

[Web editor's note: some links have been updated in this document]

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News from the International Waterbird Census

Western Palearctic and Southwest Asia

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Newsletter for Co-ordinators of national waterbird monitoring schemes

Waterbird Monitoring Group: *Chris Baker, Dineke Beintema, Simon Delany, Niels Gilissen, Lieuwe Haanstra, Ward Hagemeyer, Berna Heikamp, Cecilia Reyes, Janine van Vessem*

Introduction

Welcome to the second issue in the recent series of IWC Newsletters! The main function of this publication is to keep co-ordinators of national waterbird monitoring schemes up-to-date with developments in the International Waterbird Census in the Western Palearctic and Southwest Asia Region. This Newsletter also gives a flavour of what is happening in other branches of IWC in Africa, the Neotropics and in the Asia-Pacific region.

Staff News

There are four new faces among the staff involved with supporting and developing waterbird monitoring work at Wetlands International's Africa-Europe-Middle East (AEME) office.

Ward Hagemeyer joined the team in a new position titled Technical Advisor to the Biodiversity Programme. A number of new commitments, for example under the new GEF PDF-B African/Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA), Wader Flyway Atlas and Convention on Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF) have generated new work and Ward was recruited to strengthen the

management of Wetlands International's AEMA office. He will also be involved in developing new projects. Ward previously worked as head of the Department of Research and International Affairs for SOVON, Dutch Center for Field Ornithology, the organisation which co-ordinates bird monitoring in the Netherlands. He is vice-chairman of the European Bird Census Council and is known for being the principal editor of the 2.5 kg *EBCC Atlas of European Breeding Birds*. Ward is active on the board of the Working Group International Wetland and Waterbird Research (WIWO) and has been counting waterbirds for many years in The Netherlands and on expeditions in Africa and Eurasia.

Niels Gilissen has recently joined our staff, replacing Edith Hubert as Technical Assistant - Waterbird Monitoring. He will be mainly responsible for managing data gathered in the International Waterbird Census (IWC). The first goal for Niels is to complete the dataset for 1997-1999 as a basis for publication of a new IWC-report and new Waterbird Population Estimates. Furthermore he will be dealing with a survey on the status and management of the North-American Ruddy Duck in Europe. Niels graduated in Environmental Sciences in 1996 and has since been working in several ecological projects for the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Vogelbescherming Nederland (the Dutch BirdLife International partner) and the Provincial council of Noord-Brabant (The Netherlands). He is a birdwatcher and as a member of the Working Group International Wetland and Waterbird Research (WIWO), he has organised a voluntary expedition to Tunisia to count waterbirds.

Dr **Chris Baker** (GEF co-ordinator) has joined Wetlands International from the Wetlands Ecosystems Research Group, Royal Holloway University of London where he carried out research into the functioning of wetlands and managed related projects. His work has covered aspects of wetland ecology, hydrology and biogeochemistry and the development of decision support systems for wetland management. Chris was taken on to develop and manage the ambitious new GEF PDF-B African/Eurasian Waterbirds Flyway Project (see page 4).

Berna Heikamp is our new Biodiversity Programme Assistant. She will assist the Waterbird Monitoring Group in e.g. logistics and communication. Berna was largely responsible for organising the logistics of the highly successful Waterbird Monitoring Steering Committee meeting in November 2000, and helped organise Wetlands International's (also highly successful) 2000 Christmas party!

IWC Database Update

This year we started to make real progress with our data management upgrade. This upgrade includes transfer of data and programs from DBASE IV to ACCESS and development of a menu-driven, user-friendly data management system in Microsoft ACCESS.

A modern and flexible data management system will greatly improve the ability of Wetlands International to base conservation action on sound science. In order to achieve this, most of the old data have already been transferred. The new data structure divides the former COUNT database into two tables: visit information (method, water, ice, tidal, weather, disturbance, protection, threats, datasource) and count information (count, species, quality, coverage). The former SITE database has also been separated into two tables: the site information (sitename, country, region, co-ordinates, national code, Ramsar code, IBA code) and the habitat information (area, habitat, depth, salinity, acidity, drying, rainfall, managed, hunting, fishing, farming, protected, threats). We realise

that some of the information, especially in the new visit and habitat tables may at present be difficult for national co-ordinators and counters to supply. This additional information will enable us to better describe and analyse waterbird population trends, and make recommendations for action. New count and site forms are also being developed in line with the new structure.

The development of the data management system or "software" is in progress, and we hope to be ready with the first version in the first half of 2001. This software includes routines for data input and import, with quality checks. Some queries and extraction routines will also be available, as well as routines for presenting details of site coverage and analysing population trends. The software will be available to anyone who is interested. The use of this software will minimise some of our problems with data quality and formats. For this we will also ask all national waterbird count co-ordinators to check and update the threshold values for different species occurring in their countries. Please let us know if you want to help in this activity.

We hope in future to be able to integrate the IWC data with Ramsar, IBA and other data in a geographical information system (GIS). By sharing information in this way, we should enhance our ability to provide expert information in support of global waterbird conservation. An important component of the GIS will be maps of sites that are counted. We will give national waterbird count co-ordinators more details of our need for maps as plans develop.

Wader and Goose databases

Within the scope of the restructuring of the IWC database, the Wader and Goose databases are now also in the final phase of this laborious work. An important goal was for data from all waterbird groups to be stored in the same structure on the same computer, and for the same 'software' to be used in their management. For the wader database, the restructuring was not too difficult as it was rebuilt 3 ½ years ago, using the IWC structure.

For the Goose database the technical problems of restructuring to ensure compatibility with other waterbird count databases have been greater, because Goose censuses in many countries use different counting schemes and methods having sometimes the same, sometimes different sites. The restructuring has been an ideal opportunity to check the contents of the Goose database and to give obviously identical sites the same name and code. This time consuming but essential task has now been started for many countries. The opinion of the national co-ordinators about which sites are the same and which are different will be a decisive element of this work and we will be asking for help with this in the coming months.

IWC Web Upgrade

A visit to the Waterbird Monitoring component of Wetlands International's website (<http://www.wetlands.agro.nl>) will show you how far we have got in presenting aspects of the International Waterbird Census on the web. One objective of presenting this information is to improve the effectiveness of the IWC in meeting modern information needs on waterbird populations. The information currently presented gives a good idea of the scope and extent of midwinter waterbird counting in each country in the Western Palearctic and Southwest Asia. Please take time to look at each sub-component and give us your comments. We are particularly interested to hear what you think of the information presented about your country. In the future, we will update the information

about coverage for IWC in each country, include guidelines for waterbird co-ordinators and counters, show metadata information about our data holdings, provide the possibility of using interactive query for information requests, and present results of trend analyses, population estimates and other ongoing work. This website is also yours; please contact us if you have information you want to share with others.

Count dates: January 2001

Please note that the recommended dates for IWC counts in 2001 are:

13-14 January 2001

Don't forget to include non-native species on your national recording forms and in instructions to counters.

Waterbird Monitoring Steering Committee (Western Palearctic and Southwest Asia)

The annual Waterbird Monitoring Steering Committee meeting was held on 2-3 November 2000 here in Wageningen. The meeting was well attended and dealt with a packed agenda. The minutes are finished and we will send a summary to all national co-ordinators of waterbird monitoring schemes in the New Year. If there were any issues you would like to raise at next year's meeting, please let us know.

IWC 2003 (Gap-filling Census)

Jeff Kirby presented the committee with the near-final results of an excellent feasibility study conducted by himself and Rodney West for this mega-census. Although we await completed questionnaires from a few countries, we have now received enough information to be able to say that the census will definitely go ahead, and that the census period will be **January – early February 2003**. Our next task will be to submit Jeff and Rodney's work in the form of project proposals to a number of potential donors. The final scale and success of the census will depend on the success of this funding initiative. National Co-ordinators of waterbird monitoring schemes are encouraged if possible to seek funding for this important work. Resources are needed in many countries for national initiatives to increase the scale of IWC surveys at national level in 2003. Additional funds are required to subsidise a large number of expeditions from countries where waterbird monitoring is well-developed (mainly in northern and Western Europe) to countries requiring large-scale additional coverage in January 2003.

The importance of mapping sites

Another theme that was relevant to a number of agenda points in the meeting was the importance of mapping sites. Unless counters and co-ordinators are absolutely clear about the boundaries of each site and about the vantagepoints used for counting, the long-term integrity of data from each site (and hence the reliability of long-term population trend analyses) can be open to question.

The only reliable way to record these parameters is on hardcopy and/or electronic maps. Modern geographical information systems (GIS) software maximises the ease and flexibility of use of such maps, but waterbird monitoring schemes lacking GIS capability can convert hardcopy maps into electronic format at a later stage, when resources become available. Maps are used at every stage of monitoring: by counters in the field to ensure that they are covering the site in the same way as for previous counts, and by national co-ordinators to compare the boundaries of count sites with those of designated areas, (for example Ramsar sites). We do not yet use maps of count sites at international level, but as plans develop for using site-level data more extensively within Wetlands International (for example, by integrating the Wetland Inventory and Waterbird Count databases) the need for polygon data (site maps) increases. The trend towards sharing of data with partner organisations also means that we will need to develop site-based information maps over the coming years. Many waterbird monitoring schemes in the Western Palearctic and Southwest Asia are already based on a reliable set of site maps, but many are not, and we would like to encourage all counting schemes to develop in this direction.

Future links with BirdLife International

The attendance at the meeting of a heavyweight contingent from BirdLife International allowed discussion of a development that many of us have for some time seen as inevitable. A high proportion of sites counted by national waterbird monitoring schemes also qualifies as Important Bird Areas (IBAs) on registers maintained by BirdLife International. An important paper presented by Melanie Heath summarised the collection and application of site-based data gathered through the Wetlands International IWC Programme and the BirdLife International IBA Programme. The paper analysed how networks of people and sites working for the two programmes generate data and other products at local, national and international level. There is now a need for agreement at high level within the two organisations about how we can best take this important initiative forward.

Urgent request for data – January 1997, 1998 and 1999

We have started work on the next IWC report, covering January 1997, 1998 and 1999. The first step of this process is to compile the data from each country. Many thanks to the majority of national waterbird count co-ordinators who are now up-to-date with data submission. We will be very grateful if you would kindly send January waterbird count data from your country for these three years if you have not already done so. If you have questions about any aspect of data submission, please do not hesitate to ask.

**We will begin detailed analyses for the next IWC report in April 2001.
Any data received after this date cannot be included in the report!**

Waterbird Population Estimates 3rd edition

Waterbird Population Estimates is one of the most important publications produced by Wetlands International. It provides the basis for the 1% population thresholds used (together with many additional criteria) to identify Wetlands of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. Published every three years, this book is heavily dependent on counts organised by national waterbird monitoring schemes. Production of the 3rd edition of *Waterbird Population Estimates* was delayed in 2000. A First Consultation Draft was produced for the 7th Conference of the Parties to the Ramsar Convention in May 1999, and in the second half of 1999, a start was made with improvements suggested by a number of users, notably the inclusion of English names of species, and the separate presentation of descriptions of breeding and non-breeding ranges. Plans to finish and publish the third edition in 2000 ran into financial difficulties over the summer. This regrettable but unavoidable delay is now over and we plan to produce *Waterbird Population Estimates 3rd edition* in 2001.

GEF PDF-B Project

"Enhancing Conservation of the Critical Network of Wetlands Required by Migratory Waterbirds on the African/Eurasian Flyways"

This new project was one of the big achievements of Wetlands International's Biodiversity Programme (and many of its partners) in 2000. Development of the project was led by Janine van Vessem, who grappled with extreme complexity and pulled off a very ambitious proposal in double-quick time. This project is probably the most important activity currently taking place within the framework of the African Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) and it would not have been developed without endorsement by the Agreement at the first Meeting of the Parties in Cape Town, South Africa in November 1999.

For those not conversant with the jargon, GEF is the Global Environment Facility administered by UNEP (The United Nations Environment Programme) and a PDF-B Project is a Project Development Facility, phase B Project. This means that it is a proposal to be developed over a period of one and a half years to develop a large-scale (multi-million dollar) project. The PDF-B proposal will be a many-headed monster with the objectives of:

- Identifying key gaps and inadequacies in conservation measures
- Identifying the best practice approaches, from throughout the flyway, to management

- Designing a full GEF project that will make available and apply the best practices to areas of critical need.

A range of activities are planned over the next year to meet these objectives including:

- Middle East and Central Asian outreach workshop
- Development of project plans at ten demonstration sites throughout the AEWA region
- Analysis of best practice in the management of flyways
- Gap analysis of the critical waterbird network
- Analysis of training strategies
- Analysis of stakeholder communications strategies.

Building on these activities, a full proposal for GEF funding will be developed, which will implement strategies and measures across the African-Eurasian region, especially focusing on:

- Flyway and national protected area planning
- Capacity building
- Demonstration projects
- Co-operative research and monitoring
- Communications activities

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GEF project information: <http://www.wetlands.org/projects/AEWA/aewa-gef.htm>

AEWA Technical Committee meeting, Bonn, Germany, 23-24 October 2000

The first Meeting of the Parties to the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) took place in Cape Town, South Africa, in November 1999, one week after the Agreement came into force. The meetings of the parties will take place every three years, and in intervening years, an important way of progressing the business of the Agreement will be through annual meetings of its Technical Committee.

Business completed in Bonn included a lot of necessary bureaucratic formalities, followed by important discussions about the International Implementation Priorities of AEWA, a colonial waterbird atlas project, review of the Conservation Guidelines, review of a Brent Goose management plan, and a review of phasing out the use of lead shot in wetlands. Chris Baker also informed the Committee of progress with the GEF African/Eurasian Waterbirds Flyways project (see separate article in this Newsletter).

The meeting in Bonn was chaired (in a bush shirt) by Barry Taylor of South Africa. Barry's casual attire was the result of the loss of his luggage by South African Airways, which also caused him to miss most of the first morning's proceedings. His place was expertly filled by Vice-chair Dan Munteanu of Romania.

The African Waterbird Census (AfWC)

Tim Dodman

Africa Programme Development Officer, Wetlands International – AEME

The AfWC is co-ordinated from Wetlands International's West Africa regional office in Dakar, Senegal, led by Hilaire Béïbro and managed by Tim Dodman. We published the 1998 annual AfWC report in December 1999 for the first time in Africa, and now data is all directly input and collated in Dakar by Ravane Diop (Database Officer). The 1999 report is being published in December 2000. We are still following a system of annual reporting, as requested by an ever-expanding network. New countries taking part in the census in 2000 included Angola, Cape Verde and Djibouti.

The AfWC Steering Committee had its third meeting in August 2000 in Uganda, just preceding the 10th Pan African Ornithological Congress (PAOC10). We also organised a three-day AfWC Development Workshop '*From Census to Conservation*' in between, with some 50 participants from about 30 countries. The workshop has already led to a joint proposal for supporting waterbird monitoring in Eastern Africa in partnership with the UK's Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT).

In 1999 we began development of an 'AfWC Field Studies Manual', being compiled by Barry Taylor in South Africa. The size and scope of the manual have grown somewhat, such that a 2-volume manual is now previewed, comprising a field manual and a reference companion. Publication will be in 2001. Other publications we wish to develop include an 'African Waterbird Guide' (with a companion CD or tape of calls), a 10-year analysis of the AfWC data (1991-2000) and a series of waterbird Species Action Plans.

One Species Action Plan is already underway for the Black Crowned Crane *Balearica pavonina*, under a special project in collaboration with the International Crane Foundation, led by Emmanuel Williams. A questionnaire and suite of surveys in 2000 have led to a draft species survey and action plan, which was presented during a Round Table Discussion at PAOC10. In 2001, the focus will be on case-study projects in Mali, the Senegal Delta and some gap-filling surveys in Central Africa and Sudan.

Finally, 2000 has been a very active year in West Africa, with a range of training courses and field surveys supported across the region. Many of these have been carried out with committed partners in Africa and from Europe, and we look forward to working with them all again in 2001!

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News from the Asian Waterbird Census (AWC)

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During the first phase of the Asia-Pacific Migratory Waterbird Conservation Strategy (1996-2000), three networks have been developed (East Asian-Australasian Shorebird Site Network, North East

Asian Crane Site Network, Anatidae Site Network in the East Asian Flyway). These networks now span 68 sites in 12 countries and are growing.

These networks are established to promote and support on-site conservation, public awareness, training, research, and related activities, to link the people at and across sites, and to use these sites as models to demonstrate sound management, etc. within the country. During the next phase of the Strategy (2001-2005), under the three species-group Action Plans, activities are being planned to enhance support to the development of these networks.

Environment Australia, as a member of the Asia-Pacific Migratory Waterbird Conservation Committee (MWCC) has contracted Wetlands International to identify options to develop a project to support the further development of the networks. Wetlands International – Asia Pacific will therefore prepare a GEF PDF funding proposal in consultation with the key stakeholders, starting in 2001.

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The International Waterbird Census in the Neotropical Region (NWC)

Daniel Blanco

Project Co-ordinator, Wetlands International - Americas

The Neotropical Waterbird Census (NWC) is a site-based counting scheme for monitoring waterbird numbers in South America. Since 1990 the census has been conducted in nine countries - Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay – and has involved over 350 volunteers that jointly survey more than 300 wetland habitats within the Region.

In 1995 some of the countries abandoned the program due to various difficulties and constraints, the main one being the lack of support for both co-ordination at both national and regional levels. But in spite of these difficulties, other countries have produced their own annual reports (like Chile) and continue to show a great level of participation (like Argentina).

In the short to medium term we expect that the program will grow to reach historic levels of participation. We expect more and plans for the future include:

- re-start the census in some of the rest of the countries in South America
- reinforce the program at the level of regional and national co-ordination
- publish the results of the NWC for the period 1995-1999

Something to be highlighted is that, with the support of Ducks Unlimited, we are publishing the report "Exploring the value of the neotropical waterbird census as a conservation and wildlife management tool", that was prepared with the support of the Canadian Wildlife Service-LAP in 1996. This publication will also include the results of the surveys for the period 1955 to 1999, and we estimate that it will be ready by April 2001.

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Finally...

Season's greetings to everyone involved in waterbird monitoring work throughout the Western Palearctic and Southwest Asia. We hope that your counts in January are successful, rewarding and enjoyable.

Many thanks indeed for your continuing contribution to the IWC