UPPER THAMES Curlew Recovery

CURLEW NEWS 2025

WELCOME

Welcome to the third newsletter of the Upper Thames Curlew Recovery project.

In this issue, we will share highlights from our 2025 season.

THANK YOU

We'd like to thank all the farmers who have allowed us to survey their land, fence nests and helped chicks to fledge this year.

Curlew Solutions Trial Year 2

This year we continued working with the Curlew Recovery Partnership on the 'Curlew Solutions Trial'. Spread across 5 sites in England – Yorkshire Dales, Shropshire Hills, Breckland, Severn and Avon Vales and the Upper Thames - this initiative aims to improve our understanding of curlew breeding in grasslands and provide evidence of the effectiveness of conservation efforts to policy makers. With fieldwork now complete, the data is being analysed by BTO scientists, and we await their findings with great interest. A big thank you to our fieldworkers who worked diligently to collect a wealth of data.

Curlew chick, Upper Thames. Photo: Mark Hunter.

Breeding season results

Eurasian Curlew, Numenius arquata
Photo: Mark Hunter.

In 2025, we located 63 pairs of Curlews in the Upper Thames and a further five pairs in neighbouring south Warwickshire. We fenced 28 nests, 22 of which hatched at least one chick – a 79% success rate – a welcome improvement after a poor season last year. Particular congratulations to the team fencing nests along the Thames, where a 100% hatch success was achieved from seven nests.

2025 was a very dry, warm spring and early summer, quite the reverse of the wet and cool 2024. Overall, this seems to have benefitted Curlews, and our observations confirmed that 15 chicks fledged and a further two probably did so. This is the highest number of fledged chicks since the project started in 2021. However, some sites experienced increased grazing pressure as grass was slow to grow, making it difficult for pairs to settle down to nesting.

Year	No. of pairs observed	No. of nests fenced	Minimum no. of fledged chicks
2021	54	11	14
2022	60	21	6
2023	65	24	14
2024	71	27	12
2025	68	28	15

Curlew seeing off a Crow at the nest, Upper Thames. Photo: Curlew Solutions Trial.

Curlews on camera

This year, nest cameras set up to monitor fenced nests at Otmoor revealed a somewhat unexpected avian predator taking eggs – a female Marsh Harrier! These birds might well be expected to take chicks, but to witness one taking eggs was a surprise. An amazing series of images, captured by one of our Thames nest cameras, shows an altercation between a Curlew and a Crow. Thankfully the Curlew won this battle, seeing off the Crow, but sadly one of the eggs was damaged in the process and subsequently didn't hatch.

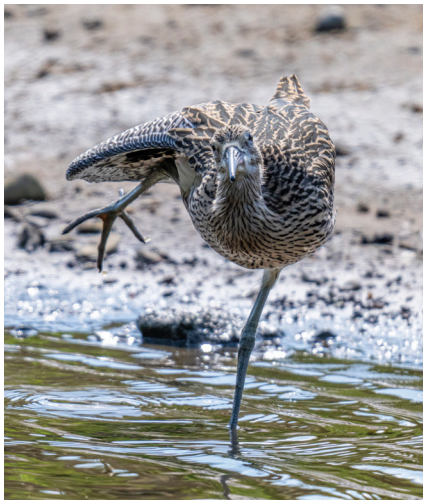
First Ock nest found

Great to be able to report that for the first time a Curlew nest was found in the Ock catchment by Darryl Campling who volunteers with Natural England's Upper Thames team. The nest hatched successfully, and monitoring revealed that a second pair had chicks in the same area! It is likely one chick fledged.

Cherwell fledglings reveal new insights by Jan Guilbride

This season, we had a rare opportunity to observe a pair and their chicks in the Cherwell Valley from hatching to 9 weeks and 4 days old – helped by the slow growth of grass due to low rainfall. The family roosted for several weeks in a field next to the one used for nesting. As the chicks grew, the family moved to feed in adjacent fields. The chicks grew quickly, probably helped by warm weather, and two were seen flying well at 37 days old. The female then left for the coast, leaving the 2 fledglings with their father.

After their original roost field was mown, they spent a couple of days 0.7km away in a field with long grass where we had seen them feeding. They were then seen flying to feed in damp fields with a good growth of grass about 1.3km from their original roost field, and started to roost there. By this time, the juveniles looked very similar to their father, and left our area with him.



Cherwell fledgling. Photo: Mark Hunter.

NEW CURLEW RECOVERY LEAD FOR WILD OXFORDSHIRE

After five years organising our Curlew Recovery work in the Upper Thames, Mike Pollard is handing the reins over to Sophie Cunnington in spring 2026. Sophie is currently leading Wild Oxfordshire's Yellow Wagtail Project and facilitates the Ridgeway and Clumps Farmer Clusters. She is also completing a PhD at the University of Reading where she is working to understand Yellow Wagtail breeding and foraging ecology in lowland England. Welcome, Sophie!

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NATURAL ENGLAND

toe Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment

The Upper Thames Curlew Recovery Project is funded by Natural England and TOE.
The Upper Thames Wader Group is a partnership of organisations working with farmers and volunteers to promote the recovery of Curlews and other wading birds.