



# Project **Godwit**

## Annual Report 2019

LIFE15 NAT/UK/000753 – LIFE BLACKWIT UK



David Morris/RSPB

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- Results of headstarting so far
- A busy year for community engagement



Jonathan Taylor/RSPB

Earith, a headstarted female released in 2017, returned to the Ouse Washes again in 2019 to breed.

## Progress in year three

**Project Godwit is a partnership project between RSPB and WWT with major funding from the EU LIFE Nature Programme. The project aims to secure the future of black-tailed godwits in the UK.**

### Sightings from the continent

We were delighted to receive a report in February of a young godwit in Coto Donãna, Spain that had fledged from the Nene Washes in 2018. This was closely followed by a sighting of headstarted male 'Tom', wintering in Porto Alto in Portugal, released in 2018. Another of the 2018 headstarted birds, 'Hurricane', was also spotted in Spain – at a nature reserve near

Valencia. The godwits that breed at the Nene and Ouse Washes spend the non-breeding season at wetland sites in Spain, Portugal and West Africa. It is wonderful to receive sightings of birds from the project and the team is grateful to all who report sightings to Project Godwit.

### Headstarting of chicks continues

In June, 48 young black-tailed godwits were released into the wild at two project sites: 33 at WWT Welney and 15 at RSPB Nene Washes. Headstarting involves collecting eggs from the wild under licence from Natural England. The chicks are then reared in captivity and released at the point of fledging. To date, 112 birds have been released by the project.

The number of breeding pairs at the Ouse Washes increased to 12 pairs across two sites this year – meaning

there are now more black-tailed godwits breeding at the Ouse Washes than in the past 20 years. With 33 pairs also breeding at the Nene Washes, this means the total number of breeding pairs of black-tailed godwits in the Fens population has increased to 45 pairs. This compares to 38 pairs in year 1 of the project, 2017.

Around a quarter of the breeding pairs in the Fens population now contain 1 or 2 headstarted birds, demonstrating the success of the trial to date. This is already providing best practice for other conservation efforts for small populations of threatened wader species, including the Eurasian Curlew in the UK and Ireland.

A total of 25 headstarted birds returned this year. Amongst these was Earith, a female released in 2017, who returned again to RSPB Ouse Washes. Her one-year-old daughter also returned to the Fens this year and paired with a headstarted male, who was released in 2017.

## Working with local communities

We welcomed Jess Owen to the team in February, to the role of Engagement Officer and a very busy programme of community outreach swiftly followed.

Eight primary schools local to WWT Welney and the Ouse Washes were visited and received 18 outreach sessions. Over 500 children took part in these sessions and all classes subsequently signed up to become 'Godwit Guardians'.

Project Godwit now has 19 Godwit Guardians in total. Becoming a Guardian links a local school or community group to one of our headstarted godwits, enabling them to follow the bird's progress over the coming years in the Fens and on migration across Europe and Africa.

We offer free visits and activities for primary schools located near the project sites. If you'd like us to visit your school please contact us [theteam@projectgodwit.org.uk](mailto:theteam@projectgodwit.org.uk).

41 Year 5 pupils and their teachers from Rackham C of E Primary School visited WWT Welney in the summer. They received a tour of the breeding facilities and viewed the chicks in their outdoor rearing pens before release.



Class 2 of Denver VC Primary School

## Godwit Festival and tours

Godwit tours for the public at WWT Welney continued this year, with 12 tours held across May and June. The tours comprised of a presentation and screened-off view of the rearing aviaries, where visitors could view the headstarted chicks outside before release.

The project held its own Godwit Festival at WWT Welney over a weekend in June.

Activities included talks by experts on the history of the Fens and the science behind the conservation of black-tailed godwits; guided walks from WWT and RSPB wardens; poetry workshops and family activities.

## Class of 2019 honours Scottish POWs

This year 15 of the headstarted birds were named in honour of Scottish prisoners of war who were brought to the Fens of East Anglia in the 17th century. These soldiers built the New Bedford River and many of the drainage works that created the landscape of the Fens as we know it today.

The Word Garden, a local community arts group, helped name some of the headstarted birds as part of 'The Origins Project', funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The names have been chosen to represent the story of the soldiers to remember them.

[thewordgarden.org.uk/projects/](http://thewordgarden.org.uk/projects/)

### Years 3 and 4 of Millfield Primary School – certified Godwit Guardians.



## Habitat creation

Eight new scrapes were created across two sites, to provide foraging areas for godwits and other wading birds.

Wet pools and scrapes provide important microhabitats which provide invertebrate food for black-tailed godwits and other waders. The new scrapes will also provide areas for birds to roost and by holding water will help mitigate against the impacts of dry weather, which could be very valuable when the Washes are dryer than usual. The last of the eight scrapes was created at the Ouse Washes in August.



**Pools and scrapes benefit an array of wading birds and attract invertebrate life.**

Predation is still a challenge for breeding godwits, with both ground predators and aerial predators attracted to godwit eggs and chicks. We continue to install exclusion fencing to try to keep predators out of key breeding areas and will be installing more in 2020.

Flooding of breeding areas in spring is also an issue for these ground-nesting birds and impacts productivity. It is important we improve breeding success in the wild if the gains from headstarting are to be consolidated long-term.

## Research and monitoring

This year 45 wild-caught chicks were fitted with colour rings, metal rings and Passive Integrated Transponder (PIT) tags. PIT tags are very light tracking devices that do not require a battery but have an internal microchip that is activated when it passes close to an antenna in the nest. The tag is attached to the bird's leg ring.

Of the 10 adult godwits caught this year, two were ringed with colour rings (the rest already having colour rings) and eight fitted with new geolocators. This is to help us better understand the movements of these migratory waders on migration, on their wintering grounds, as well as here in the UK.

Of the 48 headstarted godwit chicks released, 47 were ringed with colour rings and deployed with PIT tags and 19 were fitted with geolocators.



**All Project Godwit birds have a lime colour ring with a black 'E' on the right leg.**

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## About us

Project Godwit is a partnership between the RSPB and WWT with major funding from the EU Life Nature programme, the HSBC 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary fund, the National Lottery Heritage Fund via the Back from the Brink programme, Natural England, Leica UK and the Montague-Panton Animal Welfare Trust. The project aims to secure the future of black-tailed godwits in the UK.



[www.projectgodwit.org.uk](http://www.projectgodwit.org.uk)