

UK SPA & RAMSAR (AVIAN) SCIENTIFIC WORKING GROUP

2006 ANNUAL REPORT

1. Summary

- 1.1. This is the fifth report of the SPA & Ramsar (Avian) Scientific Working Group (SPAR SWG), and includes all issues considered at meetings during 2006. During this period the Group met on the following occasions; 1 February and 21 September (the May meeting was cancelled).
- 1.2. Feedback was received from the *Natura 2000 & Ramsar Steering Committee* (N2RSC) on the recommendations of the 2005 Annual Report. The group endorsed in principle the analytical techniques recommended in the annual report, which included for Manx Shearwater rafting surveys, aerial surveys of non-breeding waterbirds in the Greater Thames marine area, and chough home range both during breeding and outside of the breeding period.
- 1.3. This report includes reviews of a number of work areas:
The proposed 2008-2010 SPA & Ramsar (avian) networks review; treatment of mixed waterbird populations, international waterbird population estimates; national population estimates; Site Provision Index; marine SPAs; casework science; cropped habitats; status of white-tailed eagles. A list of briefings presented to the Group is included in Appendix 1.
- 1.4. A provisional work programme for 2007 is appended to the report (Appendix 2).
- 1.5. A key element of the report is to summarise the decisions of the Group; those listed below are from 2006. It should be noted that because the SPAR SWG provides summary minutes of each meeting to the N2RSC, some of these decisions will have been considered by that group during the year; they are reported here for completeness, but may require no further action by the N2RSC. Summary outcomes of consideration by the N2RSC are noted in bold following each decision - they are taken from minutes of that group's meetings, but it should be noted that these may not always be available for inclusion in this report.
 - 1.5.1. **Recommendation to the UK Natura 2000 & Ramsar Steering Committee**
 - 1.5.1.1. *The SPAR SWG supports* the methodological approaches being developed by JNCC to determining use of inshore marine waters by red-throated divers in the breeding season and encourages the N2RSC to ensure that JNCC is given adequate resources to complete the necessary survey and analysis.

2. Introduction

- 2.1. The SPA & Ramsar (Avian) Scientific Working Group is a consultative group that was established in November 2001 by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) to assist government administrations and the statutory conservation agencies in further developing the SPA and Ramsar networks within the UK, in particular promoting the coherent management of the networks and monitoring of sites.
- 2.2. The Group considers UK-scale scientific and technical issues regarding the SPA and Ramsar (avian) networks in the terrestrial and marine environment.
- 2.3. The Group comprises representatives from Government departments, devolved administrations and their statutory conservation agencies across the UK, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), and scientists from the voluntary conservation sector and other stakeholder groups, such as land-owners and managers, the water industry, marine and business sectors. A list of organisations represented in the Group is given in the 2001-2002 Annual Report.
- 2.4. The Group sits within a network of fora for the consideration of Natura 2000 issues:
 - bilateral discussions between NGOs and the Country Agencies
 - the *UK Natura 2000 & Ramsar Forum*¹
 - the *UK Natura 2000 & Ramsar Steering Committee (N2RSC)*It provides advice and recommendations to the *UK Natura 2000 & Ramsar Steering Committee* as well as acting on issues identified by them.
- 2.5. Formal *Terms of Reference*, along with an initial framework for discussions, were established at the Group's inauguration (See the 2001-2002 Annual Report). This framework was further developed into a rolling work programme. The *Terms of Reference* were revised in 2004 to add consideration of development of the UK Ramsar (avian) network to the Group's remit.
- 2.6. The Group normally meets three times per year (January, May and September). Issues for discussion are typically supported with briefing papers that are circulated prior to each meeting (a full list for 2006 is given in Appendix 1). JNCC provides the Secretariat for the Group and hosts a web-page² on which selected briefings and the approved minutes of meetings are published.
- 2.7. The role of the *Annual Report* is to summarise active areas of work considered in the meetings of a calendar year, clearly denoting advice to Government, seeking the guidance of the *UK Natura 2000 & Ramsar Steering Committee* or other fora where relevant, and also highlighting issues of a policy nature that were raised within the year but are outside of the remit of the Group. It also provides a provisional work programme for the following year (Appendix 2).

3. Response from the Natura 2000 & Ramsar Steering Committee to the 2005 SPAR SWG Annual Report

- 3.1. Feedback was received from the *Natura 2000 & Ramsar Steering Committee (N2RSC)* on the recommendations of the 2005 Annual Report, after consideration of the report at its November 2006 meeting. N2RSC endorsed in principle the analytical techniques recommended in the annual report. These covered:

¹ <http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/ewd/natura-ramsar-forum/index.htm>

² <http://www.jncc.gov.uk/page-1770>

- 3.1.1. Analysis of Manx shearwater rafting behaviour to identify extensions to existing SPAs, leading to the recommendation that a minimum 4 km generic extension was appropriate;
- 3.1.2. Analysis techniques for aerial surveys of non-breeding waterbirds in the Greater Thames marine area;
- 3.1.3. Assessment of information on chough ranging behaviour, leading to the recommendation that suitable habitat within a minimum of 1 km of a nest should be included in any future SPAs;
- 3.1.4. Assessment of information on chough ranging behaviour, leading to the recommendation that any SPAs classified for non-breeding chough be based on site-specific data.

4. Communication with the Natura 2000 & Ramsar Steering Committee

- 4.1. In reviewing the 2005 Annual Report it was noted that some of the recommendations made previously to the N2RSC had been 'bounced back' to the Group despite being of a policy nature. This has generated uncertainty over how policy and legal issues raised by Group, and for which the Group is not remitted to tackle, were to be resolved. The Chair agreed to discuss with the N2RSC.

5. Group administration

- 5.1. Attendance from representatives of the industry sector had declined and the Chair agreed to write to members early in 2007 to encourage future attendance. In addition, a new representative from the water industry would be sought early in 2007.
- 5.2. The Group also agreed that it would be beneficial to have a representative from Defra's marine team; the Defra member agreed to follow this up.

6. Progress during 2006

6.1. 2008-2010 SPA & Ramsar (avian) Networks Review

- 6.1.1. Following an initial JNCC paper on the possible scope of the 2008-2010 SPA & Ramsar (avian) Networks Review in October 2005, the Group approved a JNCC information note that was submitted to the May 2007 N2RSC meeting.
- 6.1.2. The Group considered a more detailed JNCC paper at its September 2006 meeting. In particular, this paper explored the policy drivers behind the review. At the Group's request JNCC produced a cover note to accompany submission of the paper to the N2RSC, which included a request to government to state its commitment to implementation. The cover note and paper were submitted for consideration to the November 2006 meeting of the N2RSC.
- 6.1.3. Pending the decisions of the N2RSC, JNCC agreed to develop a fuller specification for the review early in 2007, including a clearer outline of the decision making process and how this would influence the content of the review.

6.2. Treatment of mixed waterbird populations: decision of the Ramsar CoP9

- 6.2.1. Ramsar CoP9 agreed some additional guidance for application of the criteria for selecting wetlands of international importance. In particular, for Criterion 6, guidance on treatment of mixed populations was agreed: where mixed populations occur and are inseparable in the field, the larger of the relevant 1% thresholds for the species should be

used to identify sites of international importance. The Group agreed that all of the new guidance will be used during the 2008-2010 review.

6.3. *International waterbird population estimates*

6.3.1. Publication of the latest *Waterbird Population Estimates* (4th Edition) by Wetlands International had been delayed and is now expected early 2007. JNCC agreed to assess the implications of any changes to international thresholds and present this to the Group in 2007. WPE4 will be used for the 2008-2010 review.

6.4. *National population estimates: rules for setting 1% thresholds*

6.4.1. The Avian Population Estimates Panel had published a new list of GB and UK bird population estimates in February 2006. JNCC presented a paper to the Group on recommendations for deriving 1% thresholds for operational use. The Group agreed that the way in which an estimate was itself derived (the method used to produce an estimate) should determine the way in which its 1% threshold was subsequently derived, but upheld its previous decision on use of the 'minimum of 50 rule' for species with populations of less than 5,000 (the rule allows exemptions for species of high conservation concern and is described in the 2001 SPA Review). JNCC will publish a new list of thresholds once these had been agreed by the Statutory Conservation Agencies.

6.5. *Development of a Site Provision Index*

6.5.1. JNCC had presented an initial briefing on developing a site provision index in May 2005. Although no new papers were presented to the Group in 2006, further discussion took place in February 2006. The Group agreed that the concept should be fully developed during 2006/07 for the terrestrial part of the network first and be tested against actual coverage. The results would be presented to the N2RSC prior to undertaking a similar analysis for marine species. The Group agreed that the Site Provision Index could be a useful tool, but should not be thought of as prescriptive: this would be emphasised in future presentation to the N2RSC.

6.6. *Marine SPAs*

6.6.1. As in the last two years, a considerable body of work on approaches to the development of marine SPAs was presented to and discussed by the Group during 2006.

6.6.2. JNCC presented a revised confidential timetable for its work on marine SPAs. The Joint Committee had formalised its advice to government on defining extensions to seabird colonies in December 2005 (JNCC_05_P14B). There remains the need to finalise work on extensions to include feeding areas for breeding red-throated divers, shags, and tern species: JNCC has planned surveys to allow this, although not all of the necessary funding has been confirmed to date. The main focus of work at the moment was on non-breeding waterbirds, with both survey and analysis currently being undertaken.

6.6.3. JNCC's pilot work on modelling use of inshore marine waters by red-throated divers in the breeding season was presented to the Group. The Group was impressed with the early results and agreed that a generic, modelled approach looked feasible and should be further developed. The Group requested that JNCC consult it once the work was completed. It was noted that a new national breeding survey was due in 2006 and that the results from this would present an excellent opportunity to review use of inshore waters at a national scale using the JNCC model.

6.6.3.1. *The SPAR SWG supports* the methodological approaches being developed by JNCC to determining use of inshore marine waters by red-throated divers in the breeding season and encourages the N2RSC to ensure that JNCC is given adequate resources to complete the necessary survey and analysis.

6.6.4. Difficulties in using certain spatial modelling techniques for non-breeding red-throated diver data were highlighted in 2005 and JNCC presented results from applying an alternative method: home range analysis. This method produces maps that model the distribution of divers based on the observational data from aerial surveys. Whilst JNCC were of the opinion that this method was a suitable alternative approach for informing SPA selection, the Group suggested that further peer review of using this method for sparse distributional data would be beneficial. The Group requested that JNCC provide an update in 2007.

6.6.5. JNCC has estimated numbers of birds in survey areas from aerial survey data and demonstrated that the currently used national population estimate for non-breeding red-throated diver is a significant underestimate. To address this JNCC analysed all red-throated diver data for Britain and produced a new estimate: the methods were presented to the Group. The paper was being independently peer reviewed and JNCC agreed to present a final paper to the Group early in 2007.

6.7. *Casework Science*

6.7.1. The RSPB presented a paper on the implications of scientific aspects of case law for development of the SPA network, illustrating the different regulatory issues within and around SPAs. The paper highlighted the problems facing regulators when the SPA boundary did not include all habitats of ecological importance for the qualifying species. It raised the question of whether appropriate assessments were being made at the appropriate ecological level.

6.7.2. The Group recognised that the results of the Cropped Habitats Information Project would provide policy makers with valuable information on the ecological requirements of birds and would facilitate any assessment of boundary setting principles.

6.8. *Cropped Habitats Information Project (CHIP)*

6.8.1. JNCC presented its completed CHIP paper. A few suggestions on improving the structure of the paper were adopted and additional information for two species in Northern Ireland was provided by EHS; these changes will be made to the paper before submission to the N2RSC. The Group sketched out what should be included in the cover note to the N2RSC and JNCC agreed to draft this and seek comments in early 2007. The Group agreed that the CHIP review should be submitted to the summer 2007 meeting of the N2RSC for discussion and feedback.

6.9. *Re-introduced/re-establishing species*

6.9.1. The Group considered a confidential paper on the status of white-tailed eagles. Whilst the population is still growing there are areas now occupied that are likely to be of importance to the species in the long-term. The Group agreed that it would be advantageous to have a more detailed analysis of territory use for Mull and Skye birds and would request this from the Sea-eagle Project Team in 2007.

APPENDIX 1

List of briefing papers presented to the SPAR Scientific Working Group during 2006

Note: Many of these papers are available from the JNCC website. However, some of the papers presented to the Group were preliminary or draft briefings and most of these will not be published (these are noted).

February 2006

- Annual Report for 2005
- 2008-2010 SPA & Ramsar (avian) network review: summary note for Natura 2000 & Ramsar Steering Committee on initial discussions (SPAR_010206_1) (preliminary briefing)
- Additional Ramsar site selection guidance from CoP9 (JNCC paper)
- Rules for deriving national 1% thresholds from bird population estimates (SPAR_010206_2) (draft)
- Modelling red-throated diver occurrence in inshore waters in the breeding season (JNCC PowerPoint presentation) (preliminary briefing)
- Proposed costs and schedule for completion of fieldwork, analyses and advice in respect of marine SPAs (MN2KPG9_11_SPATimetable) (confidential)

September 2006

- 2008-2010 UK SPA and Ramsar (avian) Networks Review: detailed scope and estimated cost (SPAR_210906_1) (preliminary briefing)
- An assessment of the use of cropped habitats by birds represented in the UK Special Protection Area network (SPAR_210906_2) (final draft)
- Current status of white-tailed eagle and implications for the UK SPA network (SPAR_210906_3) (confidential briefing)
- Implications of recent site casework for the definition of SPA boundaries and the application of the Habitats Regulations (SPAR_210906_4)
- Revised estimate of numbers of wintering red-throated divers *Gavia stellata* in Great Britain (JNCC paper & PowerPoint presentation) (draft)
- Inshore marine SPAs: Validation of a new method for defining the extent of an interest feature (JNCC paper & PowerPoint presentation) (preliminary briefing)

APPENDIX 2

SPAR SWG provisional work programme for 2007

Items for short-term consideration that will be presented to the N2RSC for consideration during 2007 (agreed for attention prior to the 2008-2010 review)

2008-2010 SPA & Ramsar (avian) Networks Review: consider JNCC draft specification for the review; report to N2RSC later in 2007.

Site provision index sub-group to present a paper on its work, followed by an advice note to the N2RSC

Marine SPAs: respond to JNCC consultation requests as and when necessary; make recommendations to N2RSC as required

Cropped Habitats Information Project (CHIP): finalise advice to N2RSC summer 2007

JNCC to present a concept note on the roles and adequacy of the range of measures, including SPAs, implemented in the UK to meet the requirements of the Birds Directive; to be finalised and sent to N2RSC

Treatment of re-introduced/re-establishing populations: JNCC paper to be discussed and advice note sent to N2RSC

Consider and comment to N2RSC on the first Common Standards Monitoring for designated sites report

Items for development/consideration that will be included in the 2008-2010 review (outcomes will not be sent to N2RSC during 2007)

Peregrine: JNCC to collate data from the 2002 national survey in a suitable form for analysis, commission analysis and report to the group in 2007

Common Eider: JNCC to report on findings from DNA study of UK populations being undertaken by Glasgow University

Develop view on treatment of non-breeding, non-estuarine waterbirds, based on the Non-estuarine Waterbird Survey (NEWS), under the SPA Selection Guidelines.

2003-2007 Winter Gull Survey (WinGS): BTO to be invited to present the results of the survey to the Group later in 2007.