

Are National Highways' provisions for the rare stone-curlew on the Salisbury Plain secure?



A pair of fledgling goggle-eyed stone-curlew on the Salisbury Plain Special Protection Area. Image copyright: Stonehenge Alliance

[Stonehenge Alliance comments](#) on National Highways' planning application for a replacement stone-curlew, prompted journalist, [Gareth Huw Davies](#), to ask in this guest article:

"At a time of declining biodiversity, should we deliberately risk degrading a complex mesh of natural life in favour of a road scheme?"

The first casualty of National Highways' multi-billion-pound scheme to plunge the A303 in a tunnel under the Stonehenge World Heritage site is likely to be a strange, rare bird of

the night, as insignificant and retiring in the historic landscape as the stones are massive and dominant.

Few people will ever see the stone-curlew, crow-sized with a large head, yellow legs, and a haunting call. It sits perfectly camouflaged on the rolling downland by day, and probes for invertebrates in the short grass with its sharp eyes by night.

Confined to a few sites in East Anglia and Southern England, the bird is listed under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, an elite list of rare birds 'protected by special penalties'. One of its strongholds is near Stonehenge on the Salisbury Plain thanks to a conservation programme involving farmers and the RSPB over the past 20 years. [1]

The problem for the stone-curlew (unrelated to the curlew, predominantly a shore bird) is that one of its nesting sites in Winterbourne Stoke just happens to lie within the construction zone of the A303 scheme.

National Highways does not gloss over the damage the road will do to the stone-curlew breeding sites on Salisbury Plain. But the message on its website is reassuring. 'We found stone-curlews breeding in the area as part of our environmental surveys, so because it's (sic) protected we need to make special provision for them. The creation of an area of new chalk grassland will establish new habitats for wildflowers, bats, butterflies and birds, including the rare Stone-curlew.' [2]

So far, so optimistic. National Highways has applied to Wiltshire Council for permission to create a replacement breeding plot, on Parsonage Down National Nature Reserve. This would be a one hectare 'land scrape', where turf would be removed to expose the chalk. The hope is that the migrating stone-curlews returning in the spring would, of their own

volition, find this an attractive breeding habitat.

In addition, National Highways has even held out the prospect of 'net enhancement' by creating a further breeding plot on the RSPB's reserve at Winterbourne Downs, eleven kilometres east of Stonehenge.

But are National Highways and their RSPB advisers being too blasé about the potential of stone-curlew finding a new safe nesting spot? Is the road promoter not being overly optimistic that it will achieve 'net enhancement' on new plots eleven kilometres away? These site-faithful birds will surely look closer to home. It is surprising that Natural England and the RSPB both support the application. Neither has objected to the threat of disturbance, from the A303 road scheme, to the population successfully established by the RSPB near Stonehenge where they have created the perfect habitat over many years. [3]

After all, attracting stone-curlew to new plots is not the same as introducing red kites in Southern England in the 1990s, untroubled as they boldly soar over town and countryside. Stone-curlews are known to be easily disturbed, and even if the new site were quickly colonised, the bird would face an immediate adverse factor.

Land close to the new nesting site is to be the place where contractors will dump 'arisings', 400,000 m³ of chalk excavated from the tunnel and road cuttings. Objectors to the road scheme, the Stonehenge Alliance, question whether the stone-curlew could tolerate years of heavy vehicle movements and human activity close to the new plot. [4, 5]

Some might see a huge imbalance here: the fate of a rare, retiring bird which most people will never see, and may not even have heard of, set against the, so its proponents claim, benefits of a new road created to make life easier for the public and business.

But look at it another way. In a world of severely declining biodiversity, should we risk deliberately degrading yet another piece of the complex mesh of natural life we revere so much in TV programmes, in favour of a transient, polluting form of transport which itself could become obsolete in not too many generations from now?

References and further reading

- [1] RSPB (27 February 2017), [The return of the stone-curlew](#)
- [2] National Highways (25 January 2024), [Planning application for stone-curlew breeding plot](#)
- [3] Irvin Times (15 May 2024), [The National Trust, RSPB and WWF unveiled guidance on Wednesday designed to help workers encourage their businesses to put the climate and nature crisis at the heart of decision-making.](#)
- [4] Taylor et al (2007), Work on disturbance factors to Stone Curlew on Salisbury Plain quoted in Sharp et al (2008), [The effect of housing development and roads on the distribution of stone curlews in the Brecks: Evidence to support the Appropriate Assessment of development plans and projects in Breckland](#)
- [5] Comments by the stone-curlew specialist advising Stonehenge Alliance can be found on p9 Appendix 2 [here](#). At the time of publication, [National Highways' application](#) had not been determined by Wiltshire Council.

Listen to the stone-curlew

Stone curlews have been nicknamed Goggle-eyed plovers, Thick knee and Wailing heath chickens. Listen to their call at dusk and dawn here: BBC Radio 4 (30 April 2014), [Tweet of the day](#)



[Charles J. Sharp – Own work, from Sharp Photography, sharpphotography.co.uk](https://www.sharpphotography.co.uk) Wikimedia Commons