

BRITISH TRUST FOR ORNITHOLOGY

REGIONAL NETWORK COMMITTEE

33rd Meeting: Monday 18 February 2013, 09:30 – 15:00
at The British Trust for Ornithology, The Nunnery, Thetford

Present: Dr R J Harris (Chairman, RJH) (Council), Mr K F Betton (Council), Mr C W Dee, Mr R J Haycock (BH), Mr A Heavisides, Dr H Insley (Council). Also attending: Ms D Balmer (items 13 to 17), Dr A Clements, Dr G Conway (items 13 to 15), Dr B Darvill (BTO Scotland), Mr M Eddowes (items 13 - 20), Prof R J Fuller (items 13 & 14), Dr D Langslow (items 13 - 17), Dr A Musgrove, Dr D G Noble (items 13 to 20), Ms K Risely, Ms S Rider (minuting secretary), Ms K Wright (items 13 to 17).

MINUTES

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Graham Appleton, Mike Brown, Ieuan Evans, Kelvin Jones and Shane Wolsey.

2. WELCOME TO NEW COMMITTEE MEMBERS

The Chairman welcomed Chris Dee, Bob Haycock and Ben Darvill (Development Officer, BTO Scotland) to the meeting.

3. CONFIDENTIALITY AND CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Committee members were reminded of the need for confidentiality on all items marked with an asterisk, and that asterisks could be added or removed during the meeting if the Committee deemed items to be confidential. Items 6d, 8 and 9 were deemed confidential at the time of compiling the agenda. An asterisk was added to items 6a and 13d during the meeting.

4. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING (RNC:SEP12:MIN)

Minutes of the September 2012 meeting were circulated previously. Action points have either been delivered, are in-hand to the agreed timetable, or will be discussed at today's meeting.

5. MATTERS ARISING

a. Suggested procedure for dealing with RR performance issues (RNC:FEB13:1)

The Chairman reminded the Committee of the reasons why a procedure for dealing with RR performance issues was needed. The Committee agreed that a decision should be made 21 days after receiving a 'dismissal form'. The Chairman asked the Committee if they felt that there should also be an appeals procedure in place, with the final decision being made by Council at their next available meeting, which is then binding. The Committee agreed.

b. Volunteer Magazine – proposed title change

As Graham Appleton was unable to attend the meeting, this item was deferred.

6. OVERVIEW OF REGIONAL NETWORK (RNC:FEB13:2)

a.* Gaps in the Regional Network

There are currently 11 regions without an RR (as outlined in paper RNC:FEB13:2).

b. Appointment of new RRs

- Essex (north-east) Ed Hutchings application has been approved by RNC since the last reporting period in September 2013.
- Cheshire (South) Mark Eddowes has taken on this additional region.
- Avon – Gordon Kirk (formerly ARR) has taken over as RR from Mike Smart.

c. Regional Conference Programme (RNC:FEB13:2)

The list of conferences was noted.

The Chairman advised that the North West BTO Members' Conference has been promoted heavily but take up has been poor and a decision would soon have to be made as to whether the conference goes ahead. He added that he is very surprised at the poor take-up as there is a good list of speakers and the conference is only £23 for the day.

Members of the Committee discussed their own experiences of organising conferences in their areas, from allowing people to turn up on the day to holding conferences for free. The Committee agreed that there are several factors which affect conference attendance, from the current financial climate to clashes with other events.

d.* Feedback on RRs (RNC:FEB13:2)

No further feedback since the September meeting.

7. REPORTS FROM SCOTLAND, NORTHERN IRELAND AND WALES (RNC:SEP12:4)

Comprehensive country reports were provided in paper RNC:FEB13:3. Neither Shane Wolsey nor Kelvin Jones were able to attend the meeting to add anything further to their reports. KR said that the success of BBS in Wales has mainly been due to the fact that we received funding for BBS mentoring. We have the funding again for this year but the test will be whether the BBS surveyors come back for the second year.

AC told the Committee that we get a good deal out of Northern Ireland and Wales. We have a really good profile in Wales and we now have measurable results in terms of engagement from BBS. He added that SW has a growing network and he delivers a huge amount. AC continued to say that we should ensure that we engage with the countries as best we can.

BD summarised the report from BTO Scotland. He told the Committee that the 10-year celebration event which was held in October 2012 had resulted in the creation of a page on the BTO website for BTO Scotland's Future Priorities.

The new 'What's up?' project will increase BBS participation and *BirdTrack* recording. BD reassured RNC that there was no expectation that RRs will be expected to organize the additional upland transects for this project but that they are very welcome to get involved should they wish to.

The BTO Scotland E-Newsletter will be going out this week to members and supporters in Scotland. BD is hoping to build a more community feel by getting people to interact with them via Twitter and Facebook.

PART 2: BUSINESS

8.* MEDALS (RNC:FEB13:4)

The Chairman reminded the Committee to make recommendations for this year's medals through the appropriate channels.

RNC did not make a recommendation for the Bernard Tucker Medal last year as Committee members were unsure as to what 'outstanding service to the Trust' meant and were unclear as to the criteria for forming a decision. The Chairman told the Committee that he had asked Council to provide some guidance on benchmarking those nominated. AC said that a benchmarking system was needed so that both Committees have some proper guidelines to follow.

The Chairman told RNC that this issue will be revisited once Council have provided a benchmarking process.

9.* NOMINATIONS FOR NEW COMMITTEE MEMBERS

There are two places to be filled on RNC. The Chairman suggested that the vacancies available are used for a rolling invitation to different RRs.

Both Bob Harris and KB's terms finish at the end of the year and Council will nominate a representative for the role of Chairman, and a representative to fill the Council member vacancy.

The Committees are invited to make recommendations.

10. FEEDBACK FROM COUNCIL

The Chairman reported that there was no feedback from Council.

11. PART 3: FEEDBACK AND REPORTS

REPORT ON MEMBERSHIP, VOLUNTEERING AND PROMOTION IN 2012 (RNC:FEB13:5)

As IE was unable to attend the meeting, RNC took the report on face value. The Chairman said it was heartening to see total membership increasing but would like to see a change in emphasis, targeting retention rates as well as membership.

AC felt that there wasn't a need to do this unless the retention rate drops. The Chairman said that the two year retention rate is what we are interested in, as this is the point where we start to bring in revenue from the subscription.

HI said that new members recruited from promotions don't tend to turn into surveyors. Surveyors who turn into BTO members tend to stay. KB added that new people attracted by offers have a lower knowledge level of birds than past members. BD commented that BTO is broadening its appeal successfully but that we need to provide the tools to allow members to increase their skill level.

HI told RNC that we need to be careful how we use the Atlas in promotions. We are running the risk of upsetting long-term members if new members are getting a better offer on the Atlas in the long-term. AC told RNC that this was not the case. There was lots of discussion over the two-year offer and the pre-pub offer will be going out to a wide community of 60,000 members and volunteers for £45 per copy.

AC said his hesitancy around retention rates was not to promise what we could not deliver. We are in the process of pulling together a specification for improvements to the Progress database. The membership increase is putting a huge amount of pressure on the membership team, which is a small team. RNC acknowledged the hard work put in by the membership team.

There has been some discussion on forums that members have not been getting feedback from us. The Chairman said that we need to put something on the forums about the pressures causing delay in response time. He added that he will address the issue with IE.

12. TRAINING

The Chairman asked RNC for their comments on training.

AH said he'd noticed an increase in new people looking for birdwatching training in the last 12 months. Trying to find something to encourage them and keep them going is difficult. KR commented that the BTO online videos are good but acknowledged that there is a gap. AH told RNC that quite a few people asked for mentoring in birdwatching. We need to reinvigorate our links with local bird clubs and make links between BBS surveyors or more experienced birdwatchers so this can happen. BH suggested using an online networking system – something that he is using in Wales. KB added that BTO should set-up some online training available to everyone. He suggested organising birding outings in each region for £5

a head and didn't think this would be hugely expensive to do.

The Chairman suggested pointing people towards the Norwegian online training website on which you can test yourself. AM said it was adequate but that there isn't a community feel to it.

13. REPORT ON PROGRESS OF CURRENT SURVEYS (RNC:FEB13:6)

10:55am Dawn Balmer (via *GoToMeeting*), Greg Conway, Mark Eddowes, Derek Langslow, David Noble and Karen Wright joined the meeting.

a. Atlas

DEB is busy reviewing species accounts and writing/finishing chapters. One is ready to go, two are in the middle of being reviewed and one is in progress. One quarter of the text blocks has been delivered to the designer.

There is a pre-publication offer going out with *Volunteer* magazine and SOC are including fliers in Scottish Bird News.

BD asked RNC how many more Atlases produced in the future would be solely printed in book form, rather than being produced on a CD and published online. AC said that the book will be published, together with an online resource to enable more interaction with the data. We have collaborators in the digital world and we do have a lot of interest from them in terms of producing digital publications such as the Atlas and high quality field guides. There will be an e-book of the Atlas in some form.

b. BirdTrack

AM told RNC that the new BirdTrack home page is going live in a couple of weeks and will be a lot more interactive. The BirdTrack App is now available on iPhone. There is a range of new developments coming up next year which involve taxa work/interactive work/BirdTrack overseas.

c. BBS

KR confirmed that BBS would be introducing optional new recording methods in 2014, involving redevelopment of the online system. BBS maps have been published on the website. We are hoping to develop training and mentoring for BBS, which started in Wales in 2013 and is planned for Scotland in 2014.

d.* GBW

Confidential.

e. CES/RAS

Members of the Regional Network are to get in touch with the Demography Team if they know of any good sites to monitor.

f. Nest Records

KR reported that this year had the third highest annual total for nest records. There has been lots of new recruitment and there are plans to get the nest recording mentoring scheme off the ground.

14. SURVEYS IN 2013 (RNC:FEB13:7)

a. Wintering Thrushes Survey

David Noble said that the Survey would continue for another winter. Many improvements are being made and we will be looking closely at all aspects of the survey, especially the polygons and the core period.

b. Woodcocks

Greg Conway reported that the survey started late, so it began on a back foot. The methodology is on the website. Testing for the site allocation is complete. Testing for data entry and editing should be complete by the end of February. GC said he understood that RRs had been concerned by the late delivery of the survey.

c. Nightingale Survey 2012 carry-forward – gap-filling and additional surveys in 2013

Rob Fuller told RNC that we have been busy processing the data. We would like to:

- Fill two major gaps in Suffolk and north west Essex. This spring we will focus on these areas plus c.10 tetrads that had high populations in 1999.
- Look into inter-year variations of Nightingale populations. They do vary year-on-year but they are in steep decline.
- Obtain a sample of 200 tetrads from 2012 resurveyed in 2014.

d. UK National Chat Survey

DN reported that the survey will run again in 2013, with a few tweaks made to the system. 200 sites were covered last year and Whinchat was sparse. We would like to increase the coverage with new sites. The weather last year was a big problem. We will be shifting the core period of the survey later to avoid migrant/passage birds.

There is a plan to run a National Chat Survey in 2014 which would exclude Wales. There is an initiative to obtain funding for this work.

e. Lapwing Productivity Survey

No plans to run a survey in 2013. People interested in the meantime are invited to contact Greg Conway.

f. House Martin Survey

As outlined in RNC:FEB13:7, we are unable to plan for the 2014 survey until the Ringing/Nest Records database work has been completed.

KB told RNC that this survey was of great public value and a way of getting people involved with the BTO. BH said that people confuse Swallows and House Martins, so this survey would be an opportunity to get some good messages out.

g. Peregrine Survey 2014

We would like to run the survey in 2014 and there is a group within BTO looking at ways to take this forward.

h. Non-Estuarine Waterbird Survey (NEWS) – 2013/14 or later

We are looking for funding. A group within BTO looking at ways to take this forward.

i. Wrack Beach Survey

This work is now being undertaken via studentships. Once methods are developed it might be something we want to trial. Survey periods do overlap seasons but not all-year round.

RJF told RNC that recent analysis of Atlas data has thrown up new priorities. The Breeding Wader Population is in a terrible situation. All except Oystercatcher are contracting their ranges. Upland birds are not doing well in terms of range contractions. The Chat Survey fits in well to that agenda.

AC said that we have an increasingly strategic approach to our whole monitoring set-up and DN is currently working on a Monitoring Strategy. We are looking at how all the surveys relate to each other and how BirdTrack can provide a platform for all the single species information that we need. We are very excited about the way our monitoring capabilities are progressing.

BH commented that now things are advancing electronically, keeping it simple encourages people to enter data online.

DL said he was concerned about 2014, in terms of Surveys planned it's sounding very busy but nothing is finalised yet. He urged RNC to look hard at timings and wondered whether we should trial surveys the year before they take place.

PART 4: DISCUSSION

15. FEEDBACK & DISCUSSION ABOUT SURVEYS

The Network has been canvassed and 35% have sent in returns. Most were appreciative that they had been given the chance to comment. IE has reduced the returns down into the discussion document.

RNC discussed the feedback and discussion about recent surveys. RNC agreed that The Chats and Thrushes Surveys had been rolled out too fast, the website pages hadn't been tested enough and the YouTube guidance videos had been rolled out too late.

AC told RNC that, as an organisation, BTO staff had been caught off guard because of the Atlas. Lessons have been learnt and DEB's new role will have the overview of surveys that is needed.

KW asked RNC not to forget that both BBS and the Atlas had big IT budgets to enable Iain Downie to produce fantastic web pages. It is inevitable projects with smaller budgets, worked on by newer IT staff, will not be as slick.

CD said that the Regional Network is acting as the first line of support for IT queries from surveyors. Could the RN have access to ITs progress so that they are able to get back to surveyors with a solution/answer? KW explained that problems are logged and prioritised but acknowledged that IS needs to think more about how messages are then passed on to RRs.

AM summarised the discussion:

- BTO has fallen over in structural management of Thrushes, partly due to the Atlas.
- Understanding IS capacity both for individuals and problems with broadband areas.
- Understanding confusion in communication channels between observers/RRs/Organisers and IS Team.
- The amount of correspondence that comes in to survey organisers – find a way to redirect to RRs and make sure the Regional Network is enabled to answer more questions.
- IS will try to ensure that surveys have a standard look.

The Chairman discussed if we should send the document to RRs before the next meeting. IE and Bob Harris will send the document with comments to the Regional Network explaining these are the comments and this is the way we're dealing with them.

16. GENERAL DISCUSSION ABOUT SURVEYS

The Committee discussed the standardisation of surveys online, testing of web pages and differences with browsers and the continued use of paper forms.

KW explained that systems are tested within IS, then with external testers. However, we do have issues with licensing so we have to be careful how many people are involved.

There was a discussion on users and different browsers causing problems. RNC agreed that it would be useful to have a statement on the website outlining which browsers the surveys are supported by. With an apology to those using unsupported browsers and pointing them

towards browser upgrades.

RNC discussed the possibilities of no longer providing paper forms for surveys but it was felt that we need to be inclusive and could alienate observers who have been consistently recording for us on paper for many years. RRs could enter the data for them online to help the volunteers stay involved.

The Committee went on to discuss the value of the Yahoo Forum. The Chairman explained that lots of people think that the forum is not the most appropriate method for communication. He asked RNC if some people should be empowered to monitor the forum on behalf of BTO staff.

RNC felt that the Yahoo Forum wasn't the best option. CD said that there are plenty of off the shelf software packages available that could do a better job. He volunteered to work with KW to build a proposal for an alternative BTO Forum with an announcements area and a discussion area. RNC agreed.

Maps

KW explained to RNC that we are currently unable to use the 1:25,000 OS map layer on the website as the license would cost BTO £100K. She proposed making a case to OS to consider if we could take advantage of any concessions. ME added that Google doesn't show footpaths and for survey work, ideally maps of 1:25,000 were needed. CD added that OS are offering free developer courses so they are very open at the moment, now would be a good time to get in touch. RNC agreed that KW should approach OS.

The Chairman summarised that there is work to be done but at the moment we are stuck with what we have. We expect RRs to have a certain amount of capacity to inform their role. We should advise RRs to go to certain sites, such as "Where's the path?" and we should put links like this on their web pages.

17. THE ROLE OF BTO RRs

The Chairman said that the role of an RR is very different now to what it used to be. We now have a portal to put things on to the system. How do we feel we manage and use that process? How do we feel the role will evolve in time and how do we feed that back to organisers?

BH said It's difficult in rural areas to keep a network of volunteers. RRs explain things to volunteers and can help them with teething troubles. There is a degree of validation, so we are the final link in the chain, as we know the patch.

The Chairman told RNC that RRs are increasingly seeing volunteers we have never met. They choose a square online and it's a case of building that in, so you can see what they've done and validate and form a judgement. Having a mechanism to talk to the volunteer is important.

BD made the point that not all the RRs are as engaged as those at the meeting today. For those regions where we are not so lucky, we are the contact for the volunteers.

ME told RNC that it is a great bonus that BTO identifies potential volunteers. If we have to allocate randomly sampled squares, we can choose who to allocate them to.

The Chairman commented that the Wintering Thrushes Survey has allowed volunteers to select their squares. RRs are saying that squares that should have gone to very experienced, reliable surveyors have gone to newer, less experienced people. We need the ability for RRs to allocate squares.

People aren't talking face-to-face at local clubs like they used to. Some prefer internet contact only. We should acknowledge that there are people in their 20s and 30s who we could bring in if we recognise the way they communicate. KB added that young people like instant gratification. AM added that the trick is to then forge a relationship with them. HI commented that we don't have the resources at a national level to cover that.

AC said that it's about community; people use *BirdTrack* so that they can compete with their friends. RRs are crucial in allowing that to happen. We need a strong level of RRs to communicate with people.

The Chairman asked RNC about the changing face of technology. Now that Twitter and Facebook are becoming widely used, are we as RRs going to be behind technology or do we drive it forward? Do we hold training sessions for RRs on Twitter/Facebook?

KR said that all RRs do things differently and that having a 'one size fits all' approach won't work.

The Chairman asked RNC if it should be acknowledging a minimum standard or allowing RRs to continue as they are.

RNC discussed the issue. The Committee felt that RRs are volunteers and shouldn't be pushed too much. The key skills are still the same; the channels with which we now have to communicate have changed. RRs should be guided by their own volunteer network. AM told RNC that we could have YouTube videos on how to use Twitter, for example. CD said that maybe this was something we could ask SW to produce for the NI Conference.

RNC agreed they are happy but not complacent about the role of RRs.

18. HOW CAN RNC BEST SERVE THE REGIONAL NETWORK?

The Chairman told RNC that the Committee is now in its 16th year. He asked:

- Is the Committee fulfilling its role?
- Where do we feel it should go in the next five years?
- How do we see the role of this Committee developing now and in the future?

HI commented that when individual species surveys come up, RRs are never quite sure where they come from. RNC never have much say as to what is surveyed.

AC told RNC that DN and Management are in the process of pulling together a Monitoring Strategy which could feed into RNC and they should have a strong role in making sure things are delivered properly. KB said that most meetings focus on problems experienced and how we don't make the same mistakes again. We should be looking at strategies for surveys and how to take them forward. We shouldn't be problem solving. AC agreed. The first half of RNC should focus on strategic matters; general items could be moved later in the Agenda.

HI said that the idea to have a rolling attendance of different RRs is really good. This would then expose them to the inner workings of the BTO.

The Chairman said that some RRs haven't seen the Standing Orders of RNC and weren't aware of the Committee and its role.

The Chairman stated that the pack of information that RRs receive needs to be looked at and refreshed.

HI said that the minutes of the RNC should be circulated to all RRs. IE could forward the minutes to all RRs with the confidential parts taken out. If an RR then needed further explanation on any of the items, they could contact an RR who is on the Committee.

AC said he hoped that the survey organisers are able to have a sense of the Regional Network in respect of their surveys to enable them to add things to the Agenda.

The Chairman told RNC that we need to look at disseminating information to members of the Regional Network.

It was noted that people on RNC who are not Regional Reps have not been included in notifications about the Regional Network meetings. IE to address.

RNC discussed using video conferencing for future meetings to save some Committee members travelling and to reduce costs. The Chairman said that we have to accept that we need to have one face-to-face meeting and one video conferencing style meeting.

KB told RNC he would like one meeting to be face-to-face with survey organisers, then a follow-up meeting to catch up and get feedback.

The Chairman said he needed IE's input as to whether RNC should manage the forum and, as soon as IE is fit again, will discuss this with him. September's meeting will have a new style agenda with strategy items first and general business second, so that we can keep the meeting shorter and punchier.

19. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

- a. Keith Betton gave his apologies for the September meeting.
- b. Dawn Balmer, Andy Musgrove, David Noble and Kate Risely will all be at the EBCC Conference at the time of the next meeting.

20. NEXT MEETING

The next meeting was scheduled to take place on Monday 23 September 2013 at BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford starting at 09:30. In light of the absence of several participants, this meeting may have to be rescheduled.