# Curlew population in Orkney shows encouraging recovery after stoat control efforts



The population of curlews in Orkney has shown encouraging signs of recovery following a concerted effort to control an invasive predator species, according to a recent report by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). The positive trend comes after an initiative to reduce stoat numbers, which are small carnivorous mammals that were first recorded on the Orkney islands in 2010.

Curlews, native wading birds renowned for their distinctive calls and long curved bills, had experienced a sharp decline in Orkney. Surveys conducted between 2017 and 2019 revealed that the population had fallen by more than 50% compared to surveys carried out during 2006-2010. This alarming decrease coincided with the establishment and proliferation of stoats on the islands, which posed a new predation threat to the local birdlife.

In response, the Orkney Native Wildlife Project was launched in 2019 with the primary aim of removing stoats from the islands. Since then, more than 7,000 stoats have been eliminated, an effort credited by conservationists as crucial to the recovery of native species, including curlews. The latest survey, covering 100 sites and measuring pairs of wading birds per square kilometre, showed an increase from 12 to 14.5 pairs per square kilometre—a 21% rise since the low point recorded in 2019.

This recovery contrasts with trends seen elsewhere in Scotland and the UK, where curlew numbers are still declining. On mainland Scotland, populations dropped by 13% between 2012 and 2022, while across the UK the decline has been approximately 50% since 1995. The RSPB emphasised that despite these broader declines, the figures from Orkney represent a significant conservation success.

Chick survival rates on the islands have also improved since the stoat control measures began, although bad weather in 2024 caused some setbacks. The RSPB highlighted that sustained high nest success is key to enabling the curlew population to develop resilience against ongoing challenges such as predation, disease, and adverse weather. Each year’s cohort of chicks reaching maturity and reproducing contributes to strengthening the future stability of the species in the region.

Anne McCall, director of RSPB Scotland, commented on the progress in an interview with The Irish News (Belfast), stating: “It is fantastic to see that the hard work of the project team and many volunteers is starting to restore a positive future for vulnerable species in Orkney. This is the first major population survey for waders since work started to remove stoats from Orkney and the signs are really promising, as we see declines for curlew reversed.”

She continued, “Archipelagos like Orkney are always a delicate balance, with native predators, disease, bad weather and many other factors that influence the survival of our wildlife, but these are largely things that our wildlife has adapted to. Removing the invasive stoats from the islands is essential to giving Orkney’s wildlife the best chance to build the resilience it needs to meet these threats.”

While acknowledging that more work is needed to restore curlew numbers to levels prior to the arrival of stoats, McCall expressed optimism about the progress made so far: “There is still work to do to see numbers return to before stoats were first recorded, but results like this show the difference we are making.”

The Orkney Native Wildlife Project continues to monitor and support the local ecosystems, seeking to ensure the long-term survival of curlews and other native species impacted by invasive mammals. Further information about the initiative is available through the RSPB’s website.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://insideecology.com/2024/11/08/new-report-reveals-orkneys-wildlife-is-recovering-as-projects-final-phase-is-in-sight-2/> - Corroborates the recent report on wildlife recovery in Orkney and the removal of over 6,000 stoats, aligning with the stated 7,000 figure.
* <https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/scotland/posts/oh-whaup-a-place> - Supports the decline of curlews due to stoats and the progress of the Orkney Native Wildlife Project in stoat eradication.
* <https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/news/highlands-islands/6606872/orkney-stoat-project/> - Details the stoat eradication methods, including trap numbers and operational challenges, validating the project's scale and techniques.
* <https://www.orkneynativewildlife.org.uk/project/our-progress> - Confirms increased nest success rates for curlews and the role of biosecurity measures in preventing stoat spread.
* <https://www.gwct.org.uk/blogs/news/2023/september/predator-control-acceptable-in-orkney-but-not-abernethy-our-letter-in-the-times/> - Highlights conservation community recognition of the project's success in protecting ground-nesting birds like curlews.