

Who needs a Wash?

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Mudflats at Snettisham in the Wash © Elis Simpson



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There is a new plan to put a tidal barrage across the mouth of the Wash, the large estuary on the east coast of England that is used by half a million or more waders each year. Is this something that should concern us? Is this another mad idea that is going to go away? Contacts at the RSPB think that we need to take the threat seriously, as we did nearly fifty years ago.

I got hooked on waders after my first wader-catching trip with the Wash Wader Ringing Group (now [Wash Wader Research Group](#), WWRG) in April 1974. At the time, the main focus of the Group's activities was to collect as much data as we could about nine key species. There was a proposal to build one or more freshwater reservoirs on the mudflats, thereby displacing thousands of Red Knots *Calidris canutus* from Greenland and Canada, Dunlins *Calidris alpina* and Grey Plovers *Pluvialis squatarola* from Siberia and Eurasian Oystercatchers *Haematopus ostralegus* from Norway – to name just a few of the species that would have been affected. Conservation organisations across the charity and government sectors worked together to oppose the plan.



Weighing a Turnstone.

Once the fight was over, WWRG reverted to a monthly schedule of volunteer activity. Catching has changed, becoming more targeted and with an increasing emphasis on colour-ringing, flags and resightings, to generate annual survival estimates. There's a summary of what was learnt in the first sixty years (1959 to 2019) in the [WaderTales](#) blog 'Sixty years of Wash waders' (LINK: <https://wadertales.wordpress.com/2019/08/15/sixty-years-of-wash-waders/>). More recently, tagging has refined our understanding of how individuals move around the Wash and surrounding farmland. Look out for a new paper on this for Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* and Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*.

As WWRG members, we doubled our efforts to catch waders, in order to be able to estimate the turnover of birds using the site and to assess how birds built up the resources they needed to survive the winter and/or prepare for migration. It became a fortnightly commitment for many of us. The Wash Feasibility Study that was produced by the Natural Environment Research Council is available here (<https://nora.nerc.ac.uk/id/eprint/507015/1/N507015CR.pdf>). I wish I could say that we stopped the development but the impracticality of building freshwater reservoirs in a saltwater environment was probably a more telling factor in the decision not to go ahead.

WaderTales number 80

Sixty years of Wash waders

AUGUST 15, 2019 / GRAHAM APPLETON / EDIT

The Wash Wader Ringing Group (WWRG) started with a bang on 18 August 1959, when the team made a catch of 1,132 birds in a Wildfowl Trust rocket-net at Terrington, in Norfolk. Over the years, cannon have replaced rockets, catches have become generally smaller and the scientific priorities have been refined, but the Group continues to focus upon discovering more about the waders that use the Wash. This blog attempts to summarises what has been learnt about the waders that rely upon the Wash, the vast muddy estuary that lies between Lincolnshire and Norfolk, on the east coast of England.



Weighing a Turnstone



WaderTales blog.



Examining a wader.

Eurasian Oystercatcher is one of many species that exemplifies the importance of the Wash. The peak winter Wetland Bird Survey count is about 24,000, with the majority of birds being of Norwegian origin. During the low tide period these birds can be found spread across 270 square kilometres of mud and sand, with some individuals feasting on cockles and mussels and others probing for worms. We already know that life can be a struggle for Wash Oystercatchers. In poor years – and this 2022/23 winter has been particularly bad – many individuals cannot find the resources they need to complete their annual moult and some birds die. Protecting cockle stocks is important to both Oystercatchers and to fishers who depend upon them for their livelihoods.



Ringing movements of WWRG Eurasian Oystercatchers

There have been many plans to reduce the size of the Wash. Putting a barrage across, with a road running along its length, would connect Norfolk and Lincolnshire and might provide development opportunities but at what cost? The latest plan purports to hit three ‘buttons’ that may tempt the UK government to invest, suggesting that it can reduce flooding, produce clean energy and deliver a net-zero international port. Tidal power sounds attractive but would involve retaining more water in the Wash and hence reduce feeding opportunities for hundreds of thousands of birds. Building the barrage and creating a new port might deliver new jobs – but in a part of the country with awful road and rail links.

The developers also suggest that “without the scheme many people, communities, businesses, road, rail and water infrastructures are at risk of permanent

Oystercatchers return from Norway in late summer and stay for eight months but populations of other species rely on the Wash for much shorter periods, especially in the autumn. These include Sanderlings *Calidris alba* from Greenland, some of which will travel as far as Namibia, *taymyrensis* Bar-tailed Godwits that refuel on their way from Siberia to West Africa, and Grey Plovers that will move to western Britain and Ireland after their autumn moult. The estuary is never quiet; in May, the last Siberian birds leave, in June there are plenty of young waders that won’t breed in their first or second year, and by July adults are flooding back from Canada, Greenland, Iceland, Scandinavia, the Baltic and Russia.



Sanderlings.



Setting a cannon-net.

flooding” and that the plan “can control storm surges so all the bird sanctuaries, salt marshes and so on don’t get washed away” so that “it’s going to conserve The Wash and its bird life like it is today”. This is all disputed, of course, but you can see why a barrage might sound superficially attractive. I am reminded that flooding in Norwich occurs when fresh water cannot escape into the North Sea, either because of heavy rain or because high tides or storms reduce or stop the outflow at Great Yarmouth. The Wash catchment area is much bigger, receiving water that falls as rain on Lincoln, Grantham, Northampton, Milton Keynes, Cambridge and Bury St Edmunds. That’s about 12% of the land area of England.

Despite the rhetoric, I thought that the new Centre Port plan would go the way of previous ideas, until I read in The Eastern Daily Press that Centrica was investing in this plan. The company see this as a way to “generate enough electricity to power 600,000 homes and businesses” and is offering “a guaranteed price for the renewable energy produced by the tidal turbines, to underpin their construction”. This is a serious threat.

So what can we do now? WWRG will continue to collect information about waders that use the Wash but our current stripped-down government agencies would struggle to have the resources to undertake the work on sediments and plant communities that were so important fifty years ago. Who is going to model salinity levels and who will predict whether shellfish and other marine invertebrates will be able to cope in a less salty and more polluted environment?

On the plus side, many more people know about the Wash these days, thanks to the wonderful BBC Springwatch team, who have shared the amazing wader inspirations on mainstream TV. Thousands of viewers have been inspired by the spectacle on their screens and have travelled to RSPB's excellent Snettisham reserve to witness the swirling mass of waders for themselves, bringing tourist income to Norfolk at the same time. Back in the 1970s, the only engagement with the general public came from an RSPB film by Hugh Miles called 'Who needs a Wash?' that toured the country.

In Winterwatch in January, Chris Packham spoke to millions when he closed a package about waders with "we've got to protect the Wash" and he's right. As wader lovers, we need to share their stories; as conservationists, we need to fight back against plans to water down legislation that protects estuaries; and, as members, we will need to support RSPB, Wader Quest, Norfolk Wildlife Trust and Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust. We all need the Wash and the Wash needs us to protect it.



Guy Anderson

Putting flags on Grey Plovers.



An Inspiration of wades over the Wash; will this spectacle be lost to us? - Elis Simpson