New Forest Curlews: predation and other factors affecting their breeding success

Mike Short and Elli Rivers (Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust)

The Eurasian Curlew is regarded as one of the UK's highest conservation priority bird species and the New Forest holds what is arguably the most important breeding population in the English lowlands, being at the southern extremity of its range. In line with other studies across Europe, the main demographic bottleneck for New Forest curlews is poor breeding success. Since 2020, extensive field research by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) - through a Bournemouth University curlew PhD project - has revealed remarkably high nest losses, principally due to fox predation. Using a mark-recapture analytical approach, modelling of key factors which might influence curlew nest survival shows fox sighting rate by professional wildlife managers to be the strongest determinant of nest success. Tandem research by GWCT on fox population dynamics in the New Forest suggests a high density of foxes is being subsidised by anthropogenic food sources, leading to intense predation pressure on curlews and other ground-nesting birds. Radio-tracking of curlew chicks to determine survival outcomes reveals a surprisingly high proportion of chicks found dead with no sign of predation, with other deaths associated with birds of prey. Further research on curlew chick survival to determine main causes of mortality and fledging success is urgently required to inform local curlew conservation efforts and to help safeguard this nationally important breeding population.