

Saving eggs from airfields is bringing a curlew boom in the east of England

An innovative Natural England led partnership project that will boost populations of Eurasian curlew is underway in the East of England.

The project is taking eggs laid by curlew on airfields, then rearing and releasing them in the right kinds of habitats for them to thrive.

One of the country's most iconic threatened species, the curlew has suffered significant declines over the past 40 years, but the partnership project will increase numbers in the region to help the species recover.

It is the first time that the translocation of curlew from airfields has been undertaken at this scale, with 118 eggs already collected. Of these, 76 are now at Pensthorpe Natural Park where they are being incubated, hatched and reared. The rest will be reared by the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) at Slimbridge.

Curlew eggs are rescued from nests near airfield runways and hatched in incubators. Chicks are reared before being released at a number of sites

In July, they will be released at sites in Norfolk, including Wild Ken Hill and Sandringham Estate, while the Slimbridge birds will be released on Dartmoor. The releases aim to reconnect an existing population in Breckland with curlew habitat around the Norfolk coast, creating a new curlew nature recovery network.

Some of the birds will be fitted with satellite or radio tags so that the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) can monitor their progress after they are released, gathering information on their dispersal, habitat use and survival.

Working closely with the Defence Infrastructure Organisation and the Royal Air Force, staff from Natural England and the WWT have been out collecting eggs at 8 military and civil airfields across England since late April. The first chicks have now hatched at Pensthorpe Conservation Trust facilities.

Airfields provide the kind of habitat the ground nesting curlew would choose to lay eggs. However, due to the dangers to air safety posed by them nesting close to runways, eggs were – until this project began – destroyed to prevent the risk of collisions between birds and aircraft.

The 2 year project, funded by Defra and Natural England, builds on a local and national partnership already in place between numerous bodies. These include Natural England, Defra, Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, Pensthorpe Conservation 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,

the Zoological Society of London and local landowners are also involved.

It follows a successful trial in 2019, which rescued eggs from RAF airbases in the east of England and led to the release of 54 curlew chicks at WWT Slimbridge Wetland Centre in Gloucestershire.

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 66,000 pairs. However, the species has suffered very significant declines since the 1970s due to loss of habitat and predation, and numbers have dropped by about half in the past 20 years.

Earlier this week, the Environment Secretary, George Eustice, announced the establishment of an England Species Reintroduction Taskforce, led by Natural England, to deliver a more ambitious approach to reintroducing species or helping their populations recover.

As well as helping the recovery of the curlew, a key aim of this project will be to assess how nature recovery networks help other priority species bounce back from population declines or be reintroduced to their former ranges.

Graham Irving, Wildlife Management Lead Adviser at Natural England, said:

Translocation of curlew at this scale has never been undertaken and will make a real difference to the population of this iconic bird in the east of England.

We're proud to be leading such an innovative project which will not only improve the prospects of curlew, but will inform action to help re-establish populations of other species too.

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

We are thrilled to be playing a part in this incredible journey in aiding the recovery of the curlew. Breeding curlew have been lost across large areas of lowland habitat and are just clinging on in a few isolated areas.

In 2018 just 6 curlew chicks were reported to have fledged across the whole of southern England. Against this trend, being able to save 118 eggs from destruction, to be used for captive rearing and release is a remarkable achievement.

Eric Heath, Senior Project Manager for Species Recovery from the Wildfowl and 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.

Curlews can live for almost 20 years but their current breeding success is almost negligible due in large part to the disappearance of the habitat they need to live and breed. This means at some point they are going to disappear.

By rearing and releasing these chicks, coupled with changes to the management of the habitat where the chicks are released to enable them to thrive, we at WWT along with our partners hope to safeguard the future of these remaining curlew breeding areas.

Inspector of Safety RAF, Air Commodore Sam Sansome said:

This is a great example of the RAF going above and beyond, finding solutions that prove Flight Safety and Defence Operations can go hand in hand with protecting our environment.

It is brilliant what can be achieved when our teams work together with a common goal. We all learnt so much from the 2019 trial and with the help of our partners we have now seen the project go from strength to strength.

I'm really proud of its success and think it reflects the RAF's commitment to delivering for the environment.

Joe Hamer, Ecologist at the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, said:

The defence estate has been described as the most important estate for wildlife in the UK and it is playing a key role in nature recovery within this country. Defence Infrastructure Organisation has provided funding for the Curlew Headstarting project as part of its Conservation Stewardship Fund programme.

It is fantastic to see so many eggs rescued, helping to boost numbers of rare and endangered curlews, whilst at the same time reducing the risk of aircraft bird strikes and increasing flight safety. We will continue to work with our partners to increase the curlew population in the UK through this and other initiatives.