



WADER GURU



'How many species of wader are there in the UK?'

'How many species of wader are there in the UK?'

SHORT ANSWER: There are 79 species on the official [British Ornithologists' Union list](#) (see appendix)

LONG ANSWER: Whilst there are currently 80 species on the British list you can't expect to see them all every year and one will never again appear on our shores, nor any other shores for that matter, due to being extinct. That unfortunate species is the [Eskimo Curlew](#), which, as a result of its extinct status (Critically Endangered on IUCN list), is the only wader on the list not on Category A, but on Category B. Only 7 records exist of this once abundant bird of the Americas between 1852 and 1887. They must have occurred more often than reported when in their hey-day as their migration route follows that of the [American Golden Plover](#) that is a regular, if scarce, visitor. The last record was on the Isles of Scilly. The closely related, and equally unfortunate (for the same reason), [Slender-billed Curlew](#) is not on the official list, however, a number of people believe a record of this species in Druridge Pools, Northumberland on 4th-7th May 1998 is credible. It was originally accepted by the BOURC, but was later removed in 2014.

UK breeding species (27):

There are 23 species of wader that breed in the UK on a regular basis, some, such as the [Eurasian Stone-Curlew](#), are summer visitors only, other species are resident like the [Black-tailed Godwit](#), although that does not mean the individuals are necessarily resident. In the case of the godwits the subspecies that breeds in the UK winters elsewhere and the subspecies that winters here breeds elsewhere; although a small number the latter do nest in northern Scotland and the Shetland Islands.

Some breeding species are scarce with only a few pairs breeding here, for example, [Wood Sandpiper](#) while others are widespread and common, like the [Common Redshank](#).



Wood Sandpiper a scarce breeding wader
© Elis Simpson



Common Redshank a common breeding wader
© Elis Simpson

There are four species that have bred in the past. The [Black-winged Stilt](#) is increasingly regular and may well colonise the UK as the climate warms. [Kentish Plovers](#) previously bred in small numbers, mainly on the south-east coast of England, but were extirpated in the 1930s. Since then they have bred a number of times the last being in Lincolnshire in 1979.



Black-winged Stilt, a potential coloniser species
© Elis Simpson



Kentish Plover, a former breeding species © Elis Simpson

The last two of this quartet are actually rather surprising in that the species concerned are a scarce visitor and a rarity. The [Pectoral Sandpiper](#) is a frequent visitor to our shores and many have been seen displaying in springtime. In Scotland in 2004 one such pair was seen in nuptial display and, later in the year, with what was described as a 'very young juvenile', so presumably they bred - although no nest or eggs were ever found. And finally a pair of [Spotted Sandpipers](#), bred in the Highland Region in 1975. Hybrid pairs with Common Sandpiper have been observed with hybrid young fledged in 1991.



Pectoral Sandpiper, young birds were seen © Elis Simpson



Spotted Sandpiper bred once in Scotland © Elis Simpson

UK non-breeding species (52):

In this very much larger group of waders on the British list, some are regular winter visitors; [Grey Plover](#), [Bar-tailed Godwit](#), [Ruddy Turnstone](#), [Red Knot](#), [Sanderling](#), [Jack Snipe](#) and [Spotted Redshank](#), while some are merely passage migrants such as [Curlew Sandpiper](#), [Little Stint](#) and [Grey Phalarope](#). Many of these are quite numerous, but by far the biggest list of wader species recorded in the UK is the list of scarce and accidental visitors.

This section contains 45 species, those categorised as scarce visitors are only 8 and the remaining 37 are the 'rarities'. The very rarest of these with only two records apiece are [Little Curlew](#) (last seen 1985) and [Grey-tailed Tattler](#) (last seen 1994).

Further reading;

[British Summer Visiting Breeding Waders.](#)
[Kentish Plover: What's in a name?](#)

[The trials and tribulations of being a Curlew](#)
[Meet-the-godwits.pdf](#)

Appendix:

Regular UK breeding waders - resident species (14);

Eurasian Oystercatcher (96,000 pairs.)
 Pied Avocet (around 2,000 pairs.)
 Northern Lapwing (98,000 pairs.)
 European Golden Plover (47,000 pairs.)
 Common Ringed Plover (5,500 pairs.)
 Eurasian Curlew (59,000 pairs.)
 Dunlin (9,600 pairs.)
 Purple Sandpiper (scarce; 1 or 2 pairs most years.)
 Ruff (scarce; breeds most years. Not always proven.)
 Eurasian Woodcock (57,000 males.)
 Common Snipe (67,000 pairs.)
 Common Redshank (22,000 pairs.)
 Green Sandpiper (scarce; 2 pairs / year on average.)
 Common Greenshank (around 1,000 pairs.)

Regular UK breeding waders- visiting migrant species (9);

Eurasian Stone-Curlew (around 300 pairs.)
 Little Ringed Plover (up to 600 pairs.)
 Eurasian Dotterel (around 450 breeding males.)
 Eurasian Whimbrel (around 300 pairs.)
 Black-tailed Godwit (up to 50 pairs.)
 Red-necked Phalarope (50-60 pairs.)
 Temminck's Stint (scarce; displaying males most years.)
 Common Sandpiper (13,000 pairs.)

Wood Sandpiper (scarce; up to 30 pairs.)

Species that have bred;

Black-winged Stilt
 Kentish Plover
 Spotted Sandpiper (see Accidental visitors)
 Pectoral Sandpiper (see Scarce visitors)

Regular non breeding visitors (7);

Grey Plover (34,000)
 Bar-tailed Godwit (54,000)
 Ruddy Turnstone (43,000; may have bred, not proven.)
 Red Knot (265,000)
 Sanderling (21,000)
 Jack Snipe (110,000)
 Spotted Redshank (420)

Regular passage migrants (3);

Curlew Sandpiper (740)
 Little Stint (770)
 Grey Phalarope (328)

Scarce visitors (8);

Black-winged Stilt (6)
 American Golden Plover (24)

Kentish Plover (fewer than 20)
White-rumped Sandpiper (fewer than 20)
Buff-breasted Sandpiper (44)
Pectoral Sandpiper (153; has bred)
Semipalmated Sandpiper (2)
Collared Pratincole (1)

Accidental visitors (BOURC accepted records to 2021) **(38)**

Sociable Lapwing (44)
White-tailed Lapwing (fewer than 20)
Grey-headed Lapwing (1)
Pacific Golden Plover (100)
Semipalmated Plover (4)
Killdeer (59)
Caspian Plover (6)
Lesser Sandplover (6)
Mongolian Sandplover (included above)
Greater Sandplover (18)
Upland Sandpiper (48)
Hudsonian Whimbrel (10)
Little Curlew (2)
Hudsonian Godwit (3)
Great Knot (5)
Broad-billed Sandpiper (267)
Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (32)

Stilt Sandpiper (38)
Long-toed Stint (3)
Red-necked Stint (8)
Baird's Sandpiper (290)
Least Sandpiper (41)
Western Sandpiper (12)
Long-billed Dowitcher (267)
Short-billed Dowitcher (4)
Great Snipe (701)
Wilson's Snipe (10)
Terek Sandpiper (89)
Wilson's Phalarope (247)
Spotted Sandpiper (224; has bred once.)
Solitary Sandpiper (36)
Grey-tailed Tattler (2)
Lesser Yellowlegs (403)
Greater Yellowlegs
Marsh Sandpiper (146)
Cream-coloured Courser (34)
Oriental Pratincole (7)
Black-winged Pratincole (40)

Extinct species (1);

Eskimo Curlew (7 between 1852-1887; accidental)



Common Ringed Plover on its nest © Elis Simpson

Statistics sources:

[Rare Breeding Birds Panel](#)

[British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee](#)

[British Trust for Ornithology](#)

[Back to the Wader Guru.](#)