



UK RUDDY DUCK ERADICATION PROGRAMME PROJECT BULLETIN APRIL 2011

Summary

- The UK Ruddy Duck population is now thought to have fallen to fewer than 100 birds, from an estimated 4,400 in September 2005.
- The eradication programme co-funded by EU LIFE-Nature and the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) ended on 31 March 2011. However, it is now clear that full eradication is feasible and Defra has agreed to fund additional work in 2011/12 which should result in further falls in the population.
- The other key countries in Europe (France, the Netherlands and Belgium) recognise that eradication is feasible and it has been agreed at the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention that Ruddy Ducks should be eradicated across Europe by 2015.
- Only one Ruddy Duck was recorded in Spain in 2010. This bird was eventually culled in February 2011.

Background

The Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis* is a North 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 can hybridise 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. It was financed by the EU LIFE-Nature Programme and Defra.

Progress in the UK since April 2010

A total of 322 adult and immature Ruddy Ducks were shot on 39 sites between 1 April 2010 and 31 March 2011. As the population has fallen the birds are to be found on fewer sites and the Food and Environment Research Agency (Fera) continues to target breeding and wintering sites which have not previously been visited. Shooting of Ruddy Ducks has now taken place on 128 sites across Scotland, England and Wales since 2005. This includes eight new sites in the last 12 months.

Independent monitoring of Ruddy Duck numbers

Since the start of the eradication programme, the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT) has carried out independent surveys of key Ruddy Duck wintering sites. As the eradication has progressed and numbers on the principal wintering sites have fallen, more sites have been surveyed to ensure better coverage and accuracy. Two co-ordinated counts were carried out by WWT in December 2010 and January 2011. During the December count 111 sites were visited and 142 Ruddy Ducks were recorded, and in January the number had fallen to 114 birds on 116 sites. This compares to 269 birds counted in January 2010. Three separate counts were carried out in Northern Ireland in October 2010, January 2011 and March 2011. The peak count was only nine individuals (October 2010), down from 18 in 2009/10. Only one of these was a female bird, suggesting that productivity in Northern Ireland will again be extremely low in 2011.

Since the January 2011 counts, Fera has culled a further 73 Ruddy Ducks. We are aware that small numbers of birds were to be found on some sites not covered by the WWT counts, so the current UK population is estimated to be around 90 individuals. It continues to concentrate on increasingly smaller numbers of "traditional" breeding and wintering sites, so continued control until March 2012 should see a further significant reduction in the population.

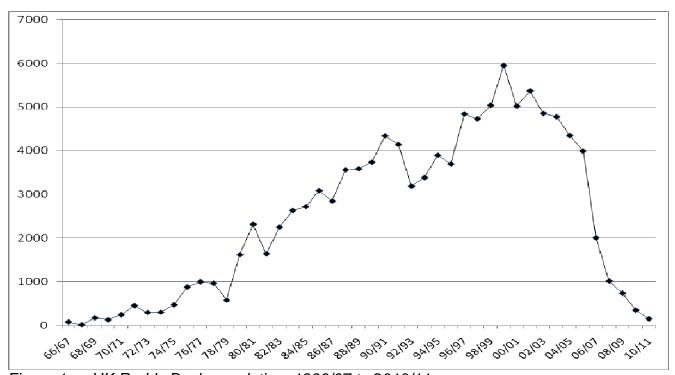


Figure 1 UK Ruddy Duck population, 1966/67 to 2010/11

Progress in Europe

Assistance from France, Belgium and the Netherlands will be required to ensure that Ruddy Ducks can be eradicated across Europe. Both France and Belgium continue to carry out control of their Ruddy Duck populations. In 2010 six birds out of 21 were culled in Belgium, while France culled 101 birds. The French population has begun to decline following a number of years of very slow but steady increase, and Belgium has successfully prevented the establishment of a breeding population. A dedicated Ruddy Duck survey in the Netherlands in February 2011 suggests that the Dutch population is now in the region of 40-45 birds. This has fallen in recent years and suggests that there has been movement of birds between the Netherlands and the UK, with shooting in the UK at least partially responsible for the decline. It is thought that control of Ruddy Ducks in the Netherlands is likely to start in late summer 2011.

A third and final European workshop was held in Madrid in November 2010. This meeting was attended by representatives from Spain, France, the Netherlands, UK and Belgium. The UK was congratulated on the very significant progress towards eradication, and a revised action plan for the eradication of the Ruddy Duck in the Western Palaearctic was presented by the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust. It was agreed by all parties that the work in the UK has shown that eradication is feasible, and that all European countries should continue with active control programmes with the intention of removing wild Ruddy Ducks across Europe by 2015. This decision was formally adopted at the meeting of the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention in December 2010.

A Ruddy Duck was sighted at a number of locations in Spain in autumn 2010 but stayed for only a few days at each site. What is thought to be the same bird was eventually shot in Murcia in February 2011.

Future work in the UK

It is now clear that eradication of Ruddy Ducks from the UK is feasible, and Defra has agreed to fund additional work in 2011/12 which should result in further significant falls in the population. This is in line with the commitment of other European countries to eradicate Ruddy Ducks elsewhere by 2015, which will ensure that the threat posed by Ruddy Ducks to the White-headed Duck is finally removed.

FERA 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. The presence of birds at any site can still be reported to iain.henderson@fera.gsi.gov.uk and this will assist us in the final stages of the eradication.

Further general information on the project can be found at https://secure.fera.defra.gov.uk/nonnativespecies/index.cfm?pageid=244





