

The Pied Avocet – in black and white*

DE: Säbelschnäbler

DK: Klyde

SE: Skärfläcka

P-G Bentz, Lennart Karlsson, Mikael Kristersson & Göran Walinder
(Falsterbo Bird Observatory, Fyren, SE-239 40 Falsterbo)

The Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* serves as an indicator species in one of the reference sites (Vellinge) within EU's LIFE-project BaltCoast. The reference population has been censused since 1988. Heavy predation and floods have necessitated measures in order to support the population and increase reproduction success.

The Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta* is a well-known breeding bird in Vellinge municipality. This slender, black-and-white wader, with its thin, upcurved bill, is an easy species to identify. You often see it in sandy and marshy areas along parts of the Vellinge coastline. From the Harbour Road and the former embankment in Skanör, you can watch the Avocet's family life on a small islet called Landgrens holme (approx. 5000 m²).



The adult Avocet. Photo: P-G Bentz/Sturnus

The first part of the species' scientific name originates from the Latin word *recurvirostra* (upcurved) and *avosetta* could be derived from the diminutive form of an old Italian word for a 'small bird'.

The Avocet returns from its wintering areas in southwestern Europe and northern Africa in late March and early April. It breeds in colonies with up to hundreds of pairs on grazed coastal meadows and sandy reefs. Mating starts immediately after arrival and the first eggs are laid at the end of April. The clutch usually consists of 3 to 4 eggs in a depression in the grass or sand. Both sexes incubate for 23-27 days.



The Avocet's nest. Photo: P-G Bentz/Sturnus

Floods sometimes destroy the clutch, but the Avocet then lays another clutch, though with fewer eggs, in another place. Egg predation is very common, in spite of the fact that the two parents defend their clutch by attacking and

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chasing the predator. Corvids, foxes, badgers, minks and even free-running dogs can eliminate even big breeding colonies. Grazing cattle and sheep sometimes cause damage to eggs and chicks by tramping or laying down on them.

The chicks hatch in late May and a hectic period follows in the Avocet colony. The chicks immediately find their own food in shallow water, guided by their parents. When foraging



The Avocet chick. Photo: P-G Bentz/Sturnus

they move their heads sideways, sweeping the bill through the water in order to catch food items like sandworms, insects and small crustaceans. Snails, shells and even small fish are also found on the menu. The parents are busy protecting their chicks but still many are taken by corvids and gulls. Minks and polecats are among the mammals taking advantage of the free buffet.

Competition for food and space force the breeding pairs with chicks to spread over vast areas just a few days after hatching. Chicks not yet fledged have been found up to 1.5 km away from the hatching site.

After 35-43 days, depending on food resources, the chicks are fledged. They look very much like the adult birds, but the black parts of the plumage tend to be brownish-black. By now the chicks are independent and the adult birds gather in big flocks before taking off for the moulting areas in Vadehavet along the western coast of Jutland. After finishing the moult the birds continue to their wintering areas. The



The road sign "Avocet crossing" helping chicks to disperse safely after hatching. Photo: P-G Bentz/Sturnus

yearlings leave somewhat later and single birds can be observed as late as October.

According to estimates one third of the Swedish population of Avocets breed in Vellinge. The County Administrative Board has given Falsterbo Bird Observatory the task of censusing the breeding population on the Falsterbo peninsula since 1988. The population has varied from some ten to 200 pairs. The diagram (Figure 1) shows the number of pairs starting to breed in the nature reserve of Northern Flommen, a wetland area which includes the main breeding site Landgrens holme.



Cattle on Landgrens holme and the Falsterbo Lighthouse. Photo: P-G Bentz/Sturnus

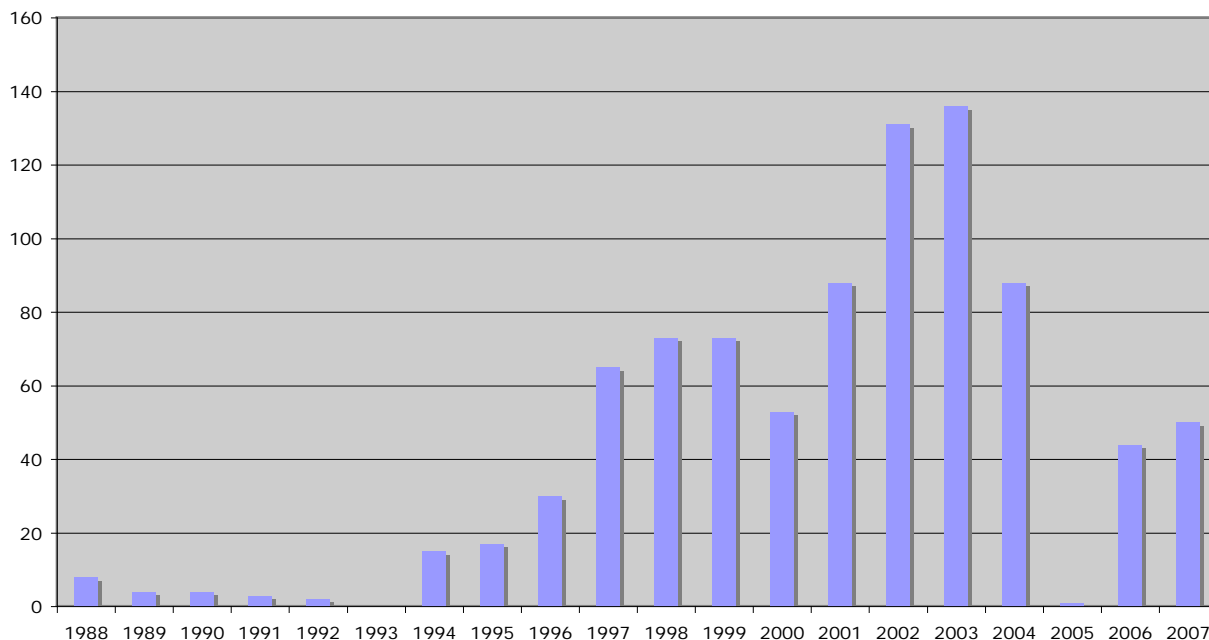


Figure 1. Number of breeding Avocet pairs in the nature reserve called Northern Flommen in the period 1988-2007.

The Avocet is very sensitive to disturbance during breeding and predation takes a heavy toll on eggs and chicks in some years. In 2002 more than 100 clutches hatched and approximately 350 small chicks were seen on the islet. It has been estimated that less than one third of these grew up to fully-fledged stage. In 2003 only 12 out of 136 clutches hatched due to predation. Tracks of badgers and minks as well as dogs (!) were found on the islet. The badger wiped out the colony in 2004 and none of the 88 clutches hatched. The predation took place just a few days before hatching. Only one pair started to breed in 2005 and the outcome is unknown. Breeding in 2006 was a complete failure due to floods and predation.

In 2007 a new predator appeared on the stage. Jackdaws frequently visited the islet after 50 Avocet pairs had started to incubate. In compact flocks of 15-20 birds the jackdaws minutely searched the area for eggs. The breeding colony suffered heavy losses and no clutches hatched. Some Avocet pairs moved to another area within the nature reserve and 3-4 clutches hatched. It is unknown if any chicks grew up to a fully-fledged stage.

Because of the extensive breeding failure on Landgrens holme during the last five years, mainly due to floods and predation, some measures have been taken. A provisional dam has been constructed in order to get a stable water level around the breeding islet and



Avocet egg predated by a Corvid. Photo: P-G Bentz/Sturnus



The Jackdaw - a new predator. Photo: P-G Bentz/Sturnus

reduce predation from mammals. An electric fence measuring 2 x 4 km (!) has also been put up around the pasture with grazing cattle. So far these actions have proved to be insufficient, and a permanent dam will be built in September 2007.

It is of crucial importance that the management of the nature reserves continue and the most important ingredient is grazing by cattle and/or sheep. But still other actions must be taken to support the breeding Avocets and increase their reproductive success thus maintaining the species as the token bird for the Vellinge municipality.

References:

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