

Winter Golden Plovers - Survey Results

The last National survey of wintering Golden Plovers, in 1977/78, showed that Cumbria was among the top four counties in Britain with high numbers during November - January, and a maximum of 13,300 birds counted in November 1977. Since then, no further surveys have been carried out, and the Bird Club Council decided to do a repeat survey in 1990/91, with three county-wide counts on 9/10 November, 7/8 December 1990, and 18/19 January 1991. Organisers were appointed to cover both coastal and inland areas, and despite atrocious weather conditions on 9/10 November, good coverage was obtained.

Total numbers for the three counts compared with the 1977/8 figures were as follows:

	November	December	January
1991/92	3,793	2,626	3,581
1977/78	13,300	9,600	6,500

Percentages of total numbers found on each habitat were:

%	Inter-tidal	Pasture	Winter cereal
November	30.7	59.2	10.1
December	43.8	54.9	1.3
January	94.3	5.7	0.0

Of those recorded on pasture in November, 3.9% were on temporary grass leys, and the remainder on permanent pasture.

Where observers recorded activity, all birds seen on cereal fields and pastures were feeding, with the exception of one flock on pasture. On inter-tidal habitat, both roosting and feeding were observed, depending on the tidal cycle.

The distribution in all three months was largely coastal, with 83.9%, 97.1% and 94.4% of all birds recorded in November, December and January respectively, being on, or within 5km of, the coast.

The largest single flock was 2,100 on Burgh Marsh in January, but other notable flocks were on and around Walney in all three months (over 600 birds), and just north of Workington in December (880 birds). The largest inland flock was of 240 birds on a playing field in Carlisle in November, but away from this site, no inland flocks of more than 80 birds were seen. Comparison with the 1977/78 counts shows a considerable reduction in numbers, but the wintering numbers of this species fluctuates considerably with the winter weather, and it is difficult to draw conclusions about long term trends.

Figures for the last five years on the South Solway (Norman Holton) suggest that overall there has been little recent change, but that numbers were very low in December with only 41 birds seen. However, there were 670 birds on Anthorn Marsh

on 22nd (Ian Kinley) which compares with an average for December over the last five years of 1441, and a maximum of 557 during the same month in 1990/91. The figure for January was higher (2793 compared with the five year average of 1901), suggesting that numbers built up rather later than usual. At Allonby the reverse was the case, with higher than usual numbers in December and a lower count than usual in January (Denis White).

With a succession of mild winters it is possible that more birds are wintering on the east coast, where numbers have been high in recent years, whilst lower numbers have been recorded on sites adjacent to the Irish Sea (Kirby *et al.* BOEE Wildfowl and Wader Counts). There seems to have been a clear move away from cereals after November onto grass and inter-tidal habitat in December, and then a shift off the grassland onto inter-tidal habitat by January. These changes may have been weather-related.

Although few conclusions can be drawn from a single series of counts, the figures do provide a baseline for any future survey, and will provide a useful interim picture pending any future national count. Thanks are due to the organisers and field workers who managed to obtain very full coverage despite the bad weather.

John Day, on behalf of Cumbria Bird Club

(We apologise for the late appearance of this report.

Ed.)