their shells are then stolen by other birds - mainly crows and gulls. Not a great situation. Fortunately May/June numbers have rallied somewhat, in line with the slight recovery in wintering numbers, but there would still seem to be cause for concern over what is happening to the species.

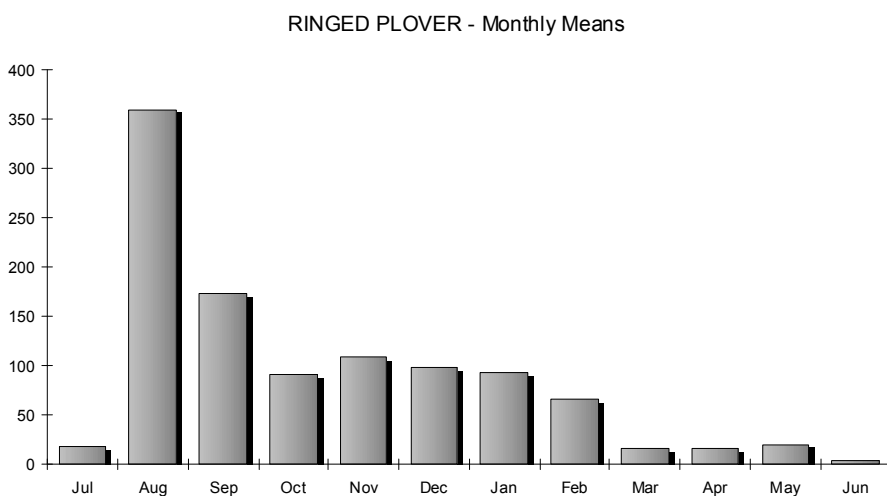
Ringed Plover are unfortunately another species which appear to be having a bad time. The wintering numbers on the Exe have declined to virtually non-existent proportions. In the 1970s and early 1980s there were over 100, sometimes around 200, throughout the winter on the estuary, whereas in recent winters you'd be lucky to find 30 birds. The decline is similar nationally, and as a result of the continuing decrease of wintering numbers, in 2015 the species was put on the Red List as a species of Conservation Concern. (Fig 9)

Fig 9: WeBS Trends for Ringed Plover on the Exe - 1970 - 2015



Whilst there are low numbers in winter, the species does have quite a significant passage through the UK, - and on the Exe this invariably occurs in August. However, it is very short lived with birds perhaps only staying a day or two, before heading on south. Not an easy situation to monitor using WeBS methodology with just one count on one day of the month, and it's often the case that peak numbers pass through on a different date from WeBS and are therefore not recorded.

Fig 10: WeBS Trends for Ringed Plover on the Exe - 1970 - 2015



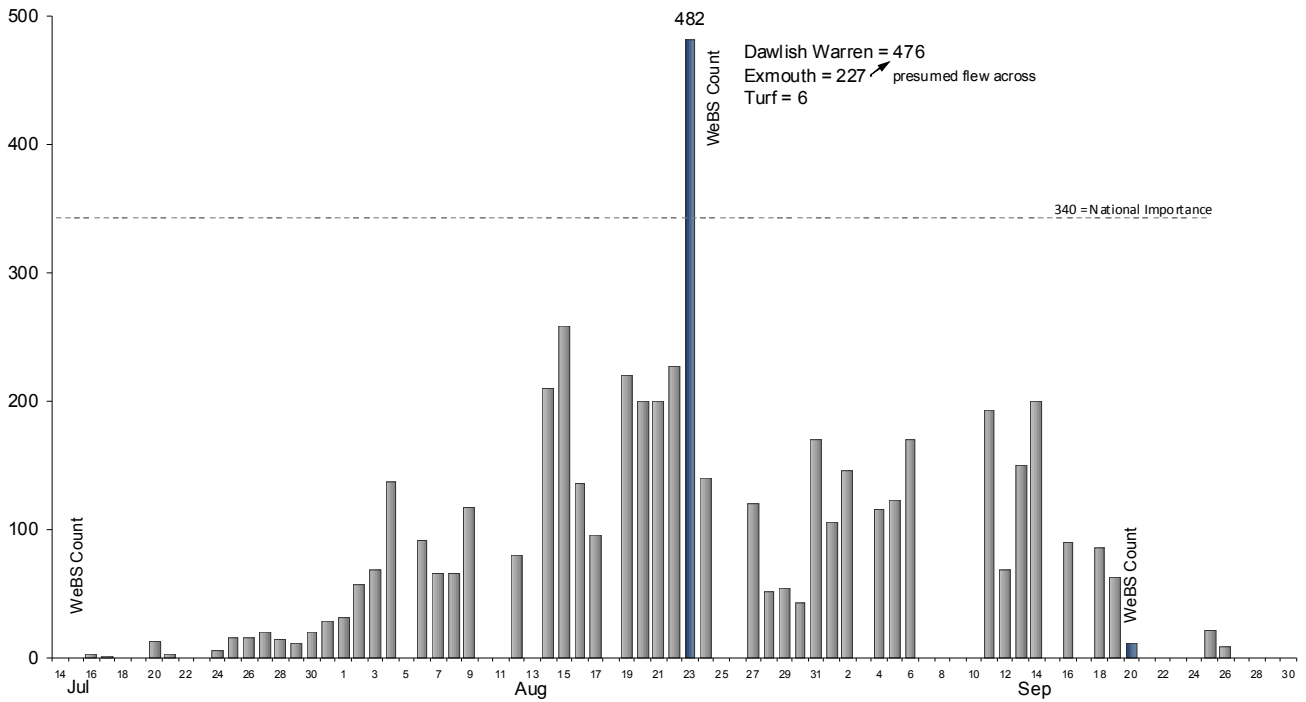
Despite this "one day snapshot" each month, over several years' passage sometimes coincides with WeBS and therefore the average pattern over a long period does show this peak. (Fig 10). However to obtain a better idea of the nature of this passage the almost daily counts from the Dawlish Warren web site provide a more detailed picture. Fig 11 shows counts at the Warren for the autumn passage in 2015, when, (surprise, surprise!) the WeBS count was on the very day of

the main peak. However in 2016 only moderate numbers were recorded on the WeBS date as the passage was later in the month and also rather prolonged with no real big peaks.

Fig 11: Detailed counts from Dawlish Warren web site for Ringed Plover on autumn passage from mid July to September 2015. WeBS counts are highlighted in blue.

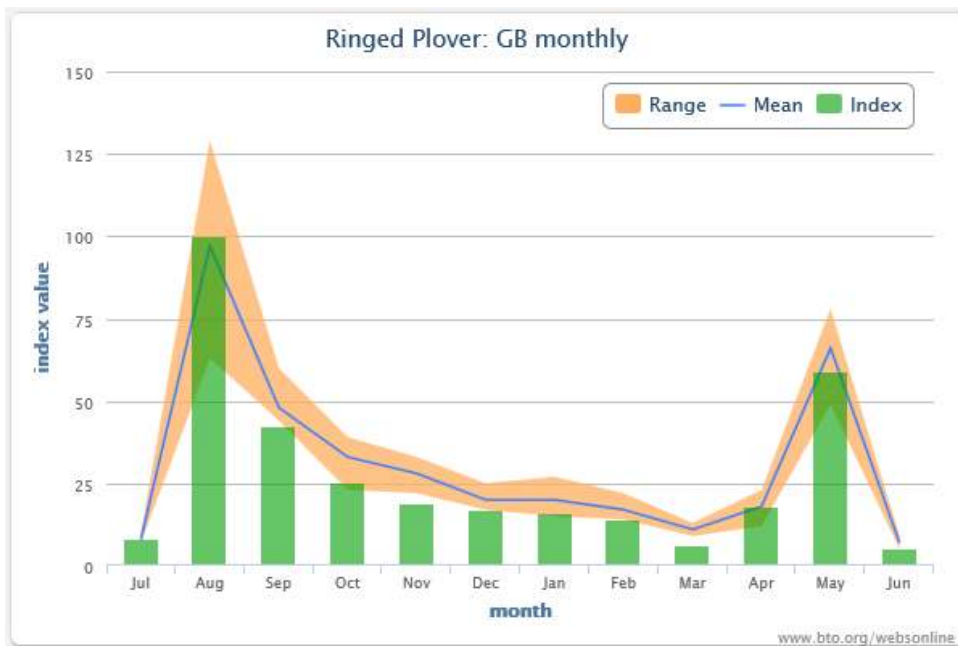
2015

Ringed Plover Passage - Dawlish Warren Counts
 Mid-July - Sept 2015
 (Source: Dawlish Warren web site - www.dawlishwarren.co.uk)



Interestingly enough though the Exe has a significant autumn peak passage (as shown in Figs 10 & 11), the return passage in spring, which is recorded during May elsewhere in Britain (Fig 12), just does not happen on the Exe. Presumably migration routes are different between spring and autumn.

Fig 12: Monthly pattern of Ringed Plover numbers in Great Britain, showing both autumn and spring migration peaks.



Golden Plover are nice to see on the Exe, but are not really a true estuary bird. They tend to prefer the marshes around the Exe, but also winter in large numbers inland across the county. Numbers and trends are often more dictated by prevailing weather conditions, rather than being population-based, with cold weather typically driving birds down off the higher moors and upland areas. Around 400 were on the estuary in the last two winters, higher than the previous 10 years, but it is perhaps difficult to interpret this in terms of what is happening to the overall population. (The wintering population in Britain is large and has been estimated at around 400,000 individuals)

Grey Plover on the other hand are very much an estuary bird outside the breeding season, rarely straying far from wet mud, where they invariably feed individually, with an apparently rather casual and sporadic approach to actually consuming anything at all. The trend on the Exe over the last two decades, and indeed nationally, has been one of unrelenting decline. Up until the mid 1990s on the Exe you could guarantee several hundred birds in winter, perhaps even reaching 4-500, whereas now counts rarely reach 200, and there are a lot fewer outside the core winter months of Nov- Jan than there used to be. (Figs 13 & 14). (Note that the estimate for wintering numbers in Britain is 43,000, - a far cry from the number of Golden Plovers)

Fig 13: WeBS Trends for Grey Plover on the Exe - 1970 - 2015

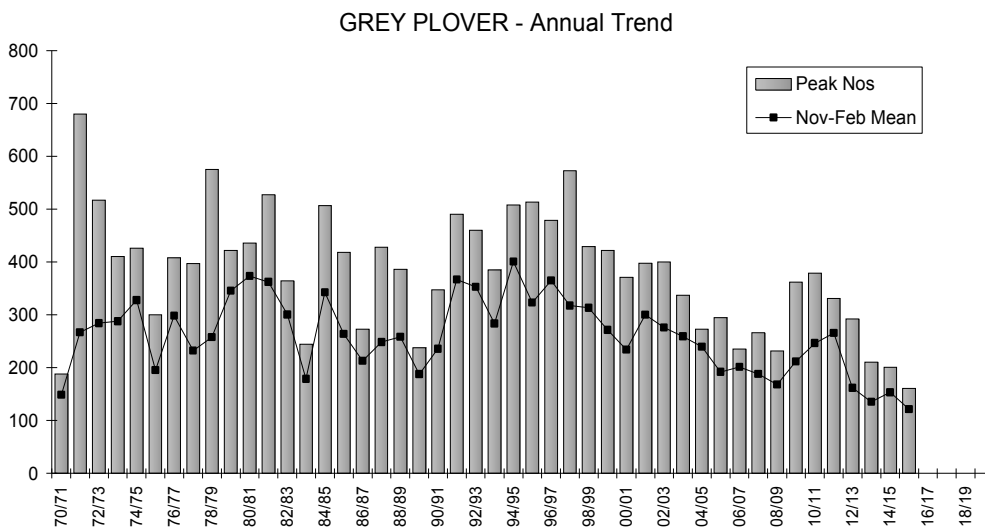


Fig 14: Grey Plover national trend 1975 - 2015

So what is happening? . . . Digging around I found an article in WeBS Annual Report for 2012/13 "Waterbird counts in The Netherlands", which describes how the number of wintering waterfowl in the Netherlands has doubled in the last 30 years with most increase in the 1990s and 2000s, - and amongst

those species that have increased is Grey Plover. The large wetland areas of the Netherlands now apparently support some five million waterbirds, and for a good proportion of species it is believed that their increase is due to milder winters. "Our" Grey Plover breed way up in the high arctic east of Scandinavia, so it is perhaps not surprising that they don't fly further west for the winter than they need to. The Exe, stuck out over to the west of Britain, is currently unlikely to be the prime target for wintering birds. Also, for the same reason (ie there are probably not many wintering birds west of us) the monthly pattern of occurrence shows no trace of passage though the estuary in the spring or autumn, though there is some evidence of this on UK estuaries in the east (Fig 15). Fig 16 shows a map of breeding areas, with my suggested main routes through Europe, which are essentially aligned SW to NE.

Fig 15: Grey Plover monthly pattern of abundance nationally, with Exe data (in grey) overlaid; the latter showing no indication of spring or autumn passage

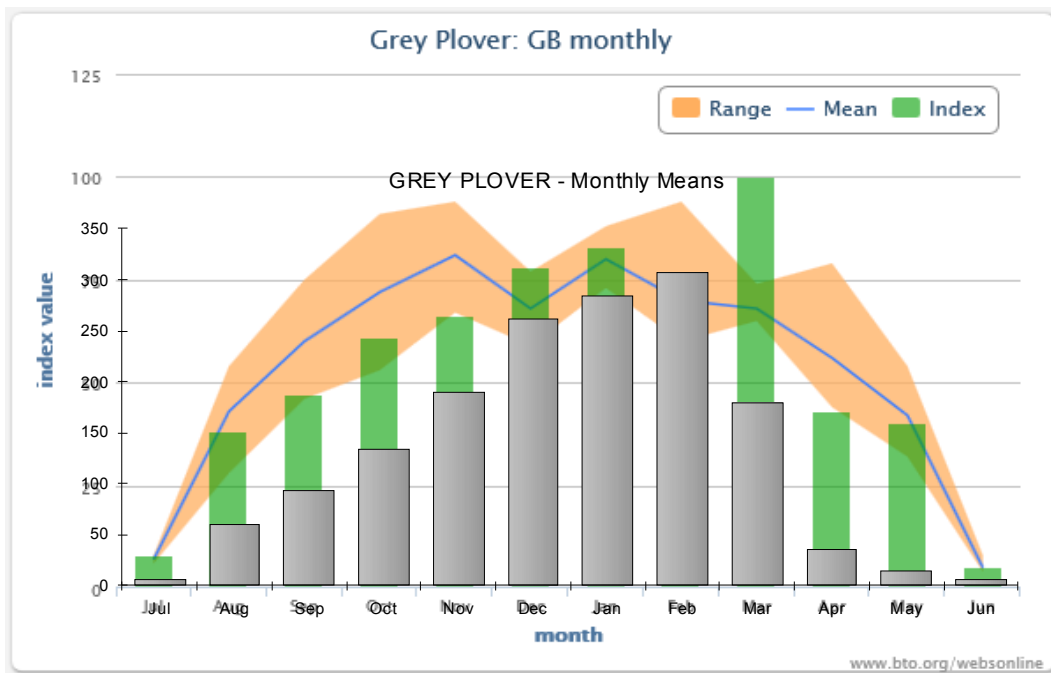
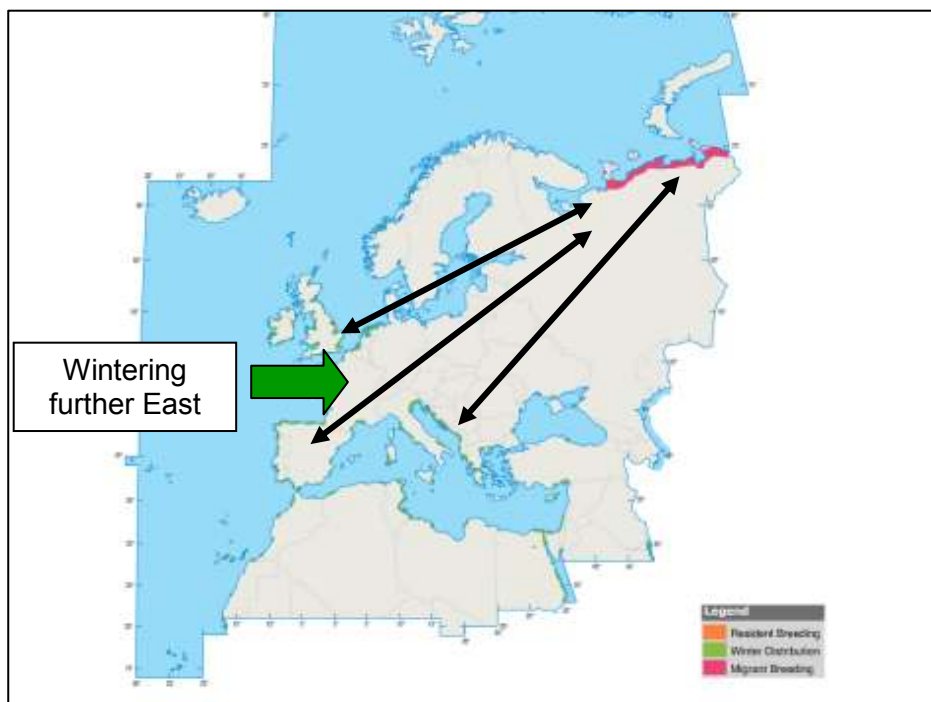


Fig 16: Grey Plover wintering and breeding areas, with probable migration directions



Sanderling are another species which has declined on the Exe as a wintering species. They are very much a bird of the tide edge in sandy areas, and as such are usually mainly recorded from the lower estuary and Dawlish Warren in particular. Fig 17 shows numbers on the Exe over the past 45 years, with the black line graph showing their inexorable decline as a wintering bird, to numbers which now rarely exceed 20 most winters. Nationally they have moved in the opposite direction with a steady increase (Fig 18); a discrepancy for which I've not been able to find an explanation. (Any suggestions gratefully received).

Fig 17: WeBS Trends for Sanderling on the Exe - 1970 - 2015

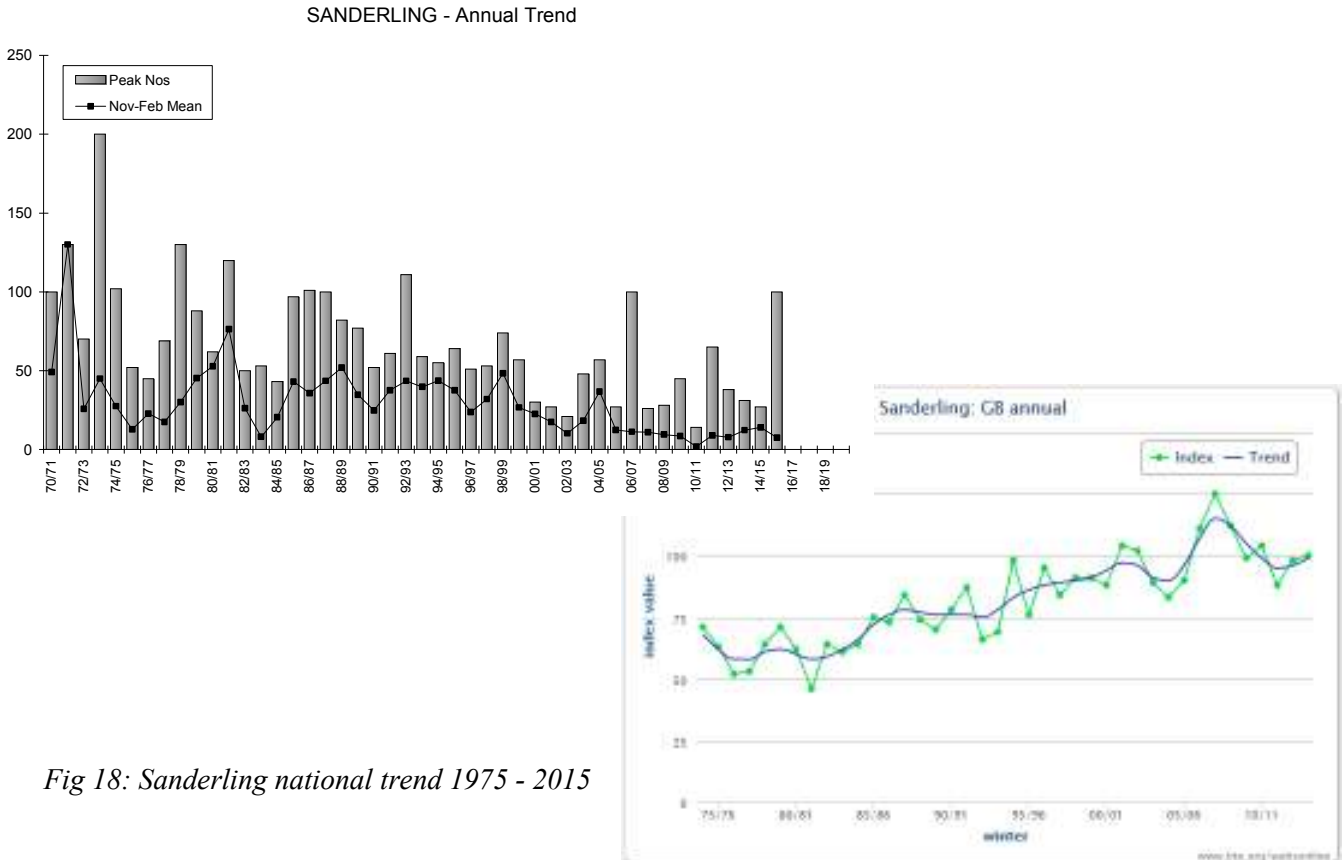
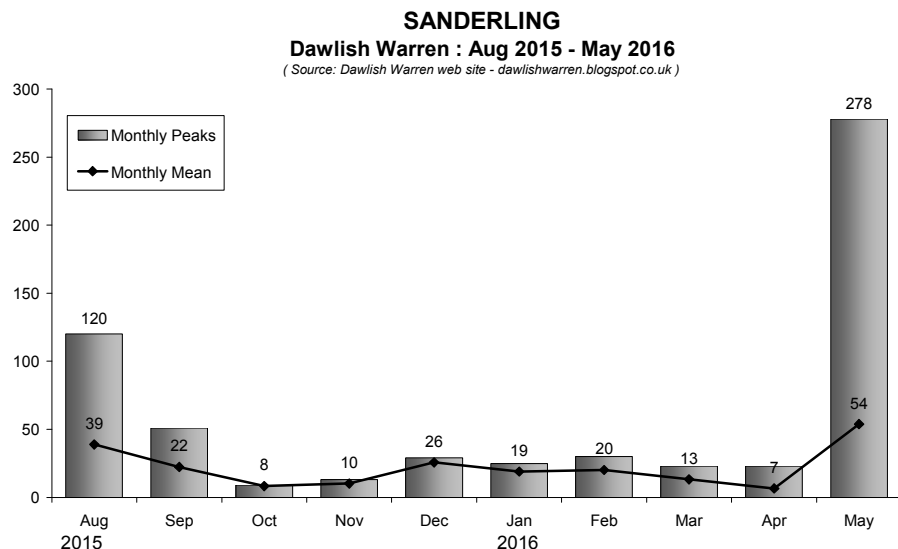


Fig 18: Sanderling national trend 1975 - 2015

With such low numbers it becomes more and more difficult to pick up the handful of birds that may be present on the estuary on a typical WeBS count amongst all the other small waders. To check the validity of WeBS numbers over the winter in more detail I did another extract from the day to day records on the Dawlish Warren web site for last winter. But even these more detailed and comprehensive counts still show that there are not many birds wintering on the estuary at the moment (Fig 19)

Fig 19 :Sanderling : Monthly means and peaks from Dawlish Warren daily log (Aug 2015-May 2016)

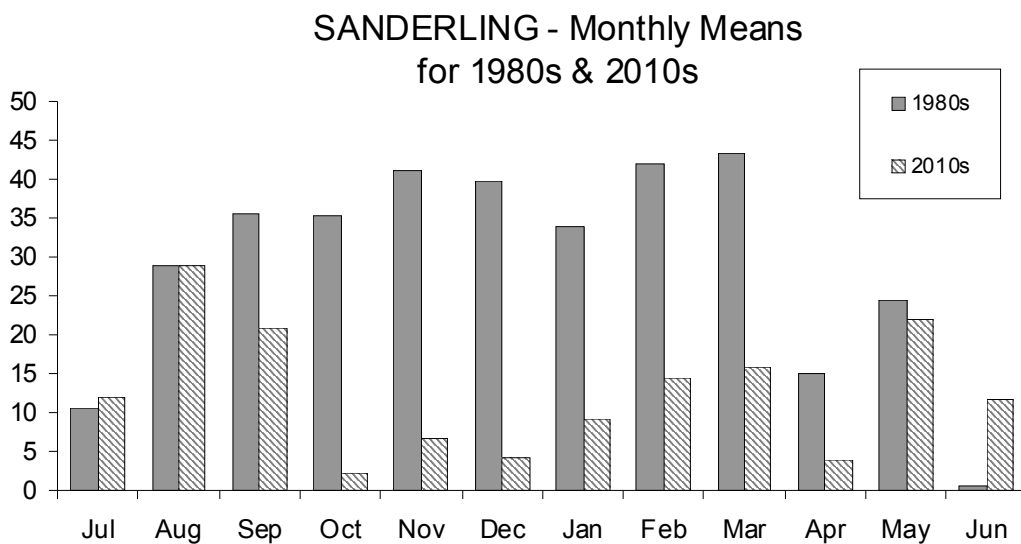


Looking beyond wintering numbers on this graph and on Fig 17, it is immediately obvious that there are some really significant peaks on both charts, and these relate to the autumn and spring passage of birds which winter further south - (as far as the west coast of Africa). Like Ringed Plover, they move through quite quickly often only staying a day or two, and an average of 54 in May against a peak of 278 illustrates this feature well - (and again like Ringed Plover a peak can be missed on the actual day of a WeBS count).

So we are seeing Sanderling largely as a passage bird, with just a handful wintering on the estuary. But it's not always been like this. Only three decades ago the passages of these birds was virtually obscured by the intervening presence of wintering birds (Fig 20). Something has caused this change!



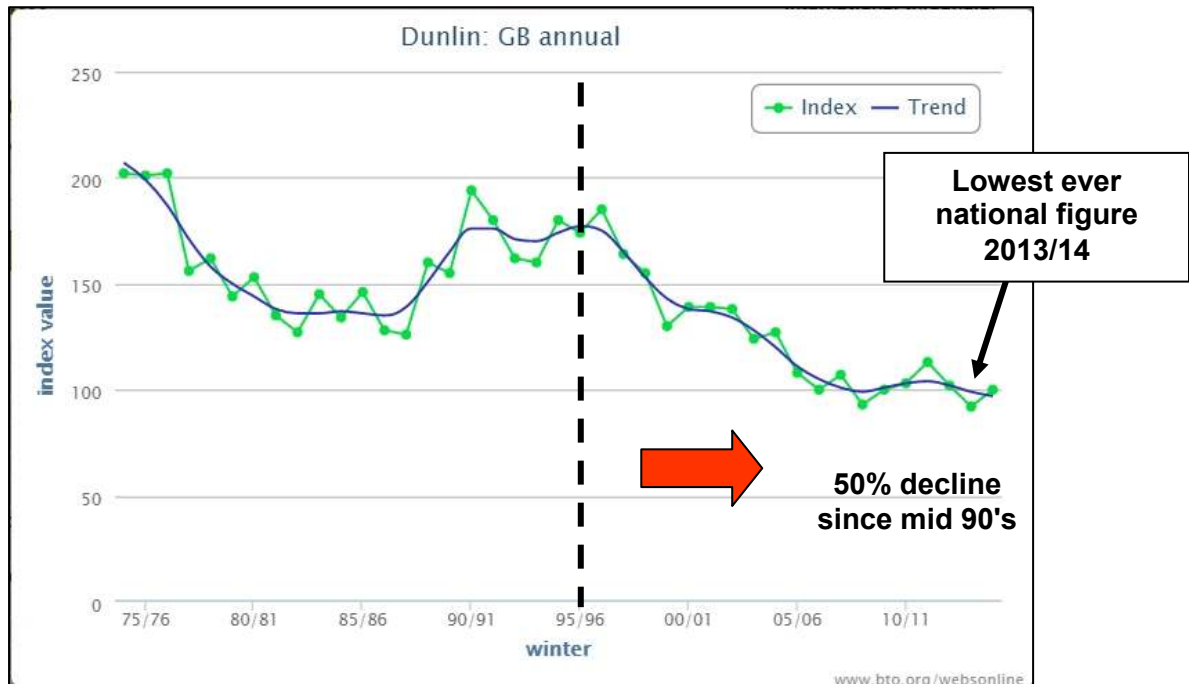
Fig 20: Sanderling : Monthly means on the Exe in the 1980s and since 2010 - showing the change in the pattern of usage of the estuary.



Moving from Sanderling to one of their close relatives, the **Dunlin**, we are immediately dealing with a much more numerous species, but one which nevertheless has suffered decline over recent years and also presents a rather complex pattern of movement through the Exe.

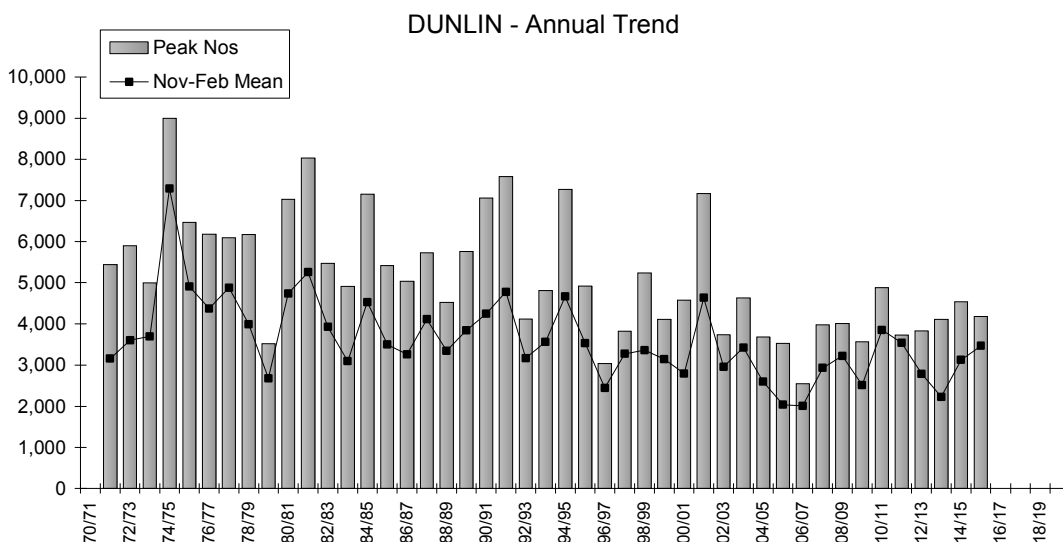
Numbers nationally have seriously declined with a 50% reduction in wintering numbers since the mid-1990s, and an all time low in 2014 (Fig 21).

Fig 21: Dunlin national trend 1975 - 2015



On the Exe there has certainly been a general downward trend, but nowhere near as steep as the national picture, and in recent winters there has actually been some degree of stabilisation in numbers, and perhaps even a small upturn. (Fig 22)

Fig 22: WeBS Trends for Dunlin on the Exe - 1970 - 2015



Part of this difference may be explained by the fact that the Exe is in the middle of a complex pattern of movements between breeding and wintering areas involving three different races of the species. The Dunlin wintering on our estuaries are largely from the race *Calidris alpina alpina*, and they mainly breed to the north east in Scandinavia and northern Asia. There is a race *Calidris alpina arctica* that winters in Africa and breeds in Greenland that moves through the UK in spring and autumn. The *Calidris alpina schinzii* race also winters in Africa but this is the race that breeds in the UK, but mainly in Iceland, so most of this race similarly moves through on passage.

At the meeting I then subjected everyone to maps, charts and PowerPoint whizzy arrows and objects zooming about all over the place to try and present the various patterns of movement. However, I'm not going to attempt this here, but suffice it to say that at the meeting I think I sufficiently bewildered everyone to the extent that they certainly realised that looking at a flock of Dunlin on the Exe was not all that straightforward. You are actually seeing just one snapshot in time of a potentially dynamic and complicated pattern. There was some discussion as to whether the different races could be readily recognised on the estuary, - but the answer is that if they are in winter plumage, they all look very much the same.

If you want to see a *schinzii* race Dunlin, the most reliable method is to head up on to the high blanket bogs on northern Dartmoor in May or June where the 20 or so pairs of nesting Dunlin form the most southerly breeding population of this species in the world!]



Dunlin breeding habitat on Winney's Down and one of the breeding *schinzii* birds (all the way from Africa) that was occupying the site in 2014.

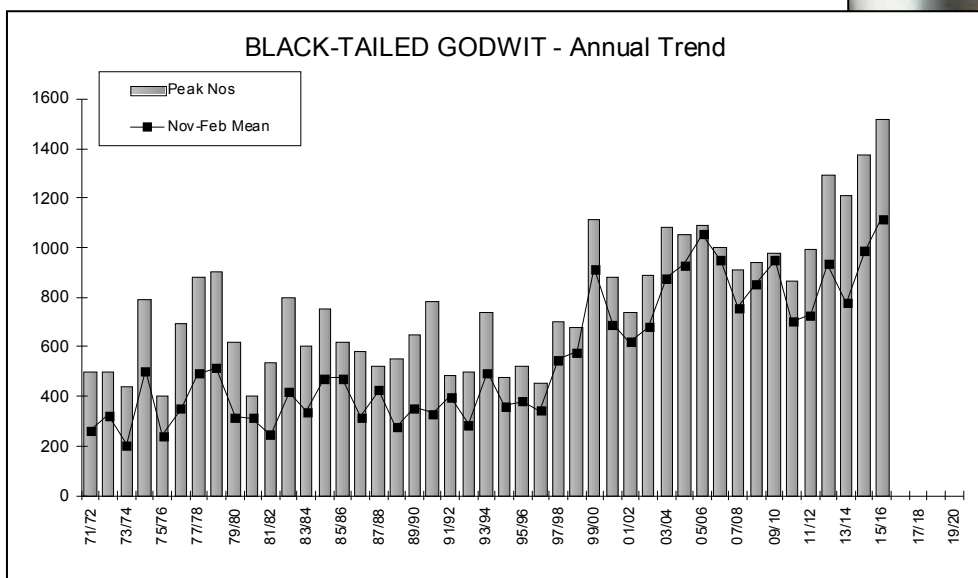
So what about a bit of a success story now . . .

Black-tailed Godwits on the Exe, as well as nationally, have gone from strength to strength since the mid 1990s, and on the Exe now regularly exceed 1,000 wintering birds.

As discussed at previous meetings the increase is all to do with the success of the Icelandic breeding race (*Limosa limosa islandica*), which is the race that winters on our estuaries. Thanks to climate change the north of Iceland is no longer locked in the grip of sea ice and severe cold conditions in the spring, and this has effectively opened up extensive areas of valley fjords and coastal lowlands for nesting birds. (Fig 23)



Fig 23: WeBS Trends for Black-tailed Godwits on the Exe - 1970 - 2015

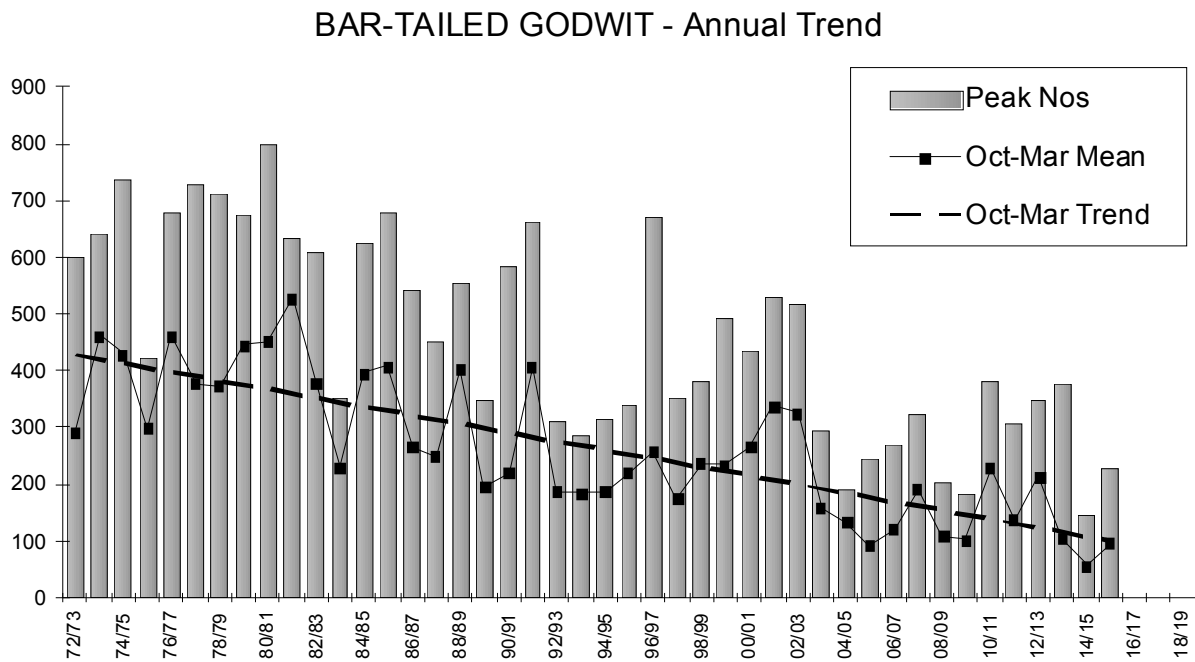


A Godwit chick a few days old in Iceland; colour ringed to follow its fortunes when it heads over to Britain -(and maybe even to the Exe)

So, sounds like a success story . . . but there's sting in the tail. Despite evidence in the UK of a burgeoning population full of promise for the future, it may come as a surprise that Black-tailed Godwits are Red Listed as a species of conservation concern. The reason for this is again linked with different races of the species. Though the race of Black-tailed Godwits which winter in Britain (*Limosa limosa islandica*) are doing well, the nominate race (*Limosa limosa limosa*) which winters down as far as Africa and breeds across huge swathes of land from Eastern Europe to Central Siberia (and even a few on the Ouse Washes) is in serious decline. The main reason is loss of suitable breeding habitat largely through changes in land management, particularly intensification of farming and the draining of wetlands. An increasingly familiar story unfortunately . . .

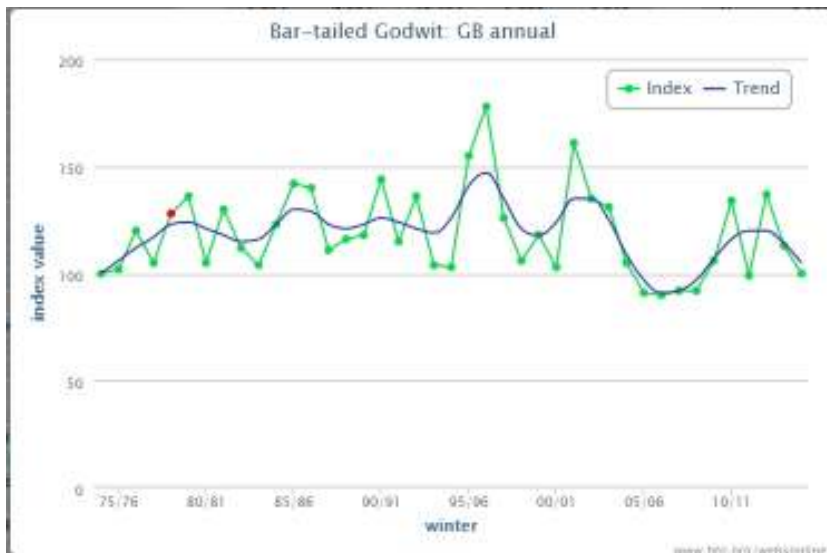
So far I guess the Waders haven't matched the Wildfowl for "good news" stories, and I'm afraid the next couple of species also introduce some negative elements. Firstly the Exe has seen a significant decline in the wintering population of **Bar-tailed Godwits**. In the 1970s and early 1980s it was not uncommon to be able to count a roosting flock at Dawlish Warren of 4-500. Now we are lucky if we ever see half that number (Fig 24)

Fig 24: WeBS Trends for Bar-tailed Godwits on the Exe - 1970 - 2015



The next thought is to compare the Exe pattern with the national trend. . . . And what do we find there? (Fig 25) Well, despite some variation, there has been very little overall change nationally throughout the Exe's period of decline. So something of a puzzle perhaps . . .

Fig 25: WeBS Trends for Bar-tailed Godwits nationally - 1975 - 2015



Now faced with an unexplained discrepancy like this, the obvious next thing to do (and this may be a useful philosophical approach for many such situations in life!) is to ask the question "So, what happens in Wales"? !!!² (See Fig 26)

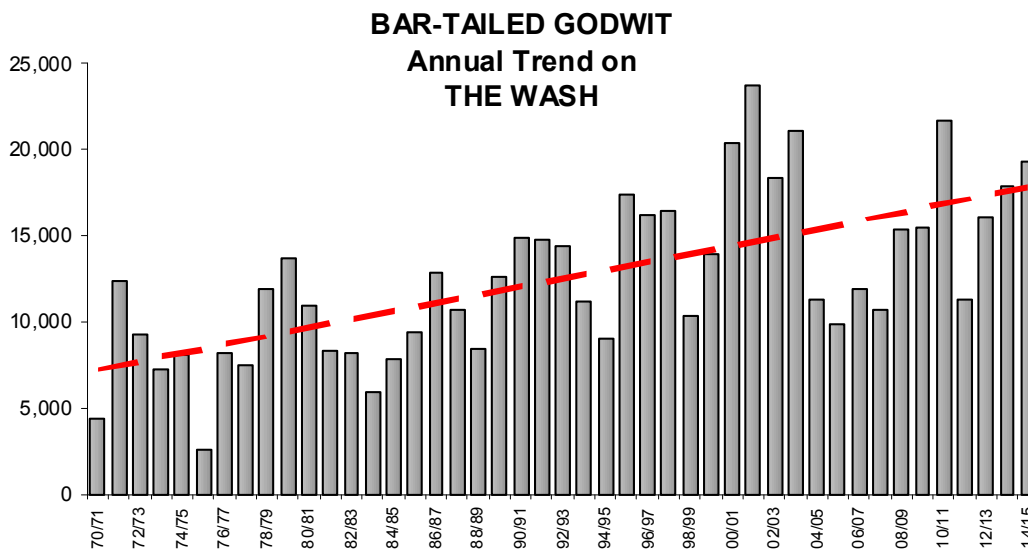
² (Asking this question may not always provide the answer but at least it gives you some thinking time!)

Fig 26: WeBS Trends for Bar-tailed Godwits in Wales - 1975 - 2015



So Fig 26 shows that Wales has a pattern very similar to the Exe, and looking at Northern Ireland, and English estuaries near Wales we find a similar trend. Now if the national picture is relatively stable, where are all the compensating increases to make up for these declines? Well, a quick look at one of the biggest WeBS sites, the Wash, provides much of the answer (Fig 27)

Fig 27: WeBS Trends for Bar-tailed Godwits on the Wash - 1970 - 2015



What this is revealing is that over the last few decades the centre of gravity of wintering Bar-Tailed Godwits has moved east, (like that of Grey Plover which similarly breed way up in the arctic north of Asia), all thanks to milder winters. This means the birds don't have to fly so far and are also nearer to their breeding grounds for the spring migration, a time when arriving on your breeding territory early has a significant advantage.

So though we may have lost many of our Exe Bar-tails, this is not necessarily all due to population decline, there is a significant element of re-distribution eastwards across the UK involved, and apparently also some movement across to the low countries.

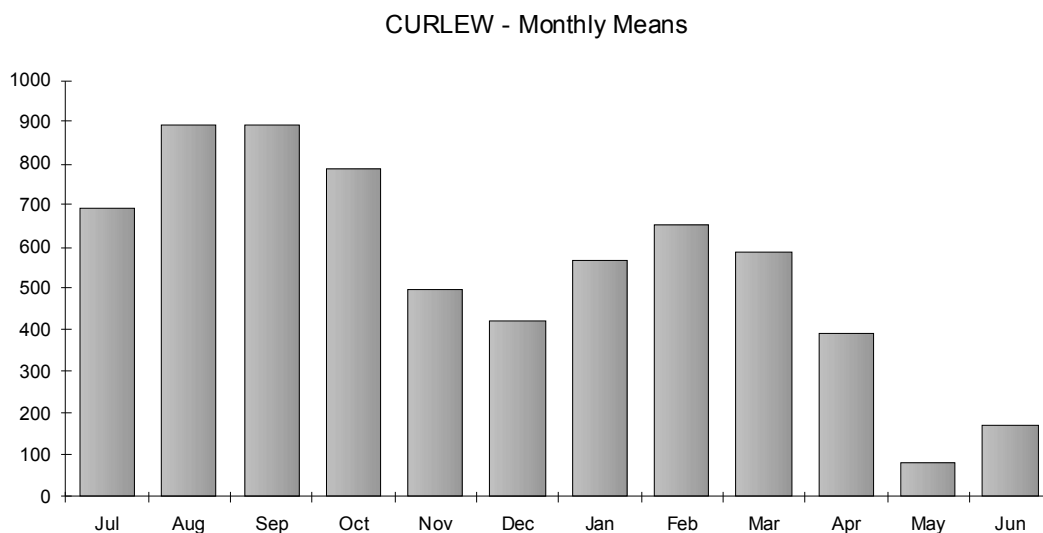
Assessing trends in the population of **Whimbrels** is not particularly easy for a bird which is essentially only recorded here on passage. Trying to obtain population estimates for a species which breeds in Iceland, Scandinavia and across Russia and Siberia and then winters in Africa, the Middle East and Australasia is a little difficult. (It's a bit like trying to get an idea of the number of vehicles in the UK by counting the comings and goings of cars at Exeter Motorway Services!). From our local perspective all we can say is that the spring and autumn peaks have generally increased over the last 3 decades, but are still very variable from year to year.

The **Curlew** is another somewhat perplexing species when looked at purely from the Exe data. Counts over the past three decades have shown considerable variability, but on average have remained reasonably stable. Nationally they have experienced a slight decline over this period.

Additionally, the pattern of monthly usage of the Exe is interesting. Fig 28 shows the average monthly pattern of occurrence on the Exe since WeBS counts started, and highlights that maximum numbers usually occur in August and September, with something of an influx again in early spring. (Again the underlying movements through the estuary that generate this pattern are probably more complicated than might be initially thought)

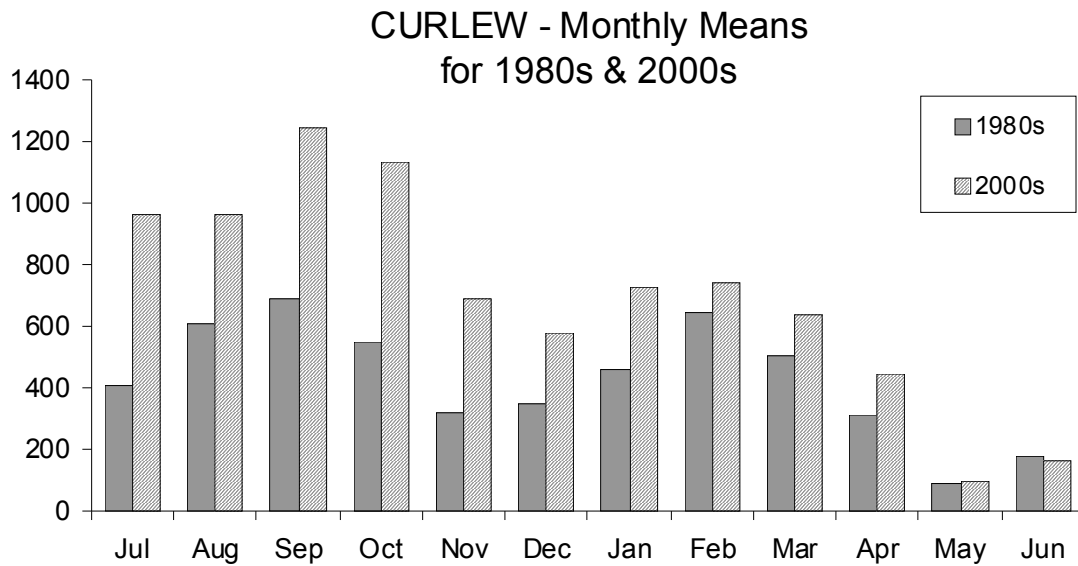


Fig 28: Curlew: Average monthly occurrence on the Exe during the period 1970 - 2015



Hidden beneath these overall monthly averages are changes over time when different decades are compared. Fig 29 shows that there was a general increase in numbers between the 1980s and 2000s, but in particular highlights that the number of birds moving through the estuary in the early autumn accounts for much of this increase. What birds were these? Where were they from? Where were they going?

Fig 29 : Curlew: Average monthly occurrence on the Exe in the 1980s decade and in the 2000s

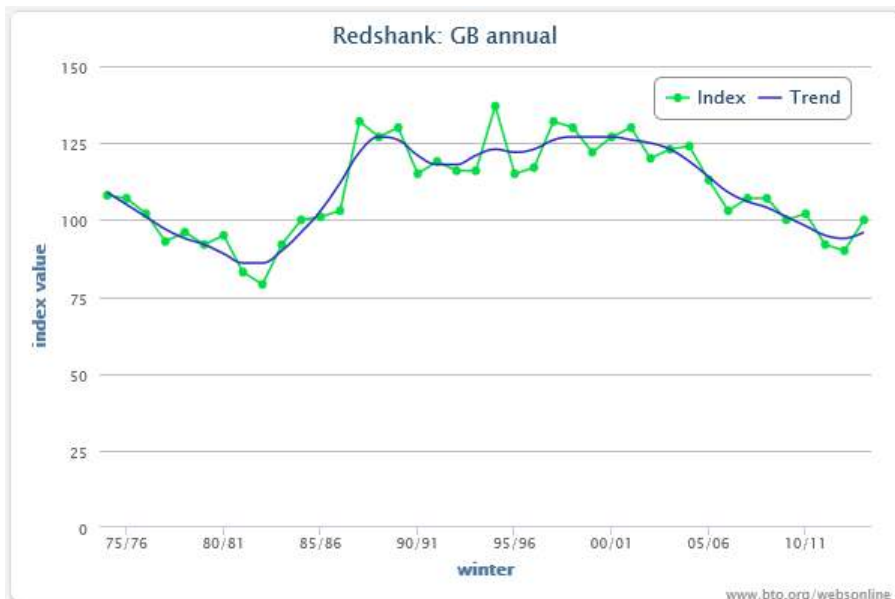


Though these figures perhaps indicate that Curlew are "doing OK", this would seem far from the truth. As a breeding bird in Britain and Ireland the picture is very different. An article in British Birds (*D.Brown et al 2015*) suggests that "Through its Near Threatened global status and the rapid decline of the UK's breeding population, and bearing in mind the history of extinction among its close relatives, Curlew has been identified as the most pressing bird conservation priority in the UK".

Between 1994 and 2010 (just 16 years) England and Wales have lost more than half of their breeding Curlews, and the loss in Ireland is equally alarming, with only a few hundred pairs remaining and at the current rate of decline the real danger of extinction in a few years time. Not good

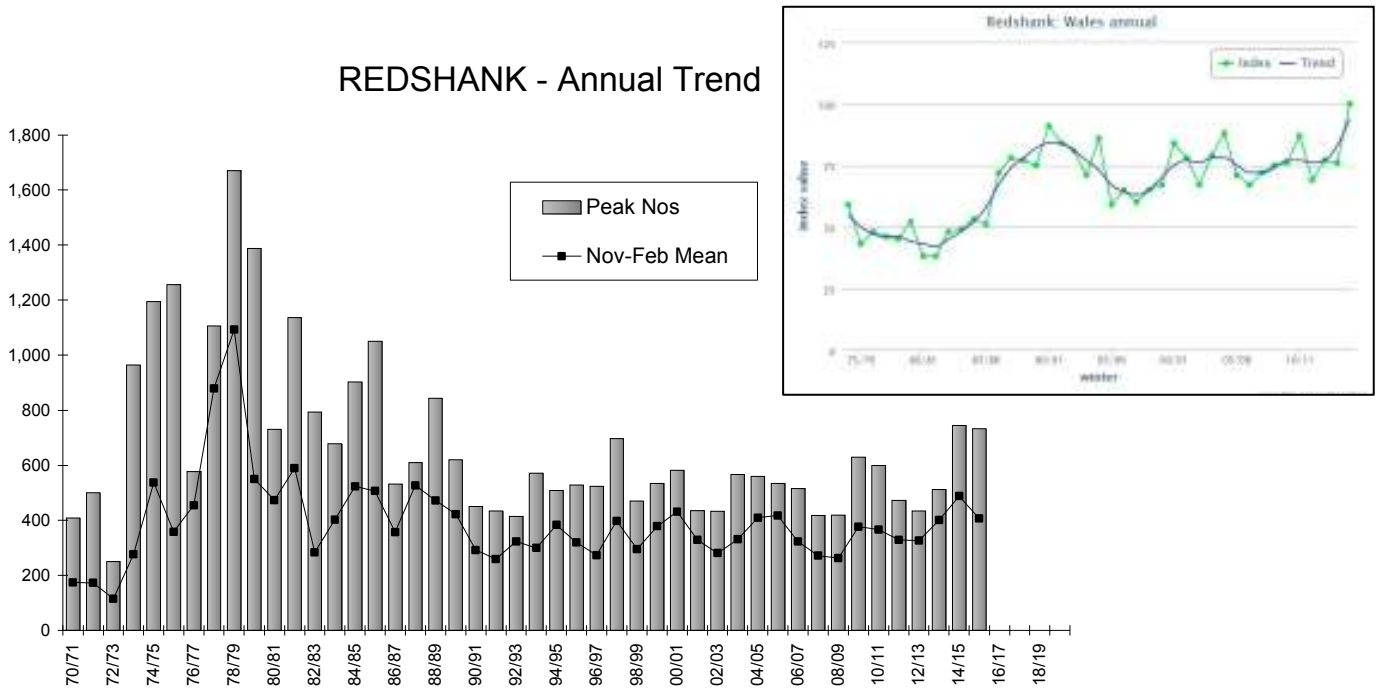
So can the "shanks" redress the balance on good and bad news? Well, **Redshank** don't look very promising nationally with 26% decline since 2002/03. (Fig 30)

Fig 30: WeBS Trends for Redshanks nationally - 1975 - 2015



However, on the Exe (ignoring the volatile 1970s) we have not seen this sort of decline since then, and though they vary from year to year there is even a suggestion of a slight upturn recently (Fig 31) - a feature which is just visible nationally. Perhaps recent mild winters have reduced mortality somewhat. (Funnily enough in this situation the question "So, what happens in Wales" provides a trend also showing a fairly stable pattern, with a slight increase recently - very like the Exe! - Fig 32).

Fig 31: WeBS Trends for Redshanks on the Exe - 1970 - 2015 Fig 32: Welsh trend 1975-2015)



I have not found explanations for these trends (though my enthusiasm for rooting around on-line to see whether I could find suggested answers was begin to wane!). However, if nothing else the different trends are presented for your consideration.

And as for **Greenshank**, well they also present a puzzlingly discrepant situation which I also haven't got to the bottom of. Peak numbers on the estuary are during autumn passage when around 50 birds may be present. Though there is some variability with these passage figures, the trend over the winter period has been much more stable and consistent since the 1970s with typically just 10-20 birds spending November to February on the estuary.

However, like Redshank, this winter trend on the Exe is again at odds with the national trend, but this time the national situation presents a picture of steady increase in the years since 1975. (Figs 33 & 34).



Again I am not able to furnish you with an explanation; . . . (and even the situation in Wales doesn't help this time!)

Fig 33: WeBS Trends for passage and wintering Greenshanks on the Exe - 1970 - 2015

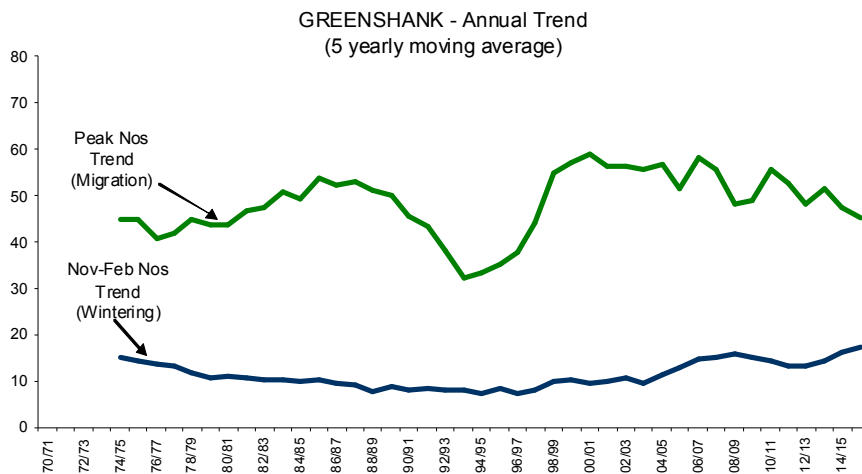


Fig 34: WeBS Trends for Greenshanks nationally - 1975 - 2015

Finally, we turn(!) to **Turnstone**, - and I'm afraid they can't pull the fortunes of waders up to out-compete the wildfowl for good news stories. However, the species is not well represented as an estuary bird, really preferring rocky and stony shores, with a large proportion of the population occupying beaches and rocky coastlines rather than areas like the Exe.

Though there has been a national decline, the picture on the Exe is somewhat confused as the species has rather changed the way it uses the estuary. Back in the 1980s Turnstones passed through the Exe in September and October on passage in numbers sometimes reaching 5-600 birds, with a respectable spring passage often exceeding 200. Fig 35 shows the monthly averages during the 1980s clearly showing this pattern.

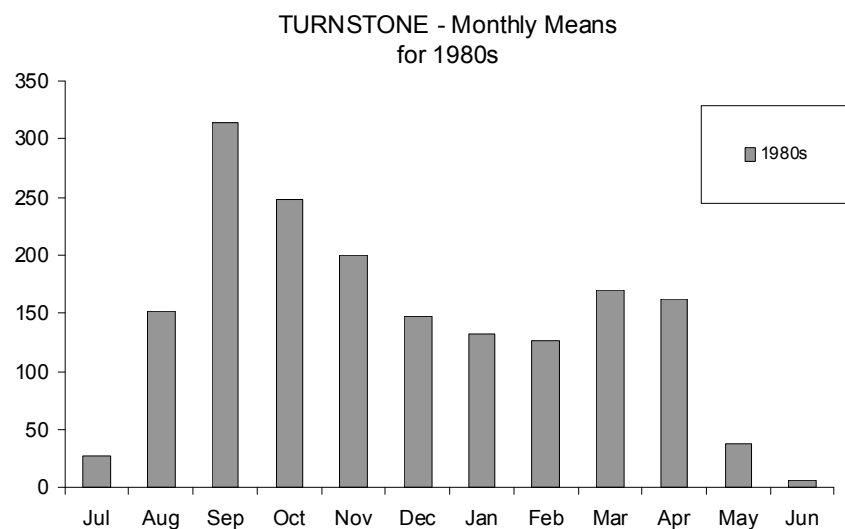
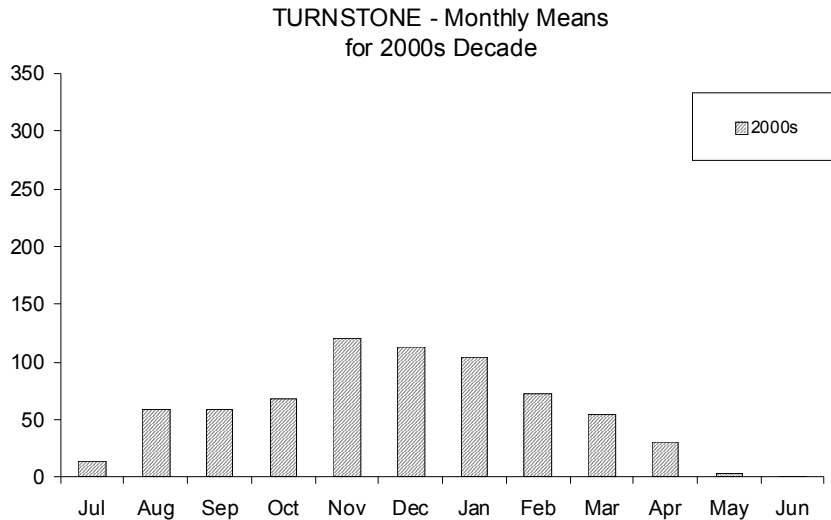


Fig 35: Monthly occurrence of Turnstone on the Exe during the 1980s decade

Fast forward to the 2000s decade, and the passage birds have completely disappeared. The pattern of usage of the estuary is now largely one of a wintering bird, and their numbers are relatively low as well. (Fig 36)

Fig 36: Monthly occurrence of Turnstone on the Exe during the 1980s decade. A largely wintering bird.



So something has changed. Have the passage birds disappeared? Are they using a different route?

But hang on a minute, what has happened since 2010? Well, Fig 37 would suggest that some degree of passage is re-establishing itself and even a few more wintering birds are present in November - (or are these birds on late passage?).



Hmmm! Will be interesting to see how this pattern develops over the next few years. And perhaps then we might even be able to explain it!

TURNSTONE - Monthly Means for 2010s Decade

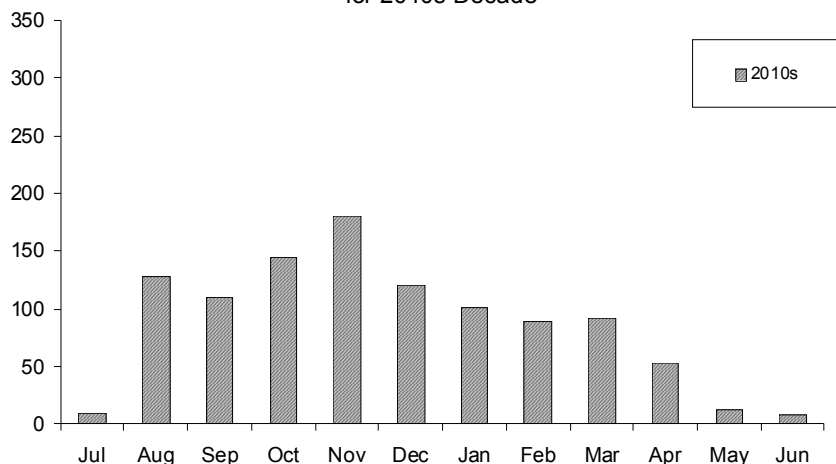


Fig 37: Monthly occurrence of Turnstone on the Exe since 2010. Is passage being re-established through the Exe?

OTHER TOPICS

Low-tide Counts: We wrapped up the presentation and discussion of counts at this point, and there was then discussion about the Low Tide Count planned for the end of November. Well, as I write, the Low Tide Count has happened and in general was felt to go off reasonably well. I've still got a load of data to enter up and to "massage" into a sensible format, so at this stage will not pre-empt any comments about the success or otherwise of the survey.

WeBS On-line Data: Much of the data relating to the national situation used in this feedback was derived from the WeBS web site for numbers and trends as part of the annual reports.

<http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/webs/publications/webs-annual-report/numbers-trends>

Other "Interesting" Sources: Having just attended the Annual BTO Conference at Swanwick, (which was very good, interesting and stimulating), and amongst lots of other people I met Graham Appleton who drew my attention to his web site which draws together the latest "stuff" about waders. You can find it on <https://wadertales.wordpress.com/> and perhaps peruse any articles that look interesting.

Count Dates for 2017: Penny reported that there had been some difficulty in obtaining advance copies of the tide tables for the Exe for 2017, but that hopefully they would be available soon and dates for 2017 counts would be identified.

In fact since then dates for January and February have been selected:

22nd January at 12:00
19th February at 09:55

. . . and the rest of the year should be with you shortly.

Gull Count: On the basis of the above dates I am planning to arrange the (eagerly awaited) annual gull count for the weekend of 7th/8th January, with the intention of carrying it out on the afternoon of Saturday 7th, unless the weather is a problem and we need to fall back to Sunday 8th. I will send out details of this and requests for assistance separately. Watch this space!

Penny rounded off the meeting with thanks to everyone, in particular to all the Exe Observers, to Elisabeth as the "catering department" but also in her capacity of providing most of the photographs used in the presentation, and to Gavin and Kevin for facilitating usage of the RSPB offices.

I hope that this gives those that were unable to attend reasonably comprehensive feedback on what was covered at the meeting - (albeit rather verbosely reported on my part!). And for those of you that were at the meeting will provide you with a reference-able set of data for all the facts, figures and graphs thrown at you at the time.

I'd like to reiterate Penny's thanks to everyone for all their efforts each month, and I hope that this feedback helps to provide some perspective to you on how important each of your counts on the Exe is in contributing to the bigger picture of what is happening to all our waders and wildfowl, nationally and internationally. Hope all goes well with the forthcoming counts through this winter,

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