

# UK SPA SCIENTIFIC WORKING GROUP

## 13 March 2002

### Review of SPA suite for Spotted Crakes

#### Status of Spotted Crakes

Spotted Crakes are listed in Annex I of the Birds Directive and they are also highly migratory (see section A6.53 of the SPA review). Accordingly they are considered under SPA selection Guideline 1.1 where possible SPAs are those sites which regularly hold >1% of the national population.

The Spotted Crane population in the UK is small compared to that of the rest of Europe, where an estimated 42,000-70,000 'pairs' breed.

Spotted Crakes are categorised by BirdLife International<sup>ii</sup> as SPEC 4 – that is, the species has favourable conservation status but is globally concentrated in Europe.

The national population is estimated as 50 calling males. The derived 1% threshold would therefore be one calling male. A breeding site in Britain would thus need to regularly hold one bird to qualify as of European importance under Guideline 1.1.

#### Spotted Crane ecology

Spotted Crakes are a highly secretive bird of the wettest types of fens. They can occur widely through Britain on spring and autumn migration. They breed at a few sites, in dense fen vegetation. They are skulking and their location can generally only be determined by listening for their very distinctive calls at night. Male Spotted Crakes have a highly distinctive display call with which they attract females. Listening for this call at suitable sites early in the breeding season (May to mid July) is a good way of locating birds, especially as the call can be heard for up to 1 km away under calm night-time conditions.

It appears that calling ceases (or is greatly reduced in intensity and frequency) once males attract their mate and the female starts to lay. This has implications in interpreting survey information since at sites holding successfully paired crakes, there may only be a short period of time when males are 'singing'. In contrast, sites with prolonged singing activity may indicate a single male unsuccessfully trying to attract a female.

Nevertheless, singing activity remains the only realistic way of determining breeding attempts and only one nest has ever been located in Britain (although adults with young in late summer are occasionally seen).

#### *Determining breeding occurrence*

Because of the very restricted short period in which breeding can be determined (the few nights when males are calling), most records are opportunistic. There is a noticeable bias in records towards those sites which are manned nature reserves (at which calling males are most likely to be heard).

Looking at the consolidated breeding records of Spotted Crakes, many sites have an irregular pattern of apparent occurrence. These are usually not manned nature reserves, and in the absence of regular monitoring, this is more likely to reflect irregular recording than it is irregular occurrence by crakes.

#### 1999 survey

The Spotted Crane is a species covered by SCARABBS and a national survey was conducted in 1999. This involved trying to ensure that any site which held calling birds at least once during the last decade was visited on several occasions during the 1999 breeding season. Needless to say, this first systematic national survey found the largest number ever recorded in Britain. The survey results found 73 singing male Spotted Crakes at 29 sites in England, Wales and Scotland during May and June. Seven additional singing males were recorded outside the survey period and at three sites, juveniles were seen yet no song was heard.

The results from the 1999 survey contrast with the annual totals published by RBBP which, in the last decade, have indicated up to 33 calling males, at up to 19 sites.

## Assessing sites of importance for Spotted Crane

Assessment of key sites is problematic, especially because years of no records at a site cannot be taken as necessarily indicating that Spotted Cranes were absent.

Since the last SPA Steering Group meeting, the following actions have been taken:

- A sites by year matrix has been created of all records of Spotted Crane in the breeding season (since the early 1970s). This has been populated with data from the 1999 SCARABBS survey, the RBBP database, RSPB's MERLIN database, county bird reports, and other published and unpublished literature.
- For records held by RBBP where no site is specified, the Secretary to the Panel has been asked to contact the relevant County Recorder to ask for location information (if known).

The conclusion of the review to date is that the RBBP data are very incomplete. In particular (and disappointingly), there are many records from nature reserves that have never been submitted to RBBP.

There are clearly sites with regular breeding occurrence outwith the current SPA suite. Further data collation is likely to increase the number of records from all sites. It should be stressed that this current status assessment is a minimal position.

## Next steps

It is clear that selection of possible additional SPAs for Spotted Cranes will depend on establishing their regular occurrence there. Work is in hand to try and establish a more definitive historical record for this species in Britain. This will take some months further work.

Regularity can also be determined by ensuring that monitoring is undertaken in future years at possible candidate sites. To this end, there would be merits in ensuring that monitoring is undertaken at these sites during the 2002 breeding season.

Both these actions will enable a more considered assessment, based on better data, to be undertaken later in 2002.

## Conclusions and recommendations

- There are four current sites in the Spotted Crane SPA suite (one in Scotland and three in England).
- Based on recent survey information and reanalysis of data from the last decade (not available to the 2000 SPA review), there are clear grounds for the selection of further SPAs for this rare and elusive species.
- The views of the Working Group are sought on the issue of site assessment for such an elusive species, where the historical record is so incomplete.
- Information on regularity of occurrence is a determining issue for SPA status. It is **recommended** that further work be undertaken to refine the initial list of possible additional Spotted Crane SPAs, in particular assessing the regularity of occurrence at these sites. **The Scientific Working Group should encourage survey coverage during the 2002 breeding season for these sites.** The SPA SWG should return to this issue with consideration of more fully developed proposals late in 2002 (after the forthcoming breeding season).

---

<sup>i</sup> Heath, M., Borggreve, C. & Peet, N. 2000. *European bird populations: estimates and trends*. BirdLife Conservation Series No. 10. Cambridge, BirdLife International. 160 pp.

<sup>ii</sup> Tucker, G.M. & Heath, M. 1994. *Birds in Europe: their conservation status*. Cambridge, BirdLife International. 600 pp