

UK RUDDY DUCK ERADICATION PROGRAMME PROJECT BULLETIN

APRIL 2014

- The UK Ruddy Duck population is now thought to have fallen to around 40 birds, of which only ten or so are thought to be adult females. At its peak in 2001, the population was estimated at almost 6,000 birds. The strategy is to remove these females to prevent future breeding, resulting in the remaining birds dying out naturally.
- Under the auspices of the Bern Convention, all of the key countries in Europe have agreed to aim for complete eradication of Ruddy Ducks by 2015. As part of this commitment Defra has agreed to fund further work in 2014/15 which should see further falls in the national population and the loss of breeding populations at regional level.
- Only one Ruddy Duck was seen in Spain in 2013, compared to an average of 17 per year immediately preceding the start of the eradication programme.

Background

The Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis* is an American bird introduced to the UK over 60 years ago. A small number escaped from captivity and formed a feral population which numbered around 6,000 by January 2000. In the early 1990s Ruddy Ducks, almost certainly originating from the UK, began to appear in Spain where they hybridised with the native White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala*. In the long-term hybridisation could lead to the extinction of the White-headed Duck so, following several years of research into the most effective methods, an eradication programme for Ruddy Ducks in the UK began in 2005.

Progress in the UK

It is thought that the UK population now consists of around 30 males and 10 females. However the birds are highly dispersed, with a number of very small regional populations which appear to be independent of each other. None of these are thought to hold more than two adult females. Productivity in 2013 was the lowest for at least 15 years, with less than one duckling fledged per adult female. In 2013 confirmed breeding is only known to have occurred in Hampshire (one brood, two birds fledged), East Anglia (one brood, two birds fledged), Sussex (one brood, subsequently removed), and Cheshire (one brood, all lost to predation). The presence of a probable immature male in Greater Manchester in January 2014 also provides evidence of breeding in that county.

Ruddy Ducks have now been lost as a breeding species in a number of areas, including Scotland (no recorded breeding for four years), Wales (none for two years), and the northern counties of England (none since 2009 in Cumbria, Lancashire, Northumberland, County Durham and Cleveland). Very small numbers of birds (often single males) may persist in some of these areas, but as long as no further breeding occurs, the species will die out completely in due course. The removal of the few remaining adult females in counties in the Midlands and south of England will ensure that other regions follow suit.

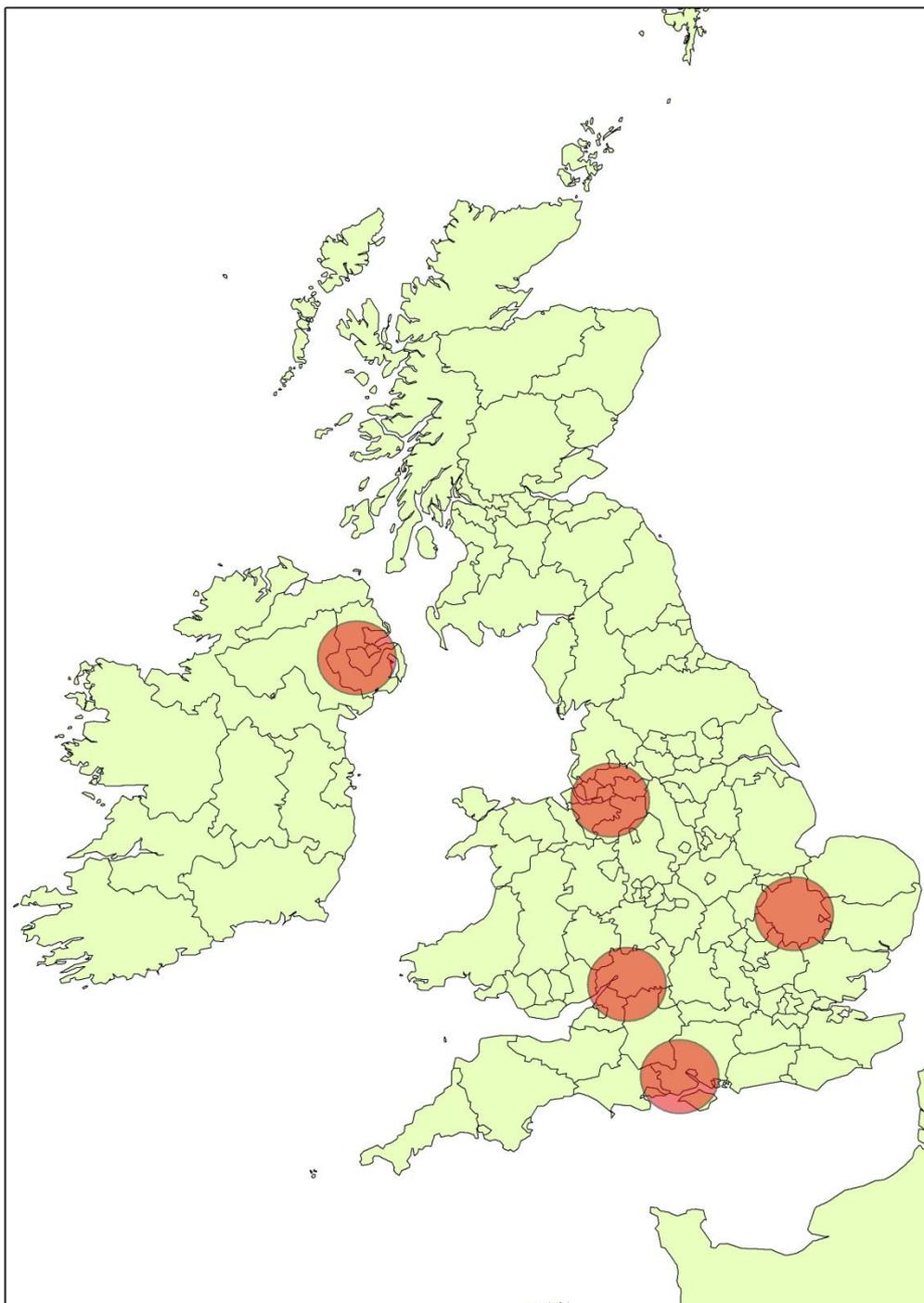


Figure 1 Potential breeding hotspots in 2014

Progress in Europe

Small populations of Ruddy Ducks still persist in France, the Netherlands, and Belgium, and these will also have to be eradicated to ensure that the risk to the White-headed Duck is removed permanently. Under the auspices of the Bern Convention, all of these countries have agreed to aim for complete eradication of Ruddy Ducks by 2015. Control in France is ongoing, with 115 birds culled between April 2012 and March 2013. Numbers have fallen to around 160 birds (from a peak of almost 350 in 2006/07) but the eradication strategy in France is currently being revised with the aim of speeding up the fall in numbers. In Belgium control is also ongoing, with between 15 and 20 birds seen in most years. Nine birds were culled in Belgium in 2012/2013. Many of the Belgian birds are sighted close to the Dutch border, and it is thought that these birds come in from the Netherlands where an eradication programme is due to start in the coming weeks.

Future work in the UK

It is clear that eradication of Ruddy Ducks from the UK remains feasible and that numbers continue to fall as a result of the control effort. Defra has agreed to fund additional work in 2014/15 in line with the commitment to eradicate Ruddy Ducks by 2015. AHVLA would like to express its sincere thanks to all the landowners who have allowed access since 2005. The progress towards eradication could not have been made without their assistance and patience, and their continued co-operation remains vital.

If the few remaining adult females can be removed then the eradication will be effectively complete. To help ensure that the work is carried out effectively, we are asking members of the public to report any sightings or reports over the next 18 months (even if second or third-hand) to jain.henderson@ahvla.gsi.gov.uk, with the key information being the location, the total number of Ruddy Ducks thought to be present and the number of females thought to be present. All reports received will be dealt with in strict confidence.

Further general information on the project can be found at www.nonnativespecies.org.