

News from the International Waterbird Census
Western Palearctic and Southwest Asia
Issue no. 7 – December 2004
Newsletter for coordinators of national waterbird monitoring schemes

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Introduction

The main function of this newsletter is to keep coordinators of national waterbird monitoring schemes up-to-date with developments in the International Waterbird Census (IWC) in the Western Palearctic and Southwest Asia region. For those who are behind with data submission, we also wish to kindly request that you send waterbird count data up to and including **January 2004**. This newsletter was produced by Simon Delany, with assistance from Jan Blew and Saskia Henderikse. Especially welcome in this issue are articles by Jan Beekman and Nicola Baccetti *et al.* If you have anything you wish to contribute to future issues, please get in touch. Please e-mail if you have any questions or comments: simon.delany@wetlands.org

Staff News

We are in the process of recruiting a replacement for **Lieuwe Haanstra** who took early retirement in December 2004. Lieuwe worked for three years as the IWC database manager, and for four years before that as manager of the decentralised Wader and Goose databases. He was central to the success of IWC in his seven years of service to Wetlands International, and we are missing his technical skills and the company of a good and valued colleague. We received Lieuwe's services as part of an agreement with our host organisation in The Netherlands, Alterra Green World

Research (formerly the Government Institute of Forestry and Nature Research), who offered early retirement to many staff as part of their restructuring in 2004. Negotiations are under way to find an appropriate replacement for Lieuwe, but we are not yet in a position to name his successor. **Jan Blew** has worked several hundred hours for us from his base in Germany this year, and is currently acting as manager of the IWC database. We are fortunate to have his skill and experience in our team and the current arrangement will continue into next year.

Count dates: January 2005

Please note that the recommended dates for IWC counts in 2005 in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia are:

15-16 January 2005

Recommendations for the counts:

- o For the convenience of volunteer counters, the recommended dates cover the traditional weekend nearest the middle of January. These dates are for guidance only and counts from any date in January are very welcome
- o Please include non-native species in the counts
- o Please submit your data in the standard manner recommended by Wetlands International, using the site names and site codes on the official site list, and providing details of any changes in, or additions to the site list

Data submission overview by country

The table presents a summary of which countries have sent us data for which years. If you see your country has not yet sent data for some or all of these years, we hope this will encourage you to send them as soon as possible. We hope that more countries will establish a routine for submitting their data for international analysis every year. Several countries have sent no data for inclusion in the IWC database since the 1990s. We particularly look forward to receiving updates from Bahrain, Finland, Iceland, and Saudi Arabia, all of which have been major contributors to IWC in the past.

COUNTRY	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Baltic/Nordic					
Belarus	+	+	+	+	-
Denmark	+	+	+	+	-
Estonia	+	+	+	+	+/-
Finland	-	-	-	-	-
Iceland	-	-	-	-	-
Kaliningrad	-	-	-	-	-
Latvia	+	+	+	+	-
Lithuania	+	+	-	-	-
Norway	+	+	+	+	-
Poland	+	-	+/-	-	-
Sweden	+	+	+	+	+
Black Sea/East Mediterranean					
Albania	+	+	+	+	+
Bosnia and Herz.	+	+/-	+/-	-	-
Bulgaria	+	+	+	+	+/-
Croatia	+	+	+	+	-
Cyprus	+	+	+	+	-
Egypt	-	+	-	-	-
Greece	+	+	-	-	-
Israel	+	+	+	+	-
Lebanon	+	+	+	+	-
Macedonia	-	-	+	-	-
Moldova	-	-	-	-	-
Palestine Authority	-	-	-	+	-
Romania	+	+	+	+	+
Russia	-	-	-	+	-
Slovenia	+	+	+	+	-
Syria	-	-	-	-	+/-
Turkey	-	-	+	-	-
Ukraine	+	+/-	-	-	-
Yugoslavia	+	+	-	-	-
Central Europe					
Austria	+	+	+	+	+/-
Czech Republic	+	+	+	+	-
Germany	+	+	+	-	-
Hungary	+	+	+	+	-
Slovakia	+	+	+	+	-
Switzerland	+	+	+	-	-

Updates from Algeria and Morocco are expected soon, and in January 2005, we expect the first ever census in Libya. Some national coordinators continue to send data in formats which take time for us to process, and this can result in delays in incorporating certain national data sets into the IWC database. We are extremely pleased to see that data from 2000 to 2002 are nearly complete, and for most National Coordinators, the priority now should be to send data from **January 2003 and 2004**.

COUNTRY	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Northwest Europe					
Belgium	+	+	+	+/-	-
France	+	+	+	+	-
Germany	+	+	+	-	-
Ireland	+	+	+	-	-
Luxembourg	-	-	-	-	-
Netherlands	+	+	+	-	-
United Kingdom	+	+	+	-	-
Southwest Asia					
Armenia	-	-	-	+	+
Azerbaijan	+	+	+	+	-
Bahrain	-	-	-	-	-
Georgia	-	-	+	+	-
Iran	+	+	+	+	-
Iraq	-	-	-	-	-
Jordan	+	+	+	-	-
Kazakhstan	+	+	+	+	-
Kuwait	+	-	-	-	-
Kyrgyzstan	+	+	+	+	-
Oman	-	+	-	-	-
Qatar	-	-	-	-	-
Russia	-	-	-	-	-
Saudi Arabia	-	-	-	-	-
Tajikistan	-	-	-	+	+
Turkmenistan	+	+	+	+	+
United Arab Emir.	+	+	+	-	+
Uzbekistan	+	+	+	+	+
Yemen	-	-	-	-	-
West Mediterranean					
Algeria	-	-	-	-	-
France	+	+	+	+	-
Italy	+	+	+	-	-
Libya	-	-	-	-	-
Morocco	-	-	-	-	-
Portugal	+	+	+	+	-
Spain	+	+	+	+	-
Tunisia	+	+	+	+	-

+ = available
 +/- = partly available
 - = not yet available

International Bewick's and Whooper Swan Census 15-16 January 2005

Jan Beekman, Swan Specialist Group, Wetlands International



In order to monitor northern swan populations, the Swan Specialist Group (SSG) of Wetlands International organises European-wide swan censuses every five years. These specially organised censuses aim to reveal the sizes of flyway populations of Bewick's and Whooper Swans and are important to get full coverage, since the IWC covers only selected sites whereas swans (and geese) are often distributed on arable lands outside wetlands. Moreover, a simultaneous census organised throughout the wintering range offers us unique possibilities to obtain large-scale "snapshot" data sets on ecological aspects such as juvenile percentages in relation to group sizes, and habitat choice as well as flock sizes in relation to habitat. With such data at an international level we will be in a stronger position to conserve these birds. For example, implementation of the EC Birds Directive requires up-to-date population figures.

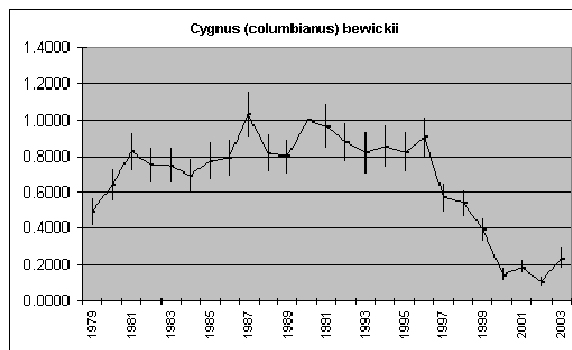
The census will be organised simultaneously with the International Waterbird Census in the weekend of **15/16 January 2005**, and will be coordinated by Jan Beekman, Swan Specialist Group of Wetlands International in the Netherlands, Bjarke Laubek, National Environment Research Institute in Denmark, and Peter Cranswick, Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust in England. National IWC Coordinators and Species Coordinators of the Swan SG are encouraged to stimulate their national network of waterbird and swan observers to participate.

Monitoring northern swans

A good scheme for monitoring northern swan population changes has been developed over the past 20 years. Special censuses for the Icelandic population of Whooper Swans were organised from 1980 onwards and covered Iceland, UK and Ireland. This population numbered more than 20,000 birds in January 2000. The continental Whooper Swan population was fully covered for

the first time in 1995, and that census was very successful in doubling the population estimate to 59,000 birds. This increase was in part the result of improved coverage.

Censuses especially focussing on Bewick's Swans and covering all relevant countries were organised in 1984, 1987, 1990, 1995 and 2000. Earlier population estimates were based on general mid-winter waterbird counts, but coverage was incomplete. The NW-European Bewick's Swans population rapidly increased between 1984 and 1995 from 16,500 to 29,000 birds. As is shown from mid-winter figures from the Netherlands, it is now rapidly decreasing again, following a 10-year series of poor breeding success. An estimate of the decrease in number is about 35-40% since 1995. This negative trend, which is also shown in the IWC figures (see graph below), gives cause for concern and in itself justifies a new population census. It should be noted that the apparent decline observed by IWC counts is exaggerated because of movement of birds from "traditional" sites to habitats which are not counted. On the basis of the recent decline, the official Red List status of Bewick's Swan in Europe has been changed from "Least Concern" to "Vulnerable".



Graph 1. Population trend for Bewick's Swans in the EU, based on IWC results 1979-2003.

For all three swan populations, the mechanism behind population regulation is not yet fully understood. Limitations in nesting, moulting or staging habitat all seem to be important factors, and their impact on survival and reproductive output is currently being studied. Another factor which may affect population trends is climate change. Current climate models predict regional differences in climate change in the Arctic, which in turn may have differential effects on waterbird populations throughout the northern hemisphere.

Information: Jan H. Beekman
E-mail: bewicks_swan@xs4all.nl

The importance of giving the correct coordinates for sites

Maps and mapping play an increasingly important role in waterbird research and conservation. Geographical coordinates of counting sites are included in the IWC database, but it is only in recent years that we have used them extensively. Work on the Wader Atlas over the summer involved plotting thousands of sites used by 90 species in Africa and west Eurasia, and a large number of coordinates were found to be erroneous. It is vitally important to receive the correct coordinates for sites, and we urge National Coordinators to check and correct these data for their own national purposes, as well as for the

international overviews produced by Wetlands International.

The following website lists the names of more than 5.5 million places and features, together with their geographical coordinates throughout the world.

<http://earth-info.nga.mil/gns/html/index.html>

At present we rely on having coordinates for an accurate central point at each site. Soon we will start compiling polygon data which will provide an electronic record of the boundaries of each site.

Leif Nilsson honoured at Waterbirds around the World, Edinburgh, Scotland, 8 April 2004



For more outcomes of the meeting, see:
<http://www.wetlands.org/GFC/Default.htm>

In our June Newsletter, we gave details of the very successful conference in Edinburgh in April. One important event that was not mentioned was the award presented to the longest-standing National Coordinator of waterbird monitoring activities, Leif Nilsson from Sweden, who has served in this capacity since the inception of IWC in 1967. Leif's energy and enthusiasm ensure that he continues to run one of the best national waterbird monitoring schemes anywhere – for more information, check out his website at: <http://www.darwin.biol.lu.se/zoekologi/waterfowl/index.htm>

In Edinburgh he was presented with a ceremonial certificate by HRH Prince Charles, heir to the British throne, in recognition of his 37 years of dedicated work, and he accepted the honour on behalf of the thousands of volunteer waterbird counters who have willingly contributed their expertise over the years.

An Atlas of Wader populations in Africa and West Eurasia

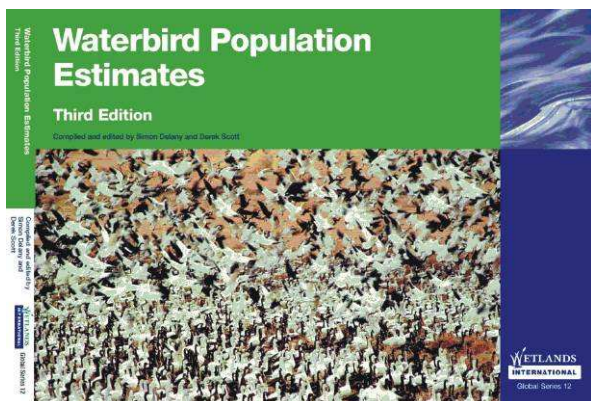
The Wetlands International Anatidae Atlas, produced in 1996, summarised the population status and distribution of Anatidae in the region covered by the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA). Work on a companion volume for waders, in partnership with the International Wader Study Group, started as long ago as 1998, and draft species accounts for 39 species were circulated for comment in a Consultation Draft in 2000. The project was a victim of the financial closure of the Africa-Europe-Middle East office of Wetlands International in 2001, but since 2003, the project has been revived thanks to funding from, among others,

AEWA and Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap (Ministry of the Flemish Community, Belgium).

This year we have updated or drafted 90 species accounts, compiled data from a multitude of sources and produced first draft maps using ArcView. BirdLife International has generously provided data from the IBA database, and to produce the maps we are collaborating with the International Institute for Geo-Information Science and Earth Observation in Enschede. A Final Consultation Draft will be circulated widely for comment in the spring of 2005, and we are aiming at publication before the end of 2005.

Waterbird Population Estimates – Fourth Edition

Time flies, and work on the fourth edition of Waterbird Population Estimates is under way. By agreement with the Secretariat of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, we will launch the fourth edition at the 9th Ramsar Conference of the Parties in Kampala, Uganda, in November 2005.



WPE3 – due for an update in 2005

We are currently using the third edition as a basis for updating estimates and trends, including up-to-date IWC results and information from many other sources. Contributions from all experts who receive this IWC newsletter will be most welcome. We invite you to provide us with any information which will update the third edition before the end of March 2005. Your updates will be included in a consultation draft of the fourth edition, which will be produced in the spring. This draft will be circulated widely for comment, and made available on the Wetlands International website from May to July for further expert amendment. If you need a copy of the third edition, in hardcopy or electronic format, please contact Simon Delany.

It is felt that the shelf life of WPE3 should be more than three years, and final publication of WPE4 is expected in October in the form of a CD RoM, together with a published supplement to the third edition.

Trend analyses of waterbird populations in the European Union

This year we undertook a series of waterbird population trend analyses under contract to the European Topic Centre for Nature Protection and Biodiversity in Paris. 2004 was the 25th anniversary of the EC Birds Directive, and we were interested in investigating whether responses shown by trends in winter waterbird numbers could be directly related to implementation of the Directive. We are grateful to all National Coordinators who answered an urgent request for their most recent data, which allowed us to include 2003 in the analyses for most species.

We compared three sets of trends: 1. Trends at SPAs compared with sites lacking SPA designation; 2. Trends of species on Annexes I and II of the Birds Directive compared with trends of species not on these Annexes; 3. Trends before countries acceded to the EU Birds Directive compared with trends after accession.

The positive January trends of a majority of monitored waterbird species in northern and western Europe over the past 25 years are very likely to be related to implementation of the Birds Directive, but our analyses demonstrated rather few clear and obvious relationships in the three sets of trends that we compared.

The analyses were extremely helpful in revealing improvements that can be made to the database, and future directions we should take in our waterbird trend analyses. Many wintering waterbird species are indeed increasing in the EU. While it is helpful to combine data in order to have a 'waterbird trend indicator', each species deserves a more detailed analysis of its trend in different sub-regions and habitats. With this more detailed approach, our future efforts to combine trends of different species into waterbird indicators will be more successful.

Satellite tagged Lesser White-fronted Goose migrates to Iraq

In summer 2004, the WWF/NOF Fennoscandian Lesser White-fronted Goose Conservation Project and the Goose, Swan and Duck Study Group of Northern Eurasia (GSDSG) started a cooperation project to unveil the migration route from one of the most important breeding areas for the Lesser White-fronted Goose: the Arctic Urals in European Russia. Three birds were fitted with transmitters by a team led by Vladimir Morozov. They migrated

via the Ob river to northern Kazakhstan, where they arrived in late September, but two disappeared (probably shot). The third individual moved on in November, via Azerbaijan and Turkey to Iraq, where it arrived 80km east of Baghdad in late November. In December (this month) it moved about 150 km north, where it was last reported on 17 December. Full details of this story are available as it unfolds on:

<http://www.piskulka.net>

Testing our counters: why a national initiative was started and what happened

Nicola Baccetti, Luca Melega, Lorenzo Serra and Fernando Spina, INFS, Italy

Two years ago, INFS (Italian Wildlife Institute, which coordinates the IWC counts in Italy) launched a programme of validation of the quality of data gathered by the national counters' network, testing species identification and counting skills. What some counters initially perceived as a politically incorrect (if not offensive) initiative has now turned into a rewarding exercise, instrumental in acknowledging and enhancing the scientific value of their activities.

Why such tests. Our initial reasons were very 'local' ones. A national law dating back to 1992 gave INFS and local administrative authorities the duty of monitoring animal populations in the country, the IWC counts being of course one of the monitoring activities. Local administrations offered a very variable technical and/or economic support to the counts, from nil to the production of complete and reliable data collected by employing the best locally available ornithological groups. Often, however, birding groups operated independently from their respective local authorities, providing better quality data than the latter, which caused some concern at the national coordination level. Sometimes two, or even more, series of data were received for the same sites and years, with an obvious waste of public/private money both in the field and at the coordination level. Hence, our decision to accept data only if collected by qualified observers, who needed to be objectively identified. Furthermore, the tasks of INFS in its role of official governmental reference on environmental issues also suggested the opportunity of certifying data quality against the risk of criticism (e.g. possible discrepancies in data collected by hunters vs. conservationists, to be used for decisions on hunting issues). Local administrations were officially informed of our policy as soon as the testing sessions started. They had the possibility to submit their own staff to test, or to commit the activity to qualified observers present in their areas.

Choosing the test type. Waterbird identification was the main subject that needed to be tested and the easiest one to be judged. Without aiming at the virtuosity of high-level tests for bird-watchers, we presented the candidates a PowerPoint slideshow of 50 good quality photos of species regularly occurring in the country (starting from very easy ones, to increase candidates' self-confidence), followed by two photos of vagrants, two photos of flocks to be counted and three recorded calls (of very easy species e.g. teal, coot, redshank); the latter five elements were not considered for the result. We considered the test passed with 75% of correct answers. All candidates had the opportunity of being aware of their mistakes and possible ways to increase their proficiency were suggested.

Results. Tests started on 20 September 2002, and there have been 15 sessions (8 at the INFS headquarters and 7 at other locations such as Sicily and Sardinia, the latter to encourage participation from most peripheral areas). A total of 394 candidates has been examined so far; 230 of them got a positive result at their first attempt and 17 on a later attempt, for an overall percentage of 63% passing the test. We estimate that at least 100 qualified observers are still to be tested; 5-10 observers, however, did not accept the idea of being tested and informed us of their decision to suspend their IWC activities. After the first sessions, initial scepticism or a negative approach by several participants was followed by a very collaborative feeling, many local groups and some administrations organising training activities, informal tests and public slideshows at which INFS' participation is usually requested. The test results will also offer an opportunity to check the accuracy of the Italian IWC dataset and a way to monitor its future development. For more information contact Nicola Baccetti at: <mailto:infszumi@iperbole.bologna.it>

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