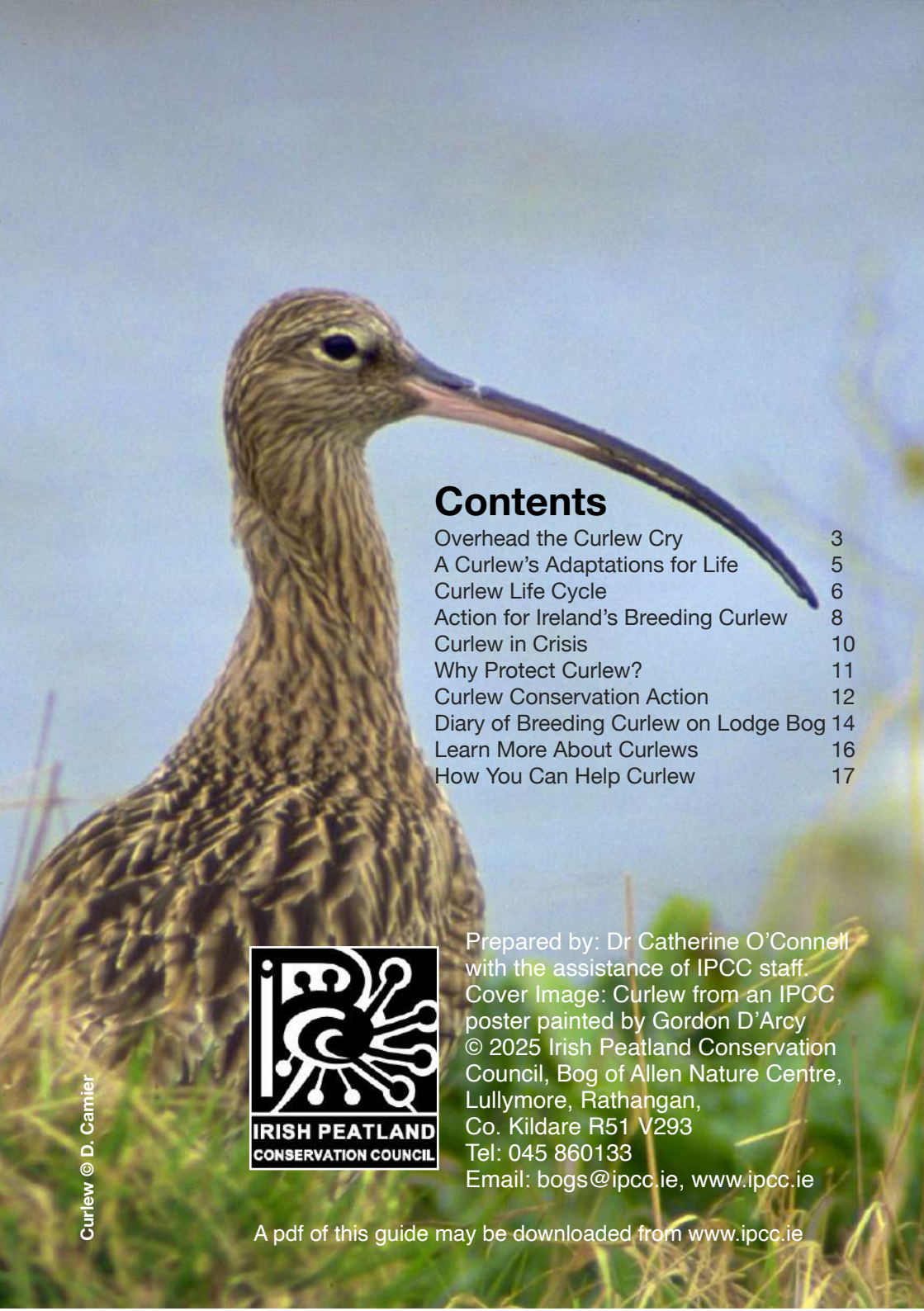


Overhead the Curlew Cry





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Cover Image: Curlew from an IPCC
poster painted by Gordon D'Arcy

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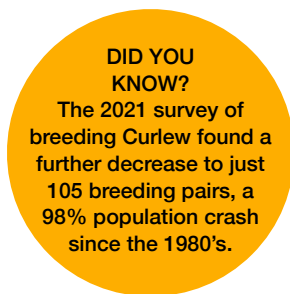
Email: bogs@ipcc.ie, www.ipcc.ie

Overhead the Curlew Cry

A loud melancholy “coor-li”, the cry that gives the Curlew its name, is the clearest sign of the bird’s presence in Ireland for most of the year.

The Curlew is one of nine birds in the genus *Numenius*. The Eurasian Curlew, Crotach in Irish and *Numenius arquata* in Latin, the species occurring in Ireland is the largest European wading bird. It is recognisable on winter estuaries or summer bogs and moors with its long down-curved bill, mottled brown plumage, white rump and long legs. Male and female birds are similar although the beak in the female Curlew is slightly longer (1).

Curlews are red-listed as near threatened on the IUCN Red List. They are also red listed on the Irish Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland 2020-2026 (2) because of a drastic decline in their breeding population. While there are as many as 28,300 (4) Curlew to be seen in estuaries and coastal habitats, these are winter visiting birds to Ireland. An estimate of the breeding population size in Ireland was 138 pairs in the period 2015-17 representing just 4% of what it was in the late 1980’s (1).



Curlew are long-lived - up to 30 years and should be able to maintain stable population numbers if each pair raised just one chick every couple of years. Unfortunately, in Ireland their breeding success is much lower due to a number of pressures. The cause of low breeding success is primarily the loss of breeding habitat which is rough pasture, meadows, bogs and other areas of semi-natural vegetation. Afforestation, commercial peat-cutting, windfarm developments, agricultural intensification or land abandonment are all factors that bring about habitat loss. Another factor is that as their habitat becomes more fragmented, Curlews also become more vulnerable to predation. Fox and crow (and sometimes buzzard) who thrive in modified habitats make it almost impossible for Curlew to protect their nests and rear their chicks.

1. Status and Distribution of Breeding Eurasian Curlew in Ireland 2021. Irish Wildlife Manual 138. <https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/IWM138.pdf>
2. Gilbert, G., Stanbury, A. and Lewis, L. (2021) Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland 2020-2026. Irish Birds 9: 523-544.
3. <https://www.discoverwildlife.com/animal-facts/birds/fascinating-facts-you-probably-didnt-know-about-curlews/>
4. https://birdwatchireland.ie/app/uploads/2020/09/PopEstimates_2019_Irish-Birds_Burke-et-al-b-2019.pdf

Movement

Curlews walk or run along the ground. When they are ready to take flight, they jump into the air, toss their legs behind them, and pull their neck in slightly. Upon landing they swing their wings upward, flutter briefly, and touch down on their long legs before bringing their wings down. They may also run a short distance on the ground before coming to a stop.

Food and Feeding

On the seashore Curlew are sight feeders which means they use their visual sense to find food. Probing follows with their curved beak. The female bird's bill is 2.5cm longer than the male's. This is an example of niche separation. It means that male and female birds do not compete with one another for food. On the shore typically female birds will be found feeding on the mudflats looking for worms. Once sighted they probe the surface of the mud. The sensitive tip of the bill detects the movement of prey. The curved bill acts like a pincers allowing the bird to withdraw soft food without it breaking apart. Once brought to the surface the food is swallowed whole. Male Curlew are found on the rocks sighting and probing for crustaceans, molluscs and small fish. In winter Curlew often feed in flocks, wading over coastal marshes and mud-flats or feeding on rocky seashore habitat.

Inland Curlew feed on insects and their larvae, worms, molluscs and at times berries and weed seeds and occasionally on grain.



Curlews feeding in winter in a rock pool near Renvyle, Co. Galway (left) and on coastal mudflats (right) at the North Bull Island, Dublin. Photos © C. O'Connell

A Curlew's Adaptations for Life

Curlews are beautifully adapted to their breeding habitat and food sources.

Ears

You can't see the bird's real ears as these are mostly hidden by feathers, but Curlews do have excellent hearing. They can detect shorter and lower sounds than we can, which helps them to hear soft contact calls and recognise each other's songs.

Plumage

Breeding plumage is mainly brown with dark streaks, which camouflages the Curlew against the terrain on which it nests. In winter, its plumage is paler and grayer, with more white on its underparts.



Eyes and Vision

A Curlew's eyes are located on the sides of its head. This gives the bird a much wider field of vision, of about 300 degrees. Amazingly, this means that they can see in front and a long way to the side, at the same time.

Rump

The Curlew has a white rump that extends onto its lower back in a triangle. Most visible in flight, this pattern may help Curlews keep track of one another when flying in flocks.

Flock Formation

Outside breeding seasons, Curlews gather in flocks of about 25-50 birds, forming larger flocks on migration. They may fly in a long line, but often adopt a V-shaped, or chevron, formation. Curlews save energy by flying in each other's wake to take advantage of the slipstream and upwash of air produced by the birds in front.

Bill

The down-curved or decurved bill has a sensitive, flexible tip. The Curlew pushes it deep into mud or peat to reach worms, or thrusts it under tussocks of rush, grass or sedge in search of beetles or into rocks on the seashore seeking crustaceans or molluscs. The female's bill at 15cm is 2.5cm longer than the male's.

Legs and Feet

The three front toes are long, which helps spread the bird's weight on soft wet ground. They also help the bird to keep its balance while searching for food. Long legs help to keep feathers high and dry when the birds are moving around bogs and mudflats.

Biometrics

Bird Length: 55cm
Wingspan: 90cm
Weight: Male: 770g
Female: 1000g
Egg Size: 68x48mm
Egg Weight: 76g (of which 6% is shell)
Clutch Size: 4 eggs
Incubation: 27-29 days
Fledging: 32-38 days
Lifespan: average 11 years

Curlew Life Cycle

Breeding Behaviour

In spring the “coor-li” cry of the Curlew is often accompanied by a bubbling song which announces that the breeding season is beginning. The males trill the song as they fly in wide circles and glide down on extended wings to claim territories in the breeding area usually in March.

When female Curlews arrive at the breeding place, sometimes as early as February, the males follow them in a crouching walk, circling them when they stop. Curlew mate for life.

Breeding Habitat

Curlew breed in all kinds of damp, open country: on moors, heaths, sand-dunes, bogs and even river shingle.

Nesting


Curlew build a simple nest on the ground, in a hollow, on low tussocks or in a clump of rushes. The nest is lined with grass or heather vegetation and feathers.

Eggs


Curlew lay eggs in April-May, usually four eggs which are buff, brown or olive in colour and spotted with darker brown. Dark blotches camouflage the eggs in the ground nest. Incubation is about 30 days by both parents. At this stage the birds are very cautious and quite silent as they change places on the nest. Curlew may lay a second clutch of eggs if the first attempt fails for any reason.

Chicks

Chicks leave the nest a few hours after hatching. The young are cared for by both parents and brooded while small, but can feed for themselves. Parent birds will become aggressive at this time, running towards intruders and sometimes taking off to swoop down at them as they protect their chicks.



A pair of Curlew flying over Lodge Bog, Co. Kildare. The birds return to this bog every year to breed. Photo © A. McCluskey



Curlew can live for up to 30 years. They mate for life. 66% of their chicks do not survive their first year. Photo © D. Camier

71% of Irish breeding Curlew nest on bogs. They leave the bog to feed in the nearby grassland and wetland.



Curlew probe for invertebrates in bog pools using their long curved bills. Photo © C. O'Connell

Habitat restoration and predator control in liaison with landowners can help breeding Curlew. Photo © IPCC



Curlew are ground nesting birds. Photo © K. Geraghty



The disappearance of breeding Curlew is due to habitat loss and predation by fox for example. Photo © S. Cormont



Annual Curlew Life Cycle (1)

	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
Adults return to breeding areas												
Nesting & chick rearing												
Adults & juveniles head to coastal wintering grounds												
European birds arrive into Irish/UK coastal areas												

Fledging

Chicks fledge or take their first flight 32-38 days after hatching and become independent. Curlew have one brood.

Wintering

Curlew leave the breeding grounds when chicks have fledged in July, although birds that have failed to breed can leave earlier. They return to the coast for winter. Numbers of Curlew build up on the coast in winter as birds from Scotland and Scandinavia arrive to spend their winters in Ireland. These visiting birds disperse again in late February to return to their breeding grounds.

1. <https://curlewlife.org/resources/>

Action for Ireland's Breeding Curlew



71% of Ireland's breeding Curlew nest on bogs



Curlew return to the bog in spring to breed



They nest on the bog surface in the sedge and moss



They feed in fields adjacent to the breeding site



Their mottled feathers camouflage them on the bog



Curlew chicks are flightless for five weeks



Curlew eggs and chicks are taken by predators such as fox



Hooded or Grey Crow also predate Curlew eggs and chicks



Breeding Curlew are threatened by habitat loss



Turf cutting, forestry and intensive farming threaten Curlew habitat



Curlew Conservation Programme

Taking action for Curlew - e.g. the Curlew Conservation Programme



Actions include drain blocking to restore breeding habitat



Humane predator control to reduce loss of Curlew eggs and chicks



Tree removal to get rid of avian predator look out posts



Monitoring Curlew nesting and breeding behaviour is necessary



Ring and tagging informs management for Curlew



Farmer co-operation is essential



Fencing excludes livestock to protect Curlew ground nests



Rewetting cutaway bog provides supporting habitat for Curlew



Education is vital to raise awareness



Help by reporting breeding Curlew to Agri.Ecology@npws.gov.ie

Curlew in Crisis

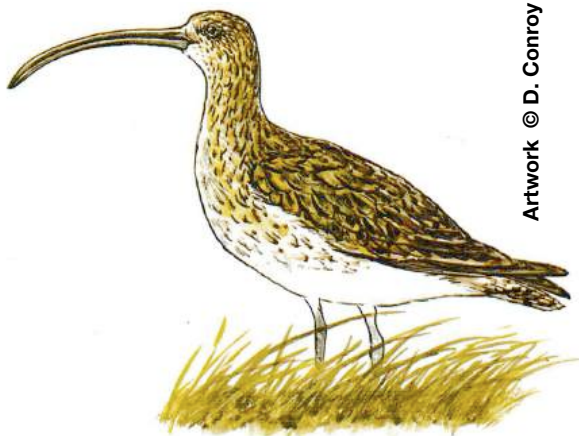
The Curlew has suffered widespread declines across its European range. Nowhere has this been more severe than in Ireland where experts have estimated a 96% decline in breeding Curlew since the late 1980's.

The results of a National Breeding Curlew survey conducted by the National Parks and Wildlife Service in 2015-2017 (1) showed that:

- There are only 138 pairs of Curlew breeding in Ireland
- 71% of breeding pairs were on peatlands and heather moorland. Some breeding sites had active turf cutting.
- 29% of breeding pairs were mainly on rushy pastures and wet grassland.
- The birds nesting on bogs are also reliant on grassland habitat surrounding the bogs for feeding.

Unfortunately breeding Curlew have suffered severe declines due to the loss and fragmentation of their habitats caused by activities such as drainage, peat extraction, intensive farming and afforestation. As well as drastically reducing their numbers this loss of habitat has led to the birds being more susceptible to predation with Curlew finding it almost impossible to rear young chicks.

DID YOU KNOW?
The English name - Curlew - imitates the call of the Curlew.



Artwork © D. Conroy

1. Status and Distribution of Breeding Eurasian Curlew in Ireland 2021. Irish Wildlife Manual 138. <https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/IWM138.pdf>

Why Protect Curlew?



Artwork © D. Conroy, IPCC

Curlew are regarded as an Umbrella Species (1). If we protect Curlew we protect other species and habitats as well. In its yearly life cycle the Curlew uses different habitats across Ireland from mudflat to bogland and grassland. For example if you protect a nesting pair of Curlew in a bog you are also protecting all of the other species that live in the bog such as hares, dragonflies, large heath butterflies and bog moss including other ground nesting birds such as Snipe. Similarly in grassland habitats, protecting breeding Curlew might involve delaying grass cutting until later in the summer to give birds a chance to breed without disturbance from predators such as fox and crow. The long grass provides cover for other ground nesting birds such as Lapwing, Meadow Pipit and Skylark giving them a chance to breed undisturbed. Delaying mowing means that wild flowers grow and set seed which in turn increases the number of pollinating insects in the meadow - a food source for young Curlew chicks as well as swallows and swifts.

1. <https://www.curlewaction.org/umbrella-species-why-saving-curlew-helps-more-than-curlew/>

Curlew Conservation Action

Curlew are protected under the European Union Birds Directive (2009/147/EC) where the bird is listed as an Annex II species. In Ireland, the Curlew are also protected under the Wildlife Acts 1976 & 2000 and the Birds and Natural Habitats Regulations 2011. Curlew are on the Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland 2020-2026 (1).

Landowners, Government and others need to work together to save Ireland's breeding Curlew. Looking to the future the recently launched Breeding Waders EIP-Agri Project will be engaging with farmers and land managers in the Irish countryside to secure existing breeding wader populations (including Curlew) and to support population recovery through landscape management and policy development (see <https://breedingwaders.ie/>).

Many important steps have been taken in the lead up to the establishment of the Breeding Waders EIP-Agri Project. In 2016 the Curlew Task Force was set up. A wide range of relevant stakeholder groups and key individuals with experience in Curlew conservation were members of this group. The Task Force published a report on Action for Curlew in Ireland in 2019 which made recommendations to protect and enhance the breeding population of Curlew (2).

The actions recommended by the Curlew Task Force were co-ordinated on the ground by the the National Parks and Wildlife Service through the Curlew Conservation Programme. The work was funded by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

1. Gilbert, G., Stanbury, A. and Lewis, L. (2021) Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland 2020-2026. Irish Birds 9: 523-544 and <https://birdwatchireland.ie/app/uploads/2021/04/BOCC14-leaflet-2-1.pdf>
2. <https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/general/curlew-task-force-recommendations.pdf>

The Curlew Conservation Programme provided funding in nine of the most important locations in Ireland for breeding Curlew to undertake a range of actions including:

- habitat improvement through restoration and management,
- head starting (rearing birds in captivity to protect them from predation),
- satellite-tagging male birds to learn more about Curlew ecology and behaviour,
- protecting nests from predators,
- monitoring the birds breeding success and
- raising awareness.

The map shows the nine areas that the Curlew Conservation Programme covered (Source: www.npws.ie):

1. Stack's Mountains Kerry,
2. Lough Ree Roscommon/
Westmeath,
3. North Roscommon-East Mayo,
4. Mid County Leitrim/North East Roscommon,
5. North Monaghan,
6. Donegal,
7. North Lough Corrib,
8. Sliabh Aughty Mountains Clare/
Galway and
9. Laois (Sliabh Blooms) and Kildare.



The annual report for 2022 gives details of the actions taken for Curlew at these nine sites and the impact these had on breeding success (1).



From 2024 onwards Curlew conservation action is being co-ordinated under the Breeding Waders EIP-Agri Project (see <https://breedingwaders.ie/>).

1. Curlew Conservation Programme Annual Report 2022 (see <https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/files/curlew-conservation-programme-annual-report-2022.pdf>)

Diary of Breeding Curlew on Lodge Bog

The Irish Peatland Conservation Council own and manage Lodge Bog in Co. Kildare for nature conservation. This involves protecting the living bog vegetation, habitats and wildlife present on the bog. Curlew were first identified on Lodge Bog in a baseline wildlife survey undertaken by the naturalist Michael O’Meara in 2005. IPCC began to monitor Curlew behaviour on the bog in 2015 when we learned how threatened breeding birds were. The ten year diary overleaf gives an insight into the successes and failures in the work to save breeding Curlew and the lessons learned along the way. The work was supported by the IPCC Curlew Adoption Scheme, Kildare County Council, Curlew Conservation Partnership, Seacology, Heritage Council, Kildare BirdWatch Ireland and the NPWS Curlew Conservation Programme and Peatlands Community Engagement Scheme 2023.

Diary of Breeding Curlew on Lodge Bog, Co. Kildare

Year	Curlew Present on Lodge Bog	Number of Birds seen at one time	Monitoring (vantage point survey)	Breeding	Actions
2015	1.5.15 to 29.7.15	3	daily surveys from June to mid August	Behaviour suggested adult birds were protecting a nest. Unconfirmed sighting of a chick	Training IPCC staff on Curlew vantage point monitoring and breeding behaviour observation
2016	25.3.16 to 17.6.16	4	93 surveys in the breeding season	Curlew mobbing rook and hooded crow	“The Curlew is Calling” Talk, livestock fencing off the bog, drain blocking
2017	2.4.17 to 12.7.17	4 (2 pairs)	68 surveys in the breeding season	Nest found abandoned, 3 eggs, fourth broken (unknown whether this hatched or was predated)	Predator control and enhancing breeding bog habitat, 10 school visits and Ireland’s Breeding Curlew leaflet published

Year	Curlew Present on Lodge Bog	Number of Birds seen at one time	Monitoring (vantage point survey)	Breeding	Actions
2018	30.3.18 to 29.6.18	2 adults (up to 5 birds)	79 surveys in the breeding season	No evidence of breeding	Habitat survey of lands used by Curlew around Lodge Bog, International Curlew Day event, Taking Action for Curlew video uploaded to YouTube, farmer delays topping meadow used by chicks
2019	8.3.19 to 29.6.19	3	85 surveys in the breeding season	First nest 3.5.19, abandoned, 4 eggs. Second nest 7.5.19. 18th June 3 chicks hatched, buzzards predate	Anti-predator electric fence placed around second nest, International Curlew day event.
2020	13.3.20 to 31.5.20	3	33 surveys in the breeding season	Breeding not confirmed due to COVID restrictions	
2021	22.3.21 to 4.6.21	2	58 surveys in the breeding season	No evidence of breeding, birds are ageing	Predator control, electric fence to exclude farm animals grazing the bog, IPCC report published on 5 years of monitoring Curlew on Lodge Bog
2022	15.3.22 to 3.6.22	2	47 surveys in the breeding season	No evidence of breeding, birds are ageing	Male Curlew tagged and fitted with GPS tracker by NPWS
2023	4.4.24 to 7.6.24	2	128 surveys in the breeding season	No evidence of breeding	Reprint Ireland's Breeding Curlew leaflet. Attempted tagging of curlew on 24.04.24 by Curlew Conservation Team, but no curlew were caught. World Curlew Day event
2024	18.4.24 to 20.5.24	2	83 surveys in the breeding season	No evidence of breeding	World Curlew Day event

Learn More About Curlews



1. Visit the Curlew Country Project at <https://curlewcountry.org/>. This project has been active since 2015. It is based in Shropshire Shropshire Hills and Powys borders in Wales and works side by side with community and farmers to help breeding Curlew.
2. Visit the Curlew Life Project at <https://curlewlife.org/>. This four year project began in 2020 and is funded through the LIFE Nature project managed by the RSPB. Working closely with project partners, the aim is to stabilise curlew breeding populations within five priority landscapes across the four countries of the UK by improving breeding habitat conditions.
3. Visit www.curlewaction.org - Curlew Action was founded and is directed by Mary Colwell - a champion of Curlew in Britain and Ireland. Their website has Curlew action toolkits for community and resources for school children.
4. Visit <https://www.ipcc.ie/a-to-z-peatlands/action-for-curlew/> to learn about the conservation work being undertaken to protect curlew on Lodge Bog. A video is also available at https://youtu.be/bwNtGGSWf0c?si=awNBg_4A9SGjdbPf.
5. Visit www.npws.ie to find out about the conservation work being undertaken to help Curlew. You can read about the results of the Irish Breeding Curlew EIP project at: <https://www.rbpnetwork.eu/country-infos/ireland/the-irish-breeding-curlew-eip-20/>. This project was completed in 2024 and trialed agri-environment measures that addressed curlew habitat degradation and depredation by predators in Ireland. Farmers in the project had a range of options available to tackle the factors affecting Curlew.
6. Visit <https://breedingwaders.ie/> to find out more about how farmers can take action to help breeding waders including Curlew.
7. **Take part in World Curlew Day which occurs on the 21st of April each year.**

How Can I Help Curlew?

If you think you have seen or heard a Curlew follow these simple steps to help the effort to protect these birds.

1. You are most likely to see or hear a Curlew between April and June. Be careful not to disturb the bird(s). Stick to walking paths and have dogs on leads.
2. Take a photograph or video with your phone or through a telescope if you can. Please also try to make sound recordings of calls e.g. the typical bubbling call or song.
3. Take detailed notes about Curlew behaviour and the habitat they are using e.g. rough pastures, wet grasslands, blanket bog, raised bog.
4. Take a GPS of the location and the date of your sighting.
5. Report a sighting to the Curlew Task Force at agri.Ecology@npws.gov.ie.

Please note: records of over wintering flocks of Curlew from coastal habitats are not needed at present.

If you would like to get involved with habitat improvement works for Curlew on your land please email the Agri-Ecology Unit of the National Parks and Wildlife Service at agri.Ecology@npws.gov.ie.

If you are living in Northern Ireland you can report your sightings to the Curlews in Crisis Life Project (www.curlewlife.org), a four year project co-ordinated by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB).

Adopt a Curlew

Symbolically adopt Curlew and at the same time help support the work of the Irish Peatland Conservation Council in protecting peatland habitats and wildlife in Ireland. Curlew adoption packs cost €20 and include a certificate with your name, a thank you card and Curlew postcards to send to friends or family. See <https://www.ipcc.ie/nature-shop> for details.

