Eurasian Curlews released on the Sandringham Estate

HRH The Prince of Wales was joined by Natural England's Chair, Tony Juniper, on the Sandringham Estate today (Tuesday 27 July) to release of one of the country's most iconic threatened species – the Eurasian curlew – following an innovative Natural England-led partnership project to boost populations in the East of England.

The curlew is Europe's largest wading bird and is now red-listed, meaning it is of the highest conservation priority, needing urgent action. The UK is home to roughly a quarter of the global breeding population of curlew – some 58,500 pairs – but the species has suffered very significant declines since the 1970s due to loss of habitat and predation, with lowland England experiencing some of the most severe declines.

The project collected 147 eggs from airfields, where nesting curlew presented a serious risk to air safety. 106 were transported to a new purpose built rearing facility at Pensthorpe Conservation Trust (PCT) in Norfolk, with 41 taken by the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT) for a project in Dartmoor. The experts at PCT and WWT used their skills to ensure as many as the eggs as possible hatched into chicks, and were reared to fledging age to be released.

The partnership project with the Defence Infrastructure Organisation and the Royal Air Force collected eggs at a total of eight military and civilian airfields across England, rearing the birds so they are ready for release into the right habitats for them to thrive. Over 80 chicks are now available for release at the two Norfolk release sites; Sandringham Estate and Wild Ken Hill.

The releases aim to expand an existing breeding population of curlew in Breckland, creating a new curlew nature recovery network. Some of the birds have been fitted with GPS or radio tags by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), so we can continue to monitor their progress after they are released, gathering information on their dispersal, habitat use and survival.

Natural England Chair, Tony Juniper said:

> Curlews have suffered significant declines over the past 40 years and their plight now presents one of England's most pressing conservation challenges. A range of actions will be needed to restore these wonderful birds and we hope that the translocation of curlews at this large scale, a method that has never been tried before, will make a real difference to the population in the east of England.
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> Today's release on the Sandringham Estate marks a significant milestone for the recovery of this iconic bird. We're proud to be

> leading such an innovative project, which will not only improve the prospects of curlew in Norfolk, but will help inform action to recover curlew across England. It is a fine example of the kinds of partnerships that will be needed to achieve nature recovery more widely and as such we hope will be an inspiration for much more of the same.

Airfields provide the kind of open grassland habitat preferred by ground-nesting curlew , but due to the dangers to air safety posed by curlew nests close to runways, eggs were – until Natural England's project began – destroyed to prevent the, potentially catastrophic, risk of collision between birds and aircraft.

This new project, funded by Defra and Natural England, builds on a local and national partnership already in place between Natural England, Defra, Pensthorpe Conservation Trust, the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, British Trust for Ornithology, the Sandringham Estate, the Ken Hill Estate, Defence Infrastructure Organisation, the RAF, Army Flying Service and USAF, bird control contractors such as NBC Environment and the Zoological Society of London.

Head of Species Management at Pensthorpe Conservation Trust Chrissie Kelley said:

> Conservation of the Eurasian curlew as a breeding species in England is of paramount importance. Pensthorpe Conservation Trust has reared over 80 curlew chicks to fledge this year, this has been a privilege and a significant step to safeguard and boost the wild population in the East of England.

BTO Senior Research Ecologist, Samantha Franks said:

> The varied landscapes of Breckland are a stronghold for curlew in lowland England, but even here, there are too few chicks produced each year to maintain a stable population. This unique partnership project can buy us time to understand the specific conservation measures required to improve breeding success, and for a diverse suite of stakeholders to work together to deliver these on the ground.

Dominic Buscall, Project Manager, Wild Ken Hill said:

> We're delighted to be involved in this vital national effort to recover one of our most beloved and threatened birds. This is a large project with many great organisations working together – our contribution at Wild Ken Hill is to provide the headstarted young curlew excellent habitat and safety from predators. We hope they

> can survive to link up with the hundreds of adult birds that usually spend the winter here.

Dr James Robinson, Director of Conservation at the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT) said:

> The rapid disappearance of curlew from southern England is incredibly sad and a clear indication that we need to change the way we are looking after our landscapes. We are delighted to be part of this ambitious project and that WWT’s pioneering work on “headstarting” this iconic species is being used to safeguard the future of these remaining curlew breeding areas.

Inspector of Safety RAF, Air Commodore Sam Sansome said:

> To have over 140 eggs collected from RAF Stations was fantastic and to see so many of them now successfully reared and released into habitats that are safe for them, and safe for us, is fabulous. It is a real privilege to be involved in such an important conservation exercise.

Joe Hamer, Ecologist at the Defence Infrastructure Organisation said:

> With the success of the trial in 2019, it’s great to see this project being expanded with continuing success. DIO are proud to work with our partners on such an innovative project to increase the curlew population whilst also increasing flight safety.