



# Whimbrel

## *Numenius phaeopus*

### Status

Amber listed: BL  
SPEC 4 (S)  
Schedule 1 of WCA 1981  
Annex II/2 of EC Wild Birds Directive

### National monitoring

Rare Breeding Birds Panel.  
WeBS.

### Population and distribution

The entire UK breeding population is confined to Scotland. Most are found on the **exposed** heathland and moorland of Shetland, the rest on Orkney, the Western Isles and the north coast of the mainland (88–91 *Atlas*). Numbers of breeding whimbrel have increased since the 1950s on Shetland and Orkney, but not elsewhere (88–91 *Atlas*). There are an estimated 530 breeding pairs of whimbrel in the UK (*Population Estimates*).

### Ecology

Whimbrel breed mainly on serpentine heaths, wet moorlands and blanket bogs with short vegetation (88–91 *Atlas*, M Grant pers comm). A clutch of usually four eggs is laid in a scrape scantily lined with grass or moss, in mid-May to early June. Incubation lasts about 26 days, the peak of hatching is 13–20 June, and the young fledge about 29 days after hatching; most chicks have fledged by mid-August (*Red Data Birds*). Whimbrel are single-brooded.

## Breeding season survey – population

It is possible that this species will be encountered during wader surveys using the field-by-field method described in the generic methods section. The method given below, however, is based on that used by Richardson (1990) and M Grant (pers comm).

#### Information required

- maximum number of territories (=pairs).

#### Number and timing of visits

Two visits, between 20 May and 15 June, separated by one week.

#### Time of day

Any time of day.

#### Weather constraints

Avoid cold, wet and windy conditions.

### Sites/areas to visit

Heath, bog and acid grassland on Shetland, the Western Isles, the north Scottish mainland and Orkney.

### Equipment

- 1:25,000 OS map
- Schedule 1 licence.

### Safety reminders

Nothing specific. See general guidelines in the *Introduction*.

### Disturbance

Keep to a minimum.

### Methods

Mark the boundary of the survey area on a map and take the same field map on both visits. Cover all areas of suitable habitat using parallel transects about 200 m apart (the exact distance depends on the terrain). Mark on the field map the position of any whimbrel actively calling or apparently on territory. Prefix all mapped registrations from visit one with an 'A', and those from visit two with a 'B'. Take the position of the nest (and centre of the territory) to be where alarm-calling is at its most intense, often with both birds of the pair calling actively overhead or undertaking distraction displays. This might be difficult to determine as whimbrel may fly up to 500 m to defend their territories. One member of the pair may also adopt a characteristic secretive 'creeping' run. If the observer is very close to the nest, the pair will often alight nearby and continue to call in an extremely agitated fashion. Establish the number of territories by pooling the information recorded on both visits. This might be difficult in areas of high density; the mean distance between territory centres can be as low as 224 m.

A site map should be prepared showing the area covered together with the number of territories found which equals the number of breeding pairs.

### Reference

Richardson, M G (1990) The distribution and status of whimbrel *Numenius p. phaeopus* in Shetland and Britain. *Bird Study* 37: 61–68.