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Wading Bird Monitoring of the Thanet Coast SPA in Jan/Feb 2022

A Report to Bird Wise East Kent (Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay SAMMS)



Golden Plovers by Steve Reynaert

Summary

This report presents the results of wading bird surveys of the Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay Special Protection Area (SPA) in winter 2022 by Sandwich Bay Bird Observatory Trust (SBBOT). The area concerned was visited twice, on 15th January and 13th February 2022, and a total of 15 species of wading bird were recorded (Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*, Redshank *Tringa totanus*, Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*, Sanderling *Calidris alba*, Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*, Purple Sandpiper *Calidris maritima*, Curlew *Numenius arquata*, Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*, Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*, Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*, Knot *Calidris canutus*, Dunlin *Calidris alpina*, Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*, Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*, and Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*). The total number of wading birds ranged between 4,491-5,080 with Sectors 1, 6, 14, and 20 containing the highest numbers. Good totals of Golden Plover and Turnstone were recorded, as well as important numbers of Sanderling. Disturbance to wading birds at high tide remains an ongoing issue with pro-active management needed to reduce its effect on the wintering wader populations.

Introduction

The Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay SPA is known for its internationally important wintering numbers of Turnstone and Golden Plover. SBBOT have co-ordinated Turnstone surveys along the Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay SPA for the last 20 years and have shown an ongoing decline in wintering numbers (Walton & Hodgson, 2018). In 2019, Footprint Ecology provided baseline data of all common wading bird species along the same stretch of Thanet coastline, and this was repeated by SBBOT in 2020. Data from both surveys confirmed a further decline in the wintering Turnstone population (Saunders & Liley (2019), Walton (2020)). SBBOT repeated this survey in 2022 with the aim of detecting changes in the wider wading bird population of the Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay SPA.

Method

This study focussed entirely on counts of wading birds. Wintering waders were surveyed using standard BTO WeBS protocol (Bibby et al, 2000). All counts were undertaken according to Health and Safety guidelines.

The survey area was divided into 21 Sectors of roughly 2km in length. Each sector was identical to the sectors surveyed by SBBOT and Footprint Ecology in previous years. These were:

1. Pegwell Bay
2. Pegwell - West Cliff
3. Ramsgate Harbour & Beach
4. Dumpton/Dumpton Gap
5. Broadstairs
6. North Foreland/Kingsgate Bay
7. Botany/Palm Bay
8. Margate (East)
9. Margate
10. St. Mildred's Bay
11. Westgate Bay
12. Grenham Bay/Birchington
13. Minnis Bay
14. Plumpudding Island
15. Coldharbour/Reculver East
16. Reculver West
17. Herne Bay East
18. Herne Bay
19. Hampton/Hampton Pier
20. Long Rock/Hampton
21. Whitstable/Tankerton

All 21 Survey Sectors were surveyed at the same time, by 21 separate observers, beginning half an hour before high tide and ending half an hour after, on both 15th January and 13th February 2022. The whole length of the allocated stretch of coastline was counted and all data logged on a sheet in the field (see Appendix 1). Double-counting was kept to a minimum by noting the time, number, and species, of any movements in and out of each Sector. Optics such as binoculars and telescopes were used as necessary.

Results

The weather on 15th January was grey (8/8 cloud), calm (SW 1), and with no rain. At some Sectors (13-21) there was intermittent dense fog. Conditions were windy on 13th February (SW 5-7) but relatively clear (2/8 cloud) and with no rain. High Tide at Margate on 15th January was 10:30 (4.0m) and 10:02 (3.9m) on 13th February.

Table 1 The number of wading birds recorded in 21 sectors along the Thanet coastline on 15th January 2022

Sector	Turnstone	Redshank	Ringed Plover	Sanderling	Oystercatcher	Purple Sandpiper	Curlew	Golden Plover	Grey Plover	Lapwing	Knot	Dunlin	Snipe	Black-tailed Godwit	Bar-tailed Godwit	Total
1	0	105	0	310	0	0	80	1	120	880	98	1400	10	24	127	3028
2	4	36	0	0	167	0	19	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	226
3	54	1	0	0	3	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	60
4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	38	0	0	0	23	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	78
6	72	0	74	295	61	0	37	0	19	0	0	1	0	0	0	559
7	21	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	24
8	3	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	15
9	45	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	46
10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
12	0	11	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	11
13	86	10	0	151	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	247
14	54	45	0	46	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	148
15	6	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7
16	15	2	5	41	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	65
17	51	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	53
18	16	39	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	55
19	17	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	19
20	47	1	88	76	12	0	1	0	0	0	0	181	0	0	0	406
21	28	0	0	0	1	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	32
Total	558	263	168	922	268	21	141	1	144	880	98	1582	10	24	127	5080

Table 2 The number of wading birds recorded in 21 sectors along the Thanet coastline on 13th February 2022

Sector	Turnstone	Redshank	Ringed Plover	Sanderling	Oystercatcher	Purple Sandpiper	Curlew	Golden Plover	Grey Plover	Lapwing	Knot	Dunlin	Snipe	Black-tailed Godwit	Bar-tailed Godwit	Total
1	4	43	1	10	830	0	59	328	1	1800	1	6	1	24	0	3108
2	0	0	0	0	20	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	20
3	26	0	0	0	0	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	34
4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	44	0	0	0	15	4	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	67
6	19	0	0	195	24	0	11	0	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	263
7	5	0	0	0	15	25	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	45
8	34	29	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	63
9	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
10	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
11	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13	46	4	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	52
14	29	23	24	190	80	0	20	0	53	0	0	22	0	0	0	441
15	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
16	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
17	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	14
18	17	58	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	75
19	24	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	24
20	66	1	24	83	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	41	0	0	0	215
21	17	0	0	0	23	0	5	0	0	0	0	8	0	0	0	53
Total	361	158	50	479	1008	37	99	328	68	1800	1	77	1	24	0	4491

A total of 5,080 wading birds of 15 species was recorded on 15th January 2022 (see Table 1). This is more than double the number of birds recorded on any previous survey. There were three-figure counts of ten species. Most numerous were Dunlin with 1,582, followed by Sanderling with 922, and Lapwing with 880. Sector 1 held the highest number of birds with 3,028 individuals. Also, of note were 559 birds in Sector 6 and 406 in Sector 20. There were no wading birds recorded in Sectors 4 and 10 and just single figures in Sectors 11 and 15. Sectors with the highest species diversity were 1 (11), 20 (seven), and 6 (six).

A total of 4,491 wading birds of 14 species were recorded on 13th February 2022 (see Table 2). The most numerous species were Lapwing with 1,800, Oystercatcher with 1,008, and Sanderling with 479. Sector 1 was the busiest Sector with 3,108 birds recorded, followed by 441 in Sector 14, and 263 in Sector 6. Thirteen species were recorded in Sector 1 and eight species in Sector 14. Sectors 4 and 12 held no wading birds and Sectors 9, 10, 11, 14, and 15 recorded only single figures.

Discussion

As in the previous survey, the two dates in January and February produced broadly similar results with an approximate 10% difference in the number of individuals. Both visits revealed exceptionally high numbers of individuals compared to the previous surveys by Footprint Ecology and SBBOT (Saunders & Liley (2019), Walton (2020)), with an average of 4,786 birds recorded and averages of 242 birds per Sector in January and 214 in February.

The rise in individuals encountered during this survey period can be mostly explained by the significant increase in numbers in Sector 1 (3,028 and 3,108 in 2022, compared to nine and 20 in 2019 and 718 and 64 in 2020). Sector 1 (Pegwell Bay) is a core feeding and roosting area for many species but because of exogenous factors, such as weather and disturbance, it is known for its count variability and many birds often use the adjacent nature reserve at Shellness Point, Sandwich Bay, just outside of this survey's geographical remit (per SBBOT).

Sectors 6, 14, and 20 also showed consistently high totals across both dates. The same three Sectors were identified in the previous Footprint Ecology and SBBOT surveys for their key wading bird assemblages (Saunders & Liley (2019), Walton (2020)). This consistency suggests these Sectors may include the top feeding and roosting opportunities within the survey area. Sectors 2 and 13 had high numbers in January but less so in February. It may be that these are important secondary sites when neighbouring Sectors (such as 1 and 14) are affected by disturbance, for example. In contrast, Sector 4 held no wading birds on either visit and Sectors 7, 10, and 11 were consistently low for wading bird totals. However, it is worth acknowledging that there is some degree of movement between Sectors and these 'lesser' sites may be more useful to wading birds when disturbance is high elsewhere, or in certain inclement weather conditions.

The species composition between the two visits was similar again, with Bar-tailed Godwit the only species recorded on just one session (in January). In contrast to the previous surveys by Footprint Ecology and SBBOT (Saunders & Liley (2019), Walton (2020)), most species showed significant differences between visits. There were big decreases in Sanderling (48%), Knot (99%), and Dunlin (95%) in the second visit, balanced by large increases in Oystercatcher (276%) and Lapwing (105%). These differences were mostly focussed around Sector 1. This also explains why some species were now the most numerous recorded across the whole survey. The three most numerous species in January were Dunlin, Lapwing and Sanderling, with Lapwing, Oystercatcher, and Sanderling in February. In previous surveys the most numerous species was Sanderling. The number of Sanderling have not decreased, in

fact in January the total count numbered 922 (almost twice the previous highest count), but in previous years the totals of the other aforementioned species were very low. It is important to recognise the Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay SPA as an important area for wintering Sanderling with counts well in excess of the 1% threshold of wintering birds in Great Britain (Frost et al, 2019).

Turnstone and Golden Plover are important species in the Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay SPA. There were no Golden Plovers recorded during the first survey period but 328 on the second date. This is a significant percentage of the SPA qualifying feature (411 birds) and important to highlight as the shingle and rocky habitats along the Thanet coastline are not always the favoured habitat for this species, with large flocks often found inland on arable land (Henderson & Sutherland, 2017). The wintering population of Turnstone has been declining along the Thanet coastline for the last 20 years (Walton & Hodgson, 2018). In previous years, the SBBOT and Footprint Ecology surveys produced counts of Turnstone in the range of 348-372 (Saunders & Liley (2019), Walton (2020)). This survey recorded 558 Turnstones on the January visit and 361 in February. Despite the 35% decrease between visits, this shows the population has not declined significantly since the last survey. The first count is in line with the co-ordinated Turnstone count of 2018 (Walton & Hodgson, 2018) and above the 1% threshold of wintering birds in Great Britain (Frost et al, 2019).

Bar-tailed Godwit was a new species for the survey, featuring in Sector 1 in January, whilst Snipe and Black-tailed Godwit featured again for the second survey in a row. Ringed Plover, Redshank, and Grey Plover continued to vary in number. For example, the latter species saw an average of 106 birds recorded over the two 2022 visits, compared to averages of six in 2020 (SBBOT) and 69 in 2019 (Footprint). Lapwing, Dunlin, and Oystercatcher all also saw sporadic large numbers at odds to the previous surveys. Also of note, was an improvement in Purple Sandpiper numbers with 37 on the second visit, the highest noted on any survey so far.

This survey did not monitor the frequency or the effects of disturbance, but as in previous years, it was impossible to avoid noticing the high levels of disturbance across the survey area. Participants in the survey remarked particularly at the number of dogs off the lead in their Sector at high tide. There were anecdotally less disturbance issues during the second visit, when the weather conditions were particularly windy. Since Baynes & Hyland (2014) acknowledged the recreational impact on Turnstones in the Thanet Coast and Sandwich Bay SPA, there has been little change in disturbance levels. Sterl et al (2008) suggest that most dog walkers perceive dog walking as having significantly less impact on natural areas than other activities. For this reason, the impact of signage has been minimal, and restricting access, creating offshore roosts (Whittingham et al, 2020), or changing subconscious behaviour (Barker, J. and Park, T., 2020)), may prove more impactful at reducing disturbance. It was mentioned by SBBOT (2018) that areas such as Bishopstone undercliff (Sector 16) show signs of recent landslides. This was even more apparent in 2022 when a significant landfall had taken place (see photo below). Closing access to the undercliff at Sector 16 is an opportunity to combine pedestrian safety with wading bird conservation at the same time.



Bishopstone cliff fall by S.Walton

Recommendations for future surveys include trialling a mid-week survey (with potentially less disturbance) to give a greater idea of what wading birds utilise each Sector, and to include birds at Shellness Point, Sandwich Bay in the survey of Pegwell Bay to reduce variability of Sector 1. Continuing to perform the survey on a regular basis will allow for the variability of species in Sector 1 and its influence on the numbers of the whole survey.

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By Steffan Walton, Warden, Sandwich Bay Bird Observatory Trust, August 2022.

Appendix 1: Participant Count Form

Two co-ordinated Wading bird counts of the NE Kent (mainly the NE Kent Marine Protected Area) will be undertaken in the winter of 21/22. The first will take place during high tide on Saturday **15 January 2022**, with the second on Sunday **13 February 2022**.

Surveyors should walk the whole length of their allocated stretch of coastline - **commencing ½ hour before high tide** - counting all Waders occurring in that section and ensuring that double-counting is kept to a minimum. Please note any movements & direction (west or east, etc.) and times of birds leaving the sector in the remarks column.

Details of Co-ordinated Wader Count Sectors			
Sector No.	Sector	From	To
1	Pegwell Bay	TR342628: South end of Pegwell Bay Nature Reserve, where coastal path turns sharply north along bay	TR354644: Opposite old hoverport road, west of Little Cliffsend Farm
2	Pegwell to West Cliff	TR354644: Opposite old hoverport road, west of Little Cliffsend Farm	TR377642: Western limit of Ramsgate Harbour, eastern limit of West Cliff
3	Ramsgate (harbour & beach)	TR377642: Western limit of Ramsgate Harbour, eastern limit of West Cliff	TR392655: By large groyne at north end of Ramsgate main beach
4	Dumpton / Dumpton Bay	TR392655: By large groyne at north end of Ramsgate main beach	TR398673: South end of Louisa Bay south of Viking Bay
5	Broadstairs	TR398673: South end of Louisa Bay south of Viking Bay	TR401694: South of Joss Bay & North Foreland Lighthouse, opposite Convent
6	North Foreland / Kingsgate Bay	TR401694: South of Joss Bay & North Foreland Lighthouse, opposite Convent	TR393711: Botany Bay, by public toilet block
7	Botany Bay to Palm Bay	TR393711: Botany Bay, by public toilet block	TR372715: Bathing Pool / Jet Ski hire
8	Margate east	TR372715: Bathing Pool / Jet Ski hire	TR354712: Main Pier at Margate Harbour
9	Margate (Westbrook Bay & Margate Bay)	TR354712: Main Pier at Margate Harbour	TR335705: Small slipway at west end of Westbrook Bay, east of 'Sunken Gardens' by shelter
10	St Mildred's Bay	TR335705: Small slipway at west end of Westbrook Bay, east of 'Sunken Gardens' by shelter	TR321705: Westgate Pavilion ('Ledge Point' on O/S map)
11	Westgate Bay	TR321705: Westgate Pavilion ('Ledge Point' on O/S map)	TR308699: Eastern limit of Epple Bay
12	Grenham Bay / Birchington	TR308699: Eastern limit of Epple Bay	TR291701: Western limit of Grenham Bay
13	Minnis Bay	TR291701: Western limit of Grenham Bay	TR273694: Western end of small groynes at 'Plum pudding Island', opposite mussel bed & public path leading south
14	Plum pudding Island to Cold Harbour	TR273694: Western end of small groynes at 'Plum pudding Island', opposite mussel bed & public path leading south	TR252694: Cold Harbour, opposite mussel beds & lagoons
15	Cold Harbour to Reculver east	TR252694: Cold Harbour, opposite mussel beds & lagoons	TR230694: Western end of shellfish hatchery
16	Reculver west	TR230694: Western end of shellfish hatchery	TR211687: Car park near 'Bishopstone Manor'
17	Herne Bay east ('Beltinge Cliff')	TR211687: Car park near 'Bishopstone Manor'	TR191685: Half-way along cliff, opposite 'Wantsum Walk' on O/S map
18	Herne Bay	TR191685: Half-way along cliff, opposite 'Wantsum Walk' on O/S map	TR172683: Herne Bay Pier
19	Hampton / Hampton Pier	TR172683: Herne Bay Pier	TR157679: Small slipway to west of Hampton Pier
20	Long Rock (Swalecliff) to Hampton	TR157679: Small slipway to west of Hampton Pier	TR137678: Long Rock, opposite sand spit
21	Whitstable / Tankerton	TR137678: Long Rock, opposite sand spit	TR108670: Whitstable Harbour

1. Co-ordinated Wader Count Survey: 15 January 2022

[illegible]

2. Co-ordinated Turnstone Count Survey: 13 February 2022

[illegible]