

14th February 2024

Curlews are back

The first flock of the season was seen by one of our surveyors, on 2nd February, flying over towards Pennypot Lane. We're not sure where these birds have settled. Previously they have settled in fields on high spots around the project area. The usual sites for them to gather when they return to breed have been Pennypot Lane, Meagill Lane, Four Lane Ends and Foulshaw Lane. There are probably other places, so if you see a gathering of curlews in a field at this time of year, please let us know where.

This video taken by Jason Drewery shows curlews gathering over Heyshaw Moor on 21st March 2023.

darleybeckcurlews.co.uk/images/Flock21March.mp4

We've not discovered a written explanation for these gatherings, which usually appear mid-February, but assume that they allow the birds to meet up with their partners. Also, the presence of many other curlews will make these gatherings relatively safe places to roost while the birds are waiting to reunite and return to their former territories.

The first curlew seen this season in the project area was on February 7th: a single male standing in the middle of one of the fields. He remained there for a few hours before disappearing. Then on 12th February, a male was seen in a different field, standing near last year's nest site. He was seen later, in an adjacent field in the same territory. The first curlew usually appear on their former territories on 14th February, so this bird may be the first of many.

By mid-March most of the territories should have been reoccupied. The birds spend the days re-establishing their ownership and defending them from encroachment by their neighbours. At this stage, they fly off each night, to roost at the gathering areas and return at the first light of dawn to resume their territorial battles. Both the male and female often fly in while performing territorial song flights, although the female's display is rarely as ostentatious as the male's.

The females usually spend the day feeding on their territory while the males spend much of their time in the air, driving away neighbouring males or performing territorial song flights. A female feeding in a field, indicates that the field may be part of the pair's territory and the presence of the pair feeding together in the field would confirm this. Because the males are more mobile than the females, a male on his own cannot be taken to indicate much.

Recent studies of adult curlews fitted with GPS recorders have shown that curlew territories often follow man-made boundaries such as walls and fences. In the absence of an obvious boundary between two territories the birds will often draw a mental boundary down the middle of a field. This may account for the initially

confusing observation, when trying to sort out the territories, of two pairs feeding in the same field.

A study reported by Rachel Taylor from the BTO, at a recent Curlew Action conference highlighted another cause for surveyors' confusion. After a head counting exercise they established the population of returning curlew on their study area and realised later that this proved to be an overestimate of the number of breeding curlew. 25% of the head-counted birds, mostly males, were non-breeding birds attempting to carve out their own territory amongst the established pairs.

We carried out a head counting exercise last year, plotting each sighting on the project area map. Although we found that, with imagination, the territories could be identified, the picture was very blurred, probably due to the presence of non-breeding males.

Aerial territorial aggression consists of flying at the opponent male to drive him away. We've not seen birds come into contact in these aerial battles but, on the ground, it is different: these battles commence as parallel walking, followed by running at the opponent with head, neck and beak outstretched.

If the opponent will not back off, the defender may exhibit frustration induced displacement activity, manifested by picking up bits of grass, twigs or even pieces of silage wrapping and throwing them around. If that doesn't ease the tension, the birds may finally come to blows, rising up off the ground, paddling at each other with their feet and battering with their wings. At this point, one of the birds, usually the intruder, will finally back down and fly off.

We expect to determine the number of curlew territories and their locations during the first month of surveys (March 15th-April 15th). We hope there will have been no decline in the number of territories and, in the absence of agricultural disturbance, that they will be in approximately the same places as last year. Their precise shapes and sizes will depend on the outcome of territorial battles between neighbouring or intruding males.

Our task, during the following month (April 15th- May 15th), of finding the nests should be made easier if the territories have been ascertained.