Glen Clova Breeding Waders: 2024

RSPB SCOTLAND

Summary and background

The aim of the 2024 farmland breeding wader survey of Glen Clova is to provide up-to-date information on the breeding distribution and population status of 5 wader species; Curlew, Lapwing, Oystercatcher, Redshank and Snipe. Glen Clova has been surveyed by RSPB Scotland in 1996, followed by 2012, 2014 and 2019. These surveys have identified the floodplain in Glen Clova as a hotspot for farmland breeding waders. Following declines in the breeding populations of these species across the UK, Curlew, Lapwing, Oystercatcher and Redshank have been identified as priority species for conservation action by RSPB. Ascertaining their distribution and abundance on a local scale will help to promote and inform habitat enhancement work and other conservation effort in the area.

Monitoring

Surveys following the O'Brien & Smith (1992) lowland breeding wader census were carried out across all fields surveyed in previous years, with 3 visits taking place in April, May and June, in line with the advised survey windows for Scotland. Landowners and land managers were contacted ahead of each visit to arrange access. To minimise disturbance to lambing operations in April it was decided to limit surveyors to the roads to avoid any potential conflict, except for one part of Rottal estate where access to the fields was necessary. As all surveyors were equipped with scopes this limitation had very little effect on adult bird detection.

Surveys were carried out between an hour before and 3 hours after sunrise and during appropriate weather conditions. On each visit, all adult birds and juveniles where possible, were recorded. Standard survey and population estimate methods were used (O'Brien 1994, 1996) to compare with previous years. The area surveyed (see Figure 1) covered approximately 830 hectares.

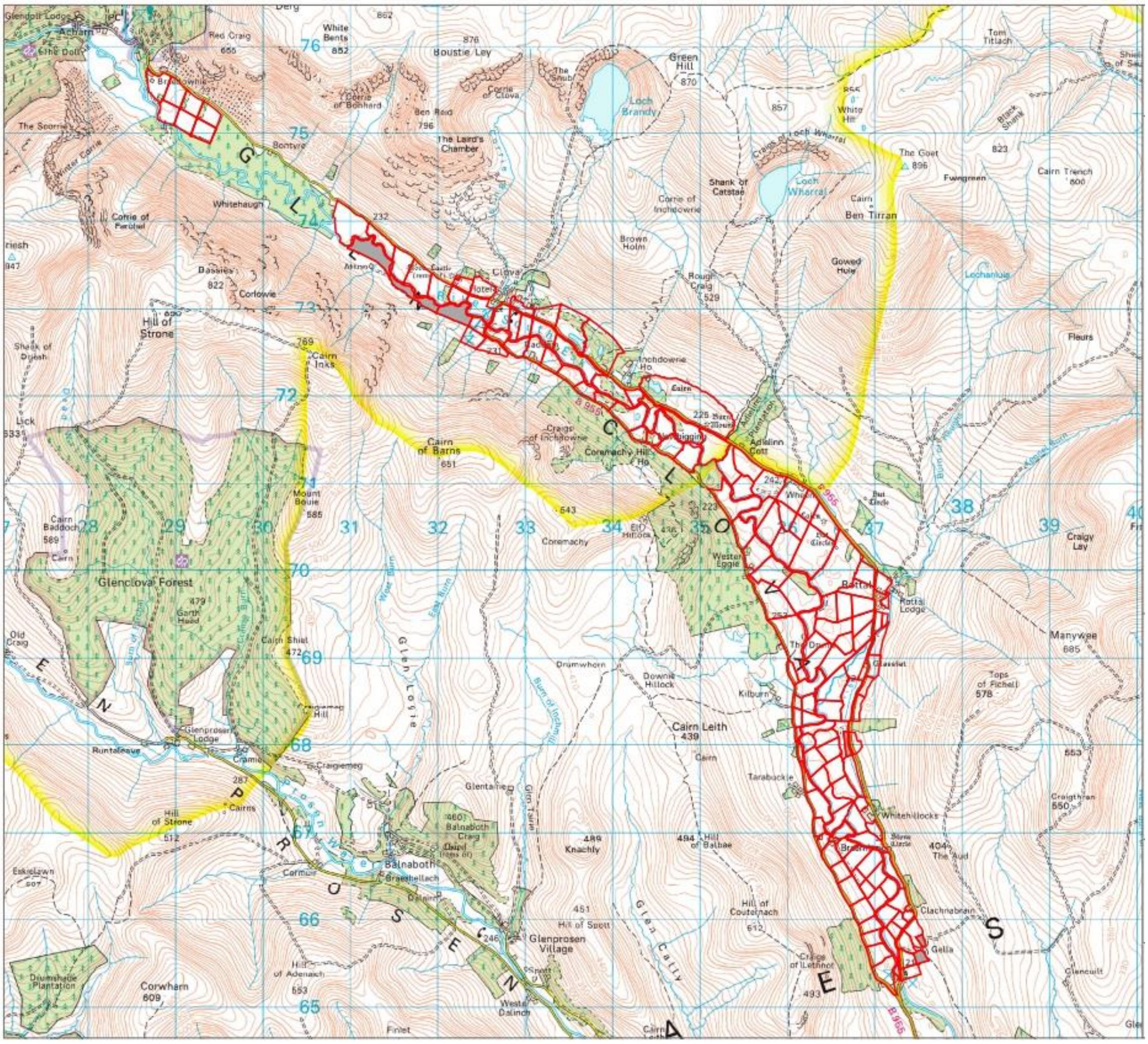

Figure 1. Glen Clova wader study area

Results

244 farmland breeding wader territories were estimated using the registrations from all 3 survey visits, with a density of 0.29 territories per hectare across the survey area. See *Table 1* for species totals and densities. Snipe counts should be treated with caution. Generally, the monitoring methodology may not accurately detect some breeding birds as this species can be particularly cryptic and their breeding cycle and behaviour often does not align with the other farmland wader species. To detect Snipe more accurately, it may be necessary to undertake a species-specific survey.

Table 1. Breeding wader summary

	No. of territories	Density territories/ha
Curlew	29	0.03
Lapwing	116	0.14
Oystercatcher	87	0.10
Redshank	5	0.01
Snipe	7	0.01
All waders	244	0.29

The predominant habitat in the flood plain was grazed damp grassland with patches of soft rush classified as rush pasture (68% of the area). The other habitats available for breeding waders were improved grassland, rough grazing, dense rush, small wetlands, game cover crop, potato fields and bare ground. Only woodland covering a small percentage of the area wasn't considered potential breeding habitat. Often this woodland consisted of pasture with scattered trees. Although this appeared unsuitable for most breeding waders, the occasional wader was found in these fields but not thought to be nesting.

Discussion

The charts below show trends for the number of breeding waders in Glen Clova between 1996 and 2024. In 2012, 2014, 2019 and 2024, 4 additional fields were surveyed that were not covered in 1996. This area comprises of an additional 20ha and in 2019 held 5 pairs of breeding waders. There is not a significant difference in overall trend data with the addition of these fields, given they held relatively few waders in each of the years they were surveyed.

Overall, the picture is of a decline in breeding waders. The first survey in 1996 recorded 383 territories, a decline of 36% to 2024, mirroring national trends. However, following a low of 230 territories in 2012, there has been an increase with a stable picture over the last 5 years (254 > 244 territories). The trends for different species are detailed below.

Curlew

2024 reflects an apparently stable breeding population of Curlew in Glen Clova, with 28, 28 and 29 territories recorded over the last 15 years. Although this is down from the original 45 territories recorded in 1996, it is a clear increase from the 15 recorded in 2012, suggesting that this population is bucking the UK wide decline recorded during this period. Curlew were found mostly in rush pasture, wetlands and some wetter meadows. Observations during these surveys and in previous years monitoring at Rottal Estate suggest that Curlew territories often encompass both an area of the floodplain and some of the adjacent hill ground, much of which is heather moorland and wet grassland.

Lapwing

The picture for Lapwing is very similar, with the 116 territories recorded in 2024 comparing favourably with all surveys other than 1996. Although there were fewer territories recorded in 2024 compared to the 120

territories recorded in 2019, annual fluctuations which are not necessarily part of an overall population trend and limitations in accuracy of a 3-visit survey methodology may account for this difference. Regardless, the relatively small difference in territories is not enough to be considered a decline. Lapwing were found exclusively in rough grazing (including some rush pasture), bare ground and game cover crop, with their preference for a shorter sward height clear in their habitat selection.

Oystercatcher

Oystercatcher remain stable over the last few surveys, with 88 territories in 2019 and 87 in 2024. This follows a decline of 44% from a peak of 133 territories in 2014. Oystercatcher were found on improved grassland, rush pasture and some areas of bare ground.

Redshank

Redshank show the most concerning decline, with only 5 territories recorded in 2024. This compares to 15 on the last survey in 2019 and a decline of 90% from the 52 territories recorded in 1996. All 5 territories were found centred on wet flushes, typically drains or smaller burns. Current efforts to increase the area of wetland habitat across the floodplain could benefit Redshank in this area.

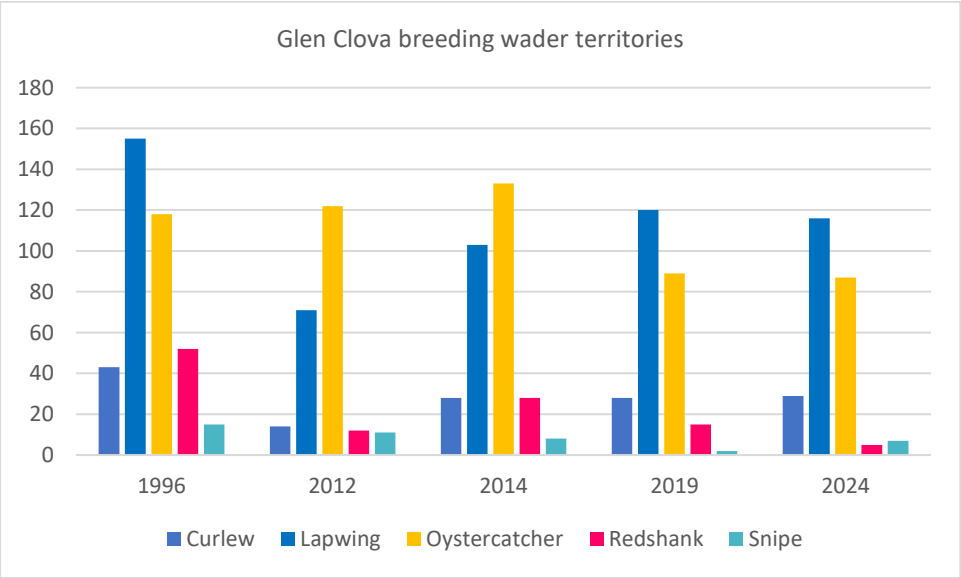

Chart 1. Population trends for all years

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the landowners and land managers within the study area.