

**WeBS Steering Group – 46th meeting
JNCC Peterborough
6th March 2013**

Present at meeting

Richard Hearn, WWT, Chair [RH]
Simon Wotton, RSPB [SW]
David Stroud, JNCC [DS]

Deborah Procter, JNCC [DP]
Chas Holt, BTO [CH]
Graham Austin, BTO [GA]

Referred to in minutes (not present at meeting)

Andy Musgrove, BTO [AM]
Heidi Mellan, BTO [HM]
Neil Calbrade, BTO [NC]

Viola Ross-Smith, BTO [VRS]
James Pearce-Higgins, BTO [JPH]
David Noble, BTO [DN]

1. Introduction and adoption of agenda

The agenda was adopted. RH chaired. CH reported and took minutes.

2. Minutes of 45th WeBS Steering Group meeting

The minutes from the previous meeting were adopted. DS raised one point; he could not recall the detail concerning discussion on Greylag Geese in Northern Ireland. The item had been discussed at SG45 but there had been no definitive recommendations (to be discussed further at a future WeBS-GSMP meeting).

AP46/2/1: Include a line in SG45 Minutes stating that Irish Greylag Goose item was discussed. [CH]

3. Progress on Action Points (APs).

The action points arising from earlier meetings were considered. Most were either complete or considered later in meeting. **New (and on-going) actions are shown in red.** DS suggested subtle restructuring of future SG papers to minimise repetition of Action Points in the *Progress* and *Reports* sections.

AP45/2/1: Ensure DS receives a copy of final documentation relating to WeBS Contingency Fund. [AM]
Completed – but still requires a paper copy

AP43/4/1: Consider a newsletter article on mapping of roost sites [CH] **On-going; defer to 2014 newsletter**

AP43/6/1/: Draft an article on the history of WeBS coverage [CH/NC] **On-going; defer to 2014 newsletter**

AP44/4/3/: If funding is secured for the proposed WeBS gaps analysis risk assessment, Mersey Estuary is to be included as a priority case-study in that work. [CH *et al.*] **On-going. Initial funding for first phase (GIS-based WeBS coverage of protected sites) secured; data will be provided to Natural England. Second phase (Risk Assessment, involving RSPB) will be addressed in next FY.**

A general discussion followed on the benefits of collecting information with respect to potential site threats, particularly in association with flagging situations where there is a lack of WeBS data due to poor coverage. This could usefully be linked to the automation of identifying priority gaps in coverage. RH

raised the point that there is no national program to monitor threats, and drew comparison with the IBA pro-forma. DS referred to a past NCC estuary review. CH stated that the next element of the WeBS/RSPB Risk Assessment work would probably be to focus on Mersey Estuary as a case study, and consult with the WeBS counter network re perceived sites threats, reasons for gaps in coverage, etc. CH said that I-WeBS had recently produced a questionnaire to send to all I-WeBS counters with the aim of collecting habitat and site threat data; all agreed that a similar approach by WeBS would be useful but difficult to use results.

AP44/11/2: Partners to compile list of research questions (concept-note format) to suggest to universities. This will probably initially be based on ideas listed on the development list, but can also be broadened. Potential university contacts also to be suggested (All) **On-going; see below.**

AP46/3/1: Modify Development document into a spreadsheet to assist in costing projects, drafting of concept notes, and liaising with universities. As time allows, look to turn each idea into a concept note. [CH]

AP45/4/1: Create "LO Vacancies" section on website and promote via social media. [HM] **Completed**

AP45/5/1: Consider more intermediate-level WeBS training courses for 2013/14. [NC, CH] **Further courses at Snettisham agreed; dates being arranged for late 2013**

AP45/5/2: Progress work on online tutorials; WeBS Online [HM], field methods. [CH, NC] **Online tutorials completed**

AP45/5/3: Create a section on the WeBS website for collation of counters' WeBS-related videos etc. and instructions on how best to make use of it. [HM] **Completed**

AP45/5/4: Produce WeBS newsletter article to improve counter awareness of the importance of WeBS counts with respect to site designations etc. [NC *et al.*] **On-going; scheduled for 2013 newsletter**

AP45/7/1: Include Humber Low Tide Counts as a feature in next WeBS report. [CH, NC] **On-going; incorporated in page layout for report (discussed later)**

AP45/8/1: Produce a page plan of new paper report. [CH *et al.*] **Completed (discussed later)**

AP45/8/2: Include facility within online system to view data by wetland habitat categories. [CH, GA] **On-going; incorporated into online reporting interface (discussed later)**

AP45/8/3: Ensure on-line publication of *WeBS Alerts* by March 2013. [GA *et al.*] **On-going; on schedule (discussed later)**

AP45/9/1: Finalise wording of service level agreement. [NC *et al.*] **(Completed)**

AP45/10/1: Produce a summary document detailing the costs of testing the feasibility of using drones for different elements of waterbird monitoring in UK. [AM *et al.*] **On-going (discussed later); concept note in prep.**

AP45/10/2: Proposal and estimated budget for next NEWS to be circulated as soon as possible. [AM *et al.*] **On-going (discussed later); proposal in prep.**

AP45/10/3: Progress work on methods review paper, including consultation with AEWA . [CH *et al.*] **On-going; discussions with AEWA (and Wetlands International)**

AP45/11/1: Progress work on stratification; aim for paper to be drafted by SG46. [VRS] **On-going (discussed later)**

AP45/12/1: Seek information from ringers who undertake studies on Water Rail. [NC, CH] **On-going**

AP45/13/1: WeBS/BTO to provide contribution to *Waterbirds* section of MCCIP Report Card. [JPH, CH] **Completed; contribution in review**

AP45/15/1: Collaborative paper between WWT and others (incl WeBS) to be advanced. [RH, CH] **On-going**

WWT are working on collating datasets; RH envisaged significant progress by SG47.

AP45/15/2: GSMP & WeBS to continue discussions relating to GSMP-monitored geese and swans. [RH, CH] **On-going; meeting arranged to discuss several items**

4. Progress versus deadlines

CH reviewed progress against standard data submission and reporting deadlines. Currently the reporting deadlines are the same as used for previous years; RH suggested that these dates might need to be modified to account for the new reporting schedule. DS suggested use of Gant chart with intermediate milestones to help plan the reporting schedule.

AP46/4/1: Update the reporting dates on the 'Progress vs. Deadlines' table with timings for new online and paper reports, and produce a Gant chart to plan the reporting schedule. [CH]

5. Counter network

CH provided update. New LOs have been recruited for: Gwent [excl. Severn Estuary], Caithness, East Yorkshire & Scarborough [excl. Humber], Derbyshire, and East Lancashire & Fylde. Vacancies in the Local Organiser network were reviewed; current gaps in LO coverage are: Carlingford Lough; Cheshire North; Clwyd; Co. Antrim; Co. Armagh; Co. Down; Co. Fermanagh; Co. Londonderry; Co. Tyrone; Durham; Essex (other sites); Huddersfield/Halifax area; Loughs Neagh and Beg; Merseyside inland; Outer Ards; South Down coast; South Yorkshire; Sutherland (excl. Moray Basin); West Inverness/Wester Ross; West Kent. In terms of specific site issues, CH reported improved coverage of the Mersey Estuary; helped by a new LO, newly recruited counters and input from Natural England. However, some gaps in coverage on the Humber Estuary, combined with the likely departure of a current LO, means that site has now become a priority in terms of recruitment of counters.

AP46/5/1: Promote WeBS on the Humber and maximise opportunities for counter recruitment [HM *et al.*]

DS suggested that it would be timely to undertake an assessment of the demographics of the counter network (as per WeBS Agreement, to be done once per Agreement period). This would provide important information regarding the future state of WeBS with respect to the potential issue of ageing counters. CH pointed out that demographic information was collected as part of a questionnaire to counters in 2010; all agreed it would be useful to repeat this.

AP46/5/2: Assess demographic of WeBS counter network [HM]

CH updated on the group about two recent cases of counters requesting their WeBS count data to be withheld from WeBS Local Organisers, county bird clubs and other external conservation NGOs. All agreed that this is contrary to wording in the WeBS Agreement: "WeBS is committed to making data and information readily available to users", and that the exclusion of certain data and restriction of access to LOs is neither feasible or practical. It was also agreed that any facility that currently provides counters with the option to specify that data cannot be forwarded to appropriate third parties should be removed.

Sensitive species, rare breeding species, or particularly site issues, will continue to be treated appropriately, on a case by case basis following correspondence from counters.

AP46/5/3: Update wording on website and elsewhere, to ensure that all counters are aware that WeBS is committed to making data and information readily available to users. Remove any associated means of requesting data to be withheld. [HM]

CH said a small pool of counters had participated in the Water Rail tape-lure trial; results were trickling in.

AP46/5/4: Provide a brief summary of water rail tape-lure study for SG47 [NC].

6. WeBS publicity and training

A WeBS training course was held at Snettisham RSPB in November 2012; others are being planned for later in the year. A training event for Natural England staff is also being arranged by NC on the Mersey.

AP46/6/1: Finalise and publicise dates of intermediate-level WeBS training courses for 2013/14. [NC]

Online tutorials to help with use of WeBS Online and to guide best practice in the field are being produced by HM; these will be made available during the summer ahead of the 2013/14 winter.

AP46/6/2: Finish on-line tutorials and upload to website [HM]

WeBS continues to feature in the media and bird-watching press. For example, the period of October 2012 to March 2013 saw articles in *BTO News* and *British Birds*. CH has written a paper on status of Great White Egret in Britain, including a WeBS trend for the species, to be published in *British Birds* in May 2013.

7. Website and WeBS Online

CH reported that WeBS Online is operating smoothly and that the proportion of data submitted on-line continues to increase annually (now at approximately 80%). Recent developmental work has been focused on the changes to reporting (see below); consequently, work on the development of an on-line mapping tool had not been completed, but would be so when the online reporting work was finished.

RH pointed out that recent database developments by WWT would allow mapping of roost sites as part of GSMP. RH and CH agreed that it would be useful to discuss relevant synergies at a future WeBS-GSMP meeting at the BTO.

AP46/7/1: Amongst other items, on-line mapping to be discussed at WeBS-GSMP meeting [CH, RH]

8. Low Tide Counts

CH reported (on behalf of NC) that 12 months of Natural England-funded Low Tide Counts (LTC) on the Humber were completed successfully in October 2012. The final report is receiving final comments, and intention is to use this work as a 'LTC feature' in the new-look paper report this summer. (see 9.1, below). All sites scheduled for LTC in 2012/13 have been covered as planned; among the estuaries counted in 2012/13 were the Ribble, Mersey, Ythan, Tay, Tees, and Inland Sea. For 2013/14, estuaries due for coverage include Colne, Clyde, Southampton Water, and Portsmouth Harbour. SW pointed out the possible importance of the latter two sites with respect to RSPB casework.

9. WeBS report

9.1 Paper report

The group spent considerable time working through CH's proposed page layout for the new paper report. All agreed that content and length (44 pages) were appropriate, particularly for the first report in the new format. **Suggestions (Action Points; all CH) are summarised here:**

General:

- Produce a timetable of preparation for 2013 report in order to assist in planning for future years.
- Produce a spreadsheet with various waterbird-related surveys (national and international) that are scheduled for forthcoming years. This will help in planning content for annual WeBS reports.
- Continue to use artwork (rather than photo) on front cover. Initially raised by DS, all agreed that this special WeBS tradition should probably be maintained if possible. CH to source cover artwork.

Content:

- Habitat focused pages: as a general principle, look to focus on one or two habitats each year, rather than cover all in detail. Focus should be on estuaries in 2013. Attempt where possible to coordinate habitat focus each year with planned surveys; e.g. NEWS – rocky shores, etc.
- Liaise with RBBP re. non-natives report which is due for publication in 2014.
- Country pages: all agreed this was a good means of introducing the Country Agencies. Coordinate content through the Inter Agency Ornithology Group; plan well ahead if expecting contributions.
- Increase *Alerts* content in 2013; it is a one-off that is not going to feature for another three years.
- International pages: look to have IWC/AEWA as a standard feature each year, with a rotating contribution from a national scheme (preferably I-WeBS in 2013). The two would make a good double-page spread, followed by species focused flyway stories. CH to contact Olivia Crowe (I-WeBS) regarding contribution.
- Re. the selection of species-focused accounts, all agreed that in 2013 the following should be planned: (i) recent colonists (scarce herons), (ii) pochard, (iii) oystercatcher, (iv) herring gull. RH offered to help with pochard feature.
- Low Tide Counts: include a map with text byte annotations for each estuary covered in 2011/12. All agreed on use of Humber Estuary as a case study for LTC.

9.2 Online report

The group was shown prototype online pages by CH/GA, and worked through the structure of the reporting interface. All were pleased with progress and agreed that the content looked good. All were mindful of maximising links to other surveys and associated websites where possible; for example, DS suggested a link to the Wetlands International's Critical Sites Network (CSN) Tool.

10. WeBS Alerts

CH/GA reported that the next Alerts (using data up to 2010/11) have been processed and interpretation is almost complete. Alerts are on schedule to be published at the end of March 2013 via the new online reporting system. A summary article will also appear in the WeBS newsletter and the Alerts will also feature in SUKB 2013. The group discussed timetabling of publication, partly in view of the fact that Alerts are treated as official government statistics (and hence are required to be made available to Defra for 24 hours ahead of full publication). It was decided that it would be pragmatic to wait until mid April, after the end of the Easter holiday period. The week beginning **Mon 15 April** was tentatively agreed.

AP46/10/1: Relevant parties to be advised of the new date for Alerts publication as appropriate. [DP, CH]

GA described that, in the future, WeBS would be in a position to update the Alerts with geese, as well as some additional protected sites. All agreed that this data upload would need to be timetabled appropriately and done at in a single batch (rather than trickling in updates), perhaps in November 2013.

AP46/10/2: GA to produce short summaries detailing (i) Alerts data for publication at end of March, and (ii) additional Alerts data likely to be available for publication before the end of 2013. [GA]

The potential for Alerts for SSSIs (as well as SPAs) to be published was also discussed briefly. All agreed that it would be sensible to consult with the Inter Agency Ornithology Group re. requirement of Alerts for SSSIs.

AP46/10/3: Inter Agency Ornithology Group to be contacted re. Alerts for SSSIs. [GA]

11. WeBS Data Requests

CH reported that the WeBS data request system continues to operate smoothly. Final figures end-of-year figures will be circulated to Partners in early April, but based on projections, accrued surplus is likely to be down on recent years, by approximately 20%. This could make available approximately £43,000 for use on supplementary projects – *discussed below*. DS suggested that we look to allocate £40,000; all agreed.

AP46/11/1: End-of-year data request figures to be circulated to Partners. [CH]

12. WeBS developmental work

A formal spreadsheet of proposed uses is needed as soon as possible (**AP44/11/2/1**). The group reviewed on-going and other potential development work, with reference to use of the data request surplus (above):

Stratification

CH reported (on behalf of VRS) that progress has been slow, but several analytical approaches have been tested, including a modelling approach, cluster analysis and PCA. The plan is for two papers to be drafted, (i) new population estimates for widespread species, (ii) examination of UK waterbird distributions using morphological variables. This work is planned for this spring; with budgeted time not yet used, this will be forwarded next FY. DS reiterated that the original driver of the stratification work was to strategically focus better counter effort.

AP46/12/1: Fresh revision of progress to be produced in April for circulation to Partners. This is to include work-plan and publication plan. [VRS]

Historic waterbird data

A medium-term timetable is in place for completion of this task. Volunteers continue to assist HM in this process; steady progress is being made. With budgeted time not yet used, this will be forwarded to future years for HM to continue to supervise and undertake this work. DS requested that an update on progress be provided for SG47. GA suggested using seasonal fieldworkers at the end of contracts to assist with this.

AP46/12/2: Update on progress with processing of historic waterbird data to be produced for SG47. [HM]

Methods review

Following discussions with AEWA and Wetlands International, there is a agreement that a defensive review of monitoring methods would represent a useful contribution to the AEWA Technical Series. With budgeted time not yet used, this will be forwarded to 2013/14.

AP46/12/3: Correspondence with AEWA and Wetlands International on defensive review of monitoring methods to be progressed [CH], and the item to be circulated within the AEWA Technical Committee [DS].

Indicators

Specification for development of an Arctic indicator is still to be finalised. DS had suggested that the UK Arctic Science conference (Cambridge, September 2013) might be a good opportunity. With budgeted time not yet used on this work, it will be forwarded to 2013/14.

AP46/12/4: Progress work on development of Arctic indicator [CH, RH, DS]

International Golden Plover survey

The next flyway survey of Golden Plover is scheduled for October 2014. CH suggested that WeBS looks to facilitate organisation of this survey (via collaboration with IWSG and other national organisers). The group agreed in principle that this would potentially be a useful 'contribution in kind' to the IWC programme.

AP46/12/5: Facilitating organisation of Golden Plover survey to be costed for circulation at end of FY. [CH]

Conservation Drones

The group have previously endorsed investment in this technology, agreeing that a small investment in the development of techniques for remote monitoring of waterbirds would be sensible. This had not yet been fully costed, but remains a priority for use of a small amount of the surplus. AM is contacting relevant parties and it is envisaged that this development work will be progressed during 2013. DP suggested the potential for setting up a "drone network" (if not already in existence) and an associated workshop. SW agreed to circulate details of related developmental work being undertaken by Nigel Butcher (RSPB).

AP46/12/6: Progress proposal for integration of remote waterbird monitoring into WeBS; costs to be circulated at FY end [AM, CH]. *CH attending SAMS UAV training workshop in April 2013*****

Non Estuarine Waterbird Survey (NEWS)

NEWS is scheduled for 2014/15. Overall costs based on modified costs of previous NEWS are estimated at 109k +VAT. As discussed at SG45, funding needs to be sought. The proposal needs to be finalised, but this survey could seek to include seaducks, mammals (otter, seal), and passerines such as rock pipit, twite. Previously, the bulk of funding was secured through separate contracts with the Country Agencies and other regionally-based organisations such as Water Authorities. CH stressed that there is good potential for engaging with birding community, e.g. through payment of expenses for expeditions (c.f. Atlas). Approximate breakdown for NEWS1415 were presented to the group, and it was agreed that a process to seek potential funding should be initiated as soon as possible. GA described the methodological approach of previous NEWS; DS considered that it was very important to stay with the same random element. All agreed that possible funding sources via MSFD (Marine Strategic Framework Directive) could potentially be directed to fulfil coverage of previously covered sections of coast that would otherwise not be covered. Pending finalisation of overall costs, all agreed that funding the initial set-up phase of the project would represent an appropriate WeBS contribution (i.e. potential use of 9k of data request surplus).

AP46/12/7: Progress proposal & funding strategy for NEWS; costs to be circulated at FY end [DN, CH]

SW suggested drafting a concept note in the next 3-4 months for submission to RSPB for potential funding.

AP46/12/8: Produce concept NEWS note for RSPB by July 2013 [DN, CH]

Contribution to RAFOS expeditions to NW Scotland

RAFOS make an annual voluntary WeBS trip to NW Scotland. It was acknowledged they visit remote, usually unvisited area, and their request for WeBS to contribute towards their expenses was discussed. It was agreed that there might be potential for this but only when linked to other surveys such as NEWS and potential facilitation of other expeditionary parties. DS stated that WeBS is unable to commit to an annual contribution. All agreed; standard WeBS expenses cannot be reimbursed as it would set a precedent.

AP46/12/8: Relay feedback to RAFOS, and encourage participation in NEWS [CH]

Contribution to MCCIP

CH reported that a wintering waterbird contribution to the annual report card of the MCCIP (Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership) had been completed on schedule (JPH, CH). The paper was currently being reviewed, prior to inclusion on the MCCIP webpages.

13. Conferences, meeting, other events

RH/CH provided an overview of the latest meeting of the Africa-Eurasian Waterbird Monitoring Partnership (Wetlands International, February 2013). In particular, CH requested input on a document he had prepared on data policy & guidelines with respect to use of IWC data. DS suggested some minor changes. All agreed the document was fit for purpose. The plan is for this to be circulated to National Organisers of all waterbird monitoring schemes for further input. RH advised the group that a deadline for input into the next Waterbird Population Estimates (WPE) & Conservation Status Report (CSR) was September 2013.

The 2013 EBCC conference (Romania, Sept 2013) will feature a waterbird session and host a Workshop for National Coordinators and associated waterbird monitoring community (the latter organised by IWC/Wetlands International, linked to MAVA funding). CH and RH anticipate attending the workshop.

14. AOB

RH reported that WWT (GSMP) had secured a contract to map feeding distributions of pink-footed geese in England, comparable to similar work carried out last year in Scotland.

RH drew attention to an apparent contradiction in trends for Bewick's Swan derived through WeBS and International Swan Census (and values published in WeBS report and SUKB). CH/GA postulated that this may be due in part to the use of WeBS roost counts for Ouse Washes in analyses, but would look into it. DP suggested that, whatever the reason, differences in reported trends needed to be documented; all agreed.

AP45/14/1: GSMP & WeBS to add issue of BS trend discrepancies to agenda for their spring meeting [RH]

On the back of the SPA review DS drew attention to the importance of flagging a need for count data from particular sites for passage periods, e.g. Whimbrel, Sanderling. This would be included in an Alerts-focused article drafted for the next WeBS newsletter.

CH reported that WeBS data would soon be incorporated to the National Biodiversity Network (NBN); AM had recently provided summarised BBS data and planned to deal with the WeBS contribution soon.

15. Next meeting

WeBS 47th SG: 24th October 2013 (11.15 am) @ JNCC Peterborough