

UK SPA SCIENTIFIC WORKING GROUP

MEETING 2004/1 28TH JANUARY 2004

09.30 - 15.40 EHS, Commonwealth House, Belfast

Approved Minutes

Present (around table):

Ian Bainbridge (Chair) - SEERAD
David Stroud (DAS) – JNCC
Nigel Buxton (NB) – SNH
Ian Enlander (IE) - EHS
Gregor Watson (GWA) – EHS
James Robinson (JRo) – WWT
David Mallon (DM) – SEERAD

Andy Webb (AW) - JNCC
Gwyn Williams (GWi) – RSPB & on behalf of
Wildlife & Countryside Link
Ben Fraser (BF) - EN
Trevor Salmon (TS) – Defra (from 10.50)
Louise Vall (LV) – Defra (from 10.50)
Helen Baker (HB) (Secretary) - JNCC

Apologies:

David Smallshire (Defra), Chris Spray (Water UK), Stephen Hull (ABPmer), Lucy Adams (ABPmer), Jeremy Wilson (Scottish Environment Link), Trish Fretten (NAW), Wendy Twell (NAW), Sian Whitehead (CCW), Jim Reid (JNCC), Andrew Clark (NFU), and Colin Hedley (CLA)

1. Introductions and apologies

- 1.1. The Chair welcomed new representatives and re-iterated the workings of the Group.
- 1.2. Apologies were received as listed above.
- 1.3. Three items were added to agenda: report from Natura 2000/Ramsar Steering Committee (added at 3); National Peregrine survey data (under 15); work plan review (under 15).

2. Minutes of last meeting (23rd September 2003, 2003/3)

2.1. Three amendments were agreed:

- 2.1.1. Under 8.5, change to last sentence: ‘... explore functional links between sites and groups of sites.’
- 2.1.2. At 8.7.2 and Action Point 8: current text to be deleted and replaced with: RSPB invited to use chough as an example in writing to Defra on the application of the UK SPA Selection Guidelines (see 3.1/AP 1).
- 2.1.3. Under 11.3, changes to wording as follows: ‘This progress had then been stalled pending a decision from the Natura 2000 and Ramsar Steering Committee on the Stage 2 application issue identified by the RSPB. The RSPB was extremely disappointed in this (not all of the 24 cases are reliant on this decision, e.g. Lake of Menteith and Slammanan). One site...’

2.2. Due to these changes, the Group deferred approval of the minutes to its May 2004 meeting.

General Items I

3. Report from Natura 2000 and Ramsar Steering Committee (added agenda item) and Annual Report 2003

3.1. Report from Natura 2000 and Ramsar Steering Committee

- 3.1.1. The Chair had received a letter from the Chair of the Natura 2000 and Ramsar Steering Committee (N2RSC) on 26th January 2004; this was immediately circulated to the Group (also appended to these minutes).
- 3.1.2. The N2RSC had developed a paper on application of the SPA Selection Guidelines and considered this at its 15th December 2003 meeting. The letter outlines the decisions of that group on this issue. The N2RSC has maintained its position that sites meeting Stages 1.1 to 1.3 of the SPA Selection Guidelines should not automatically be classified as SPAs, but that stage 2 judgements remain relevant for selection of the most suitable sites.
- 3.1.3. Defra stated that the view of the N2RSC had been influenced by the argument that you could fit a boundary to any area to encompass 1% of a population. Defra welcomed RSPB's letter on this issue, especially where it developed thinking on network sufficiency. Article 3 of the Birds Directive clearly defines SPAs as only one of the tools to be implemented to achieve desired conservation status of species. However, network targets may be a useful guide and it would be worthwhile for N2RSC to assess some examples and further consider the role of targets.
- 3.1.4. RSPB agreed that there is no explicit requirement in Birds Directive for targets, but that the requirements of Article 4 mean that some measure of the network resource is needed: this should be ecologically driven.
- 3.1.5. The SPA Review was an assessment of only one (i.e. SPA provision) of a mixture of measures that has been implemented in the UK to meet the requirements of the Birds Directive; Defra suggested that it now seems appropriate that an assessment of the other measures takes place to ensure that they are providing all of the necessary tools to achieve the desired conservation status of our birds.
- 3.1.6. RSPB advised that such an assessment should also look at the risks involved in the voluntary basis of some of the other measures, given that voluntary measures have already been judged by the ECJ as no surrogate for SPAs.
- 3.1.7. The N2RSC paper on the application of SPA Selection Guidelines is inaccurate in conveying the recommendations of the SPA SWG, stating that the Group had proposed that Stage 1.1-1.3 guidelines be regarded as criteria. The recommendations were not proposals; they were deferrals of the issues to the N2RSC. The Chair agreed to request revision of the paper by the N2RSC to address this inaccuracy. The RSPB re-iterated that the conservation NGOs are not in agreement that the SPA network is largely complete, as suggested in the N2RSC paper, and that adoption of this position by Defra and the Agencies is unhelpful.

Action Point 1: The Group to request that the Natura 2000 and Ramsar Steering Committee considers the mixture of measures implemented in the UK to meet the requirements of the Birds Directive in achieving desired conservation status of birds. To request that this consideration takes into account the risk of voluntary measures and aims to identify the need for additional SPAs, and to offer the assistance of the SPAR SWG in undertaking this review.

Action Point 2: The Chair to ask the Chair of the Natura 2000 and Ramsar Steering Committee to revise the paper on SPA Selection Guidelines and re-circulate, and whether his letter of 26th January and the revised paper can be posted on the SPA SWG web-page.

3.2. Annual Report 2003

3.2.1. Comments on the draft Annual Report for 2003 were recorded. Secretariat to revise and re-circulate by end March 2004 for additional comment and so that final draft can be agreed at 26th May 2004 meeting.

Action Point 3: Members to send any further comments on first draft of 2003 Annual Report to Secretariat by end February 2004. Secretariat to revise and re-circulate for further comment by end of March 2004.

4. Ramsar Review (Defra/JNCC briefings)

- 4.1. Changes to the draft revised Terms of Reference of the SPA SWG were agreed. Secretariat to make changes and circulate final ToR, as well replacing the original ToR on the JNCC website with the new version.
- 4.2. Agreed that the Group should now be known as the SPA & Ramsar (avian) Scientific Working Group (**SPAR SWG**).
- 4.3. The Group also agreed that prioritisation of Ramsar work will come within normal work planning of the Group, influenced by needs identified by the Ramsar Review Steering Group.
- 4.4. Minor revisions to the paper on the Ramsar Review work programme and timetable were agreed. This work will be discussed in more detail at the May 2004 meeting of the Group.
- 4.5. Both revised Terms of Reference and the Ramsar Review paper will be published on the JNCC website.
- 4.6. Secretariat to revise work programme to include Ramsar Review needs and circulate to the Group for information.

Action Point 4: Secretariat to circulate final revised Terms of Reference and replace the original ones on the JNCC website with the revised version. Also, to revise the work programme to include Ramsar Review needs and circulate to the Group prior to the next meeting.

5. Cropped Habitats Information Project (CHIP)

- 5.1. Comments on the draft discussion report had been sent by SNH and WWT. JNCC had not reviewed these fully. Phase 1 accounts were of poorer quality than the example provided by JNCC and it was agreed that they needed to more consistently detail information gaps as well as reviewing unpublished literature. JNCC agreed to take comments into account before placing the tender for Phase 2 accounts.
- 5.2. JNCC plans for Phase 2 accounts to be available for review in May/June 2004 and will circulate these for comment before finalising its report to the Group in the autumn.

Action Point 5: JNCC to take into account comments on Phase 1 in finalising Phase 2 specifications, circulate Phase 2 accounts for comment in May/June 2004 and finalise CHIP report for September 2004 meeting.

6. Marine SPAs – Liverpool Bay analysis (JNCC briefing)

- 6.1. AW gave a PowerPoint presentation on the aerial survey data analysis for Liverpool Bay; methods were consistent with previous analyses for Carmarthen Bay and Tay/St. Andrews Bay.
- 6.2. Preliminary results indicate significant populations of red-throated divers ($\approx 1,000$ individuals) and black scoter (in region of 50-80Ki). In addition, little gull numbers were around 170i, but the species is difficult to identify from the air and land-based surveys may be better, and so we have a relatively poor understanding of total numbers and distribution in Liverpool Bay. There is no GB population estimate for non-breeding little gull.
- 6.3. Divers were dispersed within the survey area and formed relatively indistinct aggregations. Black scoters were highly aggregated in several areas; aggregations were all within 10 km of each other. Boundaries generated to include 98% or 95% of black scoter did not differ, this boundary probably also includes 95% of red-throated diver but the same analytical techniques cannot be used for the latter species.
- 6.4. Current non-breeding GB & NI estimates for red-throated diver are underestimates as they are derived from land-based counts. WWT is currently reviewing the estimates now that a number of aerial surveys have been completed. Best guess is 10,000-12,000 individuals, but distribution around UK is not continuous. Preliminary analysis shows that there is a degree of cut-off in red-throated diver distribution at 10-15m depth contour. Data are poor for assessing severe weather re-distribution, but it is thought to be relatively localised.
- 6.5. Aim is to publish Liverpool Bay report by end of February 2004. The report describing analytical methods is in 3rd draft and will be finalised and circulated soon. Analysis of the Tay/St. Andrews will be deferred until more data have been gathered.
- 6.6. The analysis of red-throated diver distribution in the Liverpool Bay and Tay/St. Andrews Bay reports is novel for use in SPA assessment; distribution is modelled on probability of occurrence.
- 6.7. To date, the boundaries generated around the bird features have not taken into account combination in accordance with Stage 1.3 of SPA Selection Guidelines, but a review would be beneficial adopting the same conventions as for the SPA review (inclusion of species reaching 1% GB or 2,000 individuals in a multi-species assemblage exceeding 20,000 individuals).
- 6.8. The Group agreed that for those estimates of numbers of birds in an area generated from aerial survey analysis it would be appropriate to use the mean value for site assessment purposes.

Action Point 6: JNCC to review whether conventions for assessing waterbird assemblages in the SPA Selection Guidelines are relevant to aerial survey data.

Action Point 7: JNCC to consider summarising the results of the three completed inshore non-breeding waterbird analyses into a single paper for information for the Group.

Action Point 8: JNCC to update the Group at its May meeting on progress in producing the draft inshore non-breeding waterbird SPA selection guidelines.

7. WeBS Alerts

- 7.1. JNCC gave a brief update on progress in the WeBS Alerts reporting. A paper on the Alerts System methods has been submitted to a journal for publication. The second Alerts report is complete and will be published on the BTO website once the methods paper has been accepted for publication. Alongside will be FAQs and the opportunity to feedback to WeBS on using the Alerts.
- 7.2. The WeBS Alerts System is a formal process that will be updated annually – for sites the annual updates will be for a third of SPAs and a sixth of SSSIs. It is intended to be fully accessible to anyone with a need for this kind of information. It will also be used by the Country Agencies to assist in *Common Standards Monitoring* (CSM) of designated sites; additional CSM guidance on using Alerts will be published on the JNCC website alongside the existing CSM guidance for bird features.

Action Point 9: JNCC to notify the Group when the WeBS Alerts report is published on the BTO website and circulate the link.

Action Point 10: Group members to send the Secretariat e-mail contact information for any other organisations that they think should be notified of the WeBS Alerts being published.

Species Items

8. Eider and Goosander

- 8.1. WWT and JNCC had discussed the scope of our knowledge of **eider** populations with members of the Eider Specialist Group and explained the basis of the SPAR SWG's interest. The Specialist Group confirmed that more data are required to clarify the status of different groups of eider in the UK and had drawn up a draft proposal. Glasgow University is interested in a study. JNCC is hopeful of securing some funds for work on genetics of UK eiders.
- 8.2. In light of these discussions, the SPAR SWG recommendation of January 2003 (2003/1/10.3) that the four relevant *mollissima* populations in NW Europe be considered together to represent the relevant biogeographical population for the UK and that this population is migratory is upheld.
- 8.3. WWT tabled a draft paper on **goosander** populations and dynamics. Both WPE2 and WPE3 list the British population as distinct from NW & C Europe, with a 1% threshold of 160 in WPE3. WeBS shows an increase in numbers in UK outside of the breeding season, with apparent January/February influxes. Peak numbers occur in late summer in northern areas. A significant part of the UK breeding population of males is known to make a moult migration to Norway and wintering birds in southern England are thought to be seasonal immigrants from Europe. However, few have been ringed and there are very few recoveries. Hence, the degree of population intermixing between UK and NW European birds remains unknown.
- 8.4. Both of these considerations fall under work item 3 in the SPAR SWG work programme; revision of international population estimates.
- 8.5. JNCC informed the Group that active consultation on Wetland International's compilation of *Waterbird Population Estimates 4* is likely in early 2005, leading to adoption of new estimates at Ramsar CoP9 in November 2005.

Action Point 11: SPAR SWG to discuss goosander paper in more depth at May 2004 meeting; Secretariat to circulate WWT paper.

Action Point 12: JNCC to initiate consultation with SPAR SWG on *Waterbird Population Estimates 4* at appropriate time in 2005.

9. Spotted crane sites (JNCC briefing)

- 9.1. JNCC gave an update on progress with collating spotted crane data for UK, requesting feedback on the circulated briefing so that a completed paper could be presented to the Group at its September 2004 meeting.
- 9.2. The record on spotted cranes is patchy; the only systematic survey was the 1999 national survey, but this covered only those sites with previous records. Other data probably exist in reserves records, etc., but response to the questionnaire had been poor.
- 9.3. There was general agreement that it would be hard to set a 1% threshold for the species, although it would be more feasible for the breeding population than the non-breeding (passage) population, but despite this it should still be possible to evaluate sites against the SPA Selection Guidelines and rank them in terms of relative importance. There is little evidence to elucidate whether the passage population comprises birds from outside of the UK, but treatment of spotted cranes should be consistent with other Annex I species and so review of the passage population should be on the basis of the national population at that time.
- 9.4. This briefing will not be published on the JNCC website as it is not yet complete.

Action Point 13: Members to send any comments on the spotted crane briefings to JNCC by end April 2004, focusing especially on issues identified within the paper.

Action Point 14: Where relevant Members to provide nature reserve records of spotted crane by end of June 2004.

Action Point 15: JNCC to present final spotted crane paper to the SPAR SWG at its September 2004 meeting.

10. Ring Ouzel (previously circulated EN short-information paper)

- 10.1. Estimates from Scandinavia cannot be improved upon as few surveys have been done and no new, more accurate estimates have been published. Hence, the currently published estimate for *T. t. torquatus* remains the best available (19,567-118,199 pairs). Given this, any agreed 1% threshold would mean that no sites in the UK would meet the requirement of Stage 1.2 of the SPA Selection Guidelines and so any consideration of SPA provision would have to be under Stage 1.4.
- 10.2. The suitability of site-based as opposed to wider countryside management for ring ouzel was queried. Surveys do not give a good overview of aggregation due to sample structure and data have not been obtained from the Ring Ouzel Study Group. Further work on this declining [*newly red-listed in BoCC 2002*] species would be beneficial. SNH and EN to present further analysis to the Group in September 2004.
- 10.3. The Group agreed that on the basis of the published population estimate for *T. t. torquatus* that a 1% biogeographical threshold for use in GB should be 200 pairs (rounded).

It was noted that using a national 1% threshold (60 pairs) for this migratory species was not in accord with the SPA Selection Guidelines.

- 10.4. A slightly revised version of this briefing will be published on the JNCC website.

Action Point 16: SPAR SWG to recommend to N2RSC that a 1% biogeographical threshold of 200 pairs be adopted by GB for ring ouzel.

11. Smew

- 11.1. Deferred pending data acquisition from WeBS.

12. Corncrake (RSPB briefing)

- 12.1. RSPB introduced this briefing, which provides the first substantial insight into the results of the 2003 national corncrake survey. The GB population has increased and now exceeds the 1978 level; the increase has taken place almost entirely within the species core area (Orkney/Western Isles). The paper re-evaluates the existing SPA network according to the 2003 results, suggesting that just 32% of the GB population is now within the network. RSPB considers that this is too little coverage and that according to the principles established by the SPA Review (Volume 1; Chapter 5) that the SPA network should be expanded. SNH requested that the detailed survey data underpinning these results be forwarded so that the above re-evaluation and recommendations can be considered in detail.

- 12.2. The Group agreed that it needed more time to review the paper. It was noted that there were two fundamental aims in the conservation strategy for the species: stabilisation of population in the core area and range expansion. The 2003 results are important in adding to understanding of whether the strategy aims are being met. Research indicates that establishment of young within the breeding population is localised (<20 km from natal area) and that range expansion will be achieved only through habitat creation within this limit or re-introduction into now suitable habitats elsewhere, e.g. the Eastern England re-introduction project.

- 12.3. Another important issue for this species has been the role of agri-environment schemes in helping bring about recovery in the core area. Defra indicated that a review of all the measures currently in place for this species, including SPA provision, would be valuable. Such a review will allow a clearer understanding of how best to achieve the aims of the conservation strategy for this species.

- 12.4. The Group agreed to reconsider this issue at its September 2004 meeting and invited the RSPB to present the Group with a review of measures (RSPB to confirm whether it can do this).

Action Point 17: Group to discuss corncrake SPA provision at its September 2004 meeting; RSPB invited to review measures for corncrake conservation prior to this meeting if able (to inform Secretariat if this is possible).

13. Golden eagle

- 13.1. A press release on the 2003 national survey was issued recently. There is no change in overall population size, but there is a change in distribution with more pairs in the west and fewer in the east.

- 13.2. The Group requested a more detailed brief for its May 2004 meeting and invited RSPB to prepare this.

Action Point 18: RSPB to provide a detailed brief on results of the 2003 golden eagle national survey for the May 2004 meeting.

14. Bilateral discussions

- 14.1. RSPB informed the Group that its IBA/SPA re-evaluation for England, Wales and Northern Ireland would be ready by the end of February. No dialogue with SNH since update at last meeting.
- 14.2. EHS reported that the extension to Belfast Lough would not proceed until 2004/05. Research on declines of waterbirds on Lough Neagh will be reported at end March and EHS will circulate this report to the Group. The declines are thought to be due to factors acting outside of the site.
- 14.3. Nothing reported from CCW.
- 14.4. SNH is to agree a meeting date with RSPB very soon.
- 14.5. EN has closed the consultation on the Stour & Orwell Estuary Extension. The underpinning SSSI has been notified and EN will advise Defra on the outcome of consultation in February.

Action Point 19: EHS to circulate Lough Neagh diving duck report to the SPAR SWG.

15. Any other matters arising from the minutes of the last meeting and discharge of actions

- 15.1. RSPB had reported to the Secretariat that it had been unable to provide the Group with an evaluation of the 2003 national peregrine survey as it did not hold all of the data. RSPB suggested that the Group invite BTO to lead on this assessment.
- 15.2. Group agreed that review of the work programme should be an agenda item for the May 2004 meeting.
- 15.3. Action Point 2003/3:11 carried forward.
- 15.4. The UK Natura 2000 and Ramsar Forum met on 6th November 2003; Defra to send papers to Secretariat to then circulate to SPAR SWG. [Please note that papers are available at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/ewd/natura-ramsar-forum/index.htm>]

Action Point 20: Secretariat to discuss SPAR SWG needs for review of 2003 national peregrine survey with BTO and try to find a solution to bringing required information to the Group.

16. Dates and venues of next meetings

- 16.1. 26th May 2004, RSPB, Sandy.
- 16.2. 29th September (venue TBC).

Attachments:

Redrafted minutes of the 23rd September 2003 meeting (2003/3), for approval at May meeting.
Finalised revised Terms of Reference for the SPAR SWG.
Revised Ramsar Review paper.

Letter, dated 26th January 2004, from Chair of the Natura 2000 and Ramsar Steering Committee to
Chair of the SPA SWG.

UK SPA SCIENTIFIC WORKING GROUP

MEETING 2004/1, 28TH JANUARY 2004

Action Point Summary

(In Chronological order and not minute order, batched by work period or future meeting)

Actions from this meeting to be discharged prior to 26th May 2004 meeting (see minutes of last meeting also):

(Papers to be submitted to secretariat by 7th May 2004)

Action Point 1: The Group to request that the Natura 2000 and Ramsar Steering Committee considers the mixture of measures implemented in the UK to meet the requirements of the Birds Directive in achieving desired conservation status of birds. To request that this consideration takes into account the risk of voluntary measures and aims to identify the need for additional SPAs, and to offer the assistance of the SPAR SWG in undertaking this review.

Action Point 2: The Chair to ask the Chair of the Natura 2000 and Ramsar Steering Committee to revise the paper on SPA Selection Guidelines and re-circulate, and whether his letter of 26th January and the revised paper can be posted on the SPA SWG web-page.

Action Point 3: Members to send any further comments on first draft of 2003 Annual Report to Secretariat by end February 2004. Secretariat to revise and re-circulate for further comment by end of March 2004.

Action Point 4: Secretariat to circulate final revised Terms of Reference and replace the original ones on the JNCC website with the revised version. Also, to revise the work programme to include Ramsar Review needs and circulate to the Group prior to the next meeting.

Action Point 5: JNCC to take into account comments on Phase 1 in finalising Phase 2 specifications, circulate Phase 2 accounts for comment in May/June 2004 and finalise CHIP report for September 2004 meeting.

Action Point 6: JNCC to review whether conventions for assessing waterbird assemblages in the SPA Selection Guidelines are relevant to aerial survey data.

Action Point 7: JNCC to consider summarising the results of the three completed inshore non-breeding waterbird analyses into a single paper for information for the Group.

Action Point 8: JNCC to update the Group at its May meeting on progress in producing the draft inshore non-breeding waterbird SPA selection guidelines.

Action Point 9: JNCC to notify the Group when the WeBS Alerts report is published on the BTO website and circulate the link.

Action Point 10: Group members to send the Secretariat e-mail contact information for any other organisations that they think should be notified of the WeBS Alerts being published.

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Action Point 16: SPAR SWG to recommend to N2RSC that a 1% biogeographical threshold of 200 pairs be adopted by GB for ring ouzel.

Action Point 17: Group to discuss corncrake SPA provision at its September 2004 meeting; RSPB invited to review measures for corncrake conservation prior to this meeting if able (to inform Secretariat if this is possible).

Action Point 18: RSPB to provide a detailed brief on results of the 2003 golden eagle national survey for the May 2004 meeting.

Action Point 19: EHS to circulate Lough Neagh diving duck report to the SPAR SWG.

Actions from this meeting to be discharged after 26th May 2004 meeting (see minutes of last meeting also):

Action Point 12: JNCC to initiate consultation with SPAR SWG on *Waterbird Population Estimates 4* at appropriate time in 2005.

Action Point 15: JNCC to present final spotted crane paper to the SPAR SWG at its September 2004 meeting.

Action Point 20: Secretariat to discuss SPAR SWG needs for review of 2003 national peregrine survey with BTO and try to find a solution to bringing required information to the Group.