

WeBS Local Organiser Advisory Committee

Minutes of 13th Meeting: 6th June 2023

Attendees

Chair: Gill Birtles (BTO)

Neil Calbrade (BTO), Teresa Frost (BTO), Dan Jenkins-Jones (Wales), Kerry Mackie (Northern Ireland), Brian Moore (Midlands), Andy Riches (South and East Scotland), Eve Tigwell (South and West Scotland).

1 Apologies for absence

Chris Gunn (Eastern England), Kirsi Peck (JNCC), Bob Swann (North and West Scotland), Simon Wotton (RSPB).

2 Welcome and introductions

All attendees of the WeBS Local Organiser Advisory Committee (LOAC) introduced themselves.

3 Confidentiality and conflicts of interest

Members of the LOAC were asked to note that agenda items marked with an asterisk [*] should be regarded as strictly confidential. The LOAC may add or remove asterisks during the meeting. LOAC members are asked to notify the Chair of any conflict of interest for any particular item and to absent themselves from the discussion, decision or vote for this item as appropriate.

4 Action Points from the Last Meeting and Matters Arising

AP/LOAC12/1 Add coverage maps of LTC sites onto the BTO website - **not done. NC will look into this in the following year.**

AP/LOAC12/2 Finish the Age/Sex recording guidance video and send round to LOAC to sense check before making it available on the website - **done.**

AP/LOAC12/4 Look into reviewing how casual counts are viewed and verified by Local Organisers and used in WeBS Online and encourage additional supplementary counts - **not done. TF and GB will look into promoting supplementary and casual counts and making it clearer why/how we use this information, e.g. in the newsletter.**

AP/LOAC12/5 GB to email LOAC with questions prior to the publication of the newsletter and write an article to be included - **not done. GB will do this for the 2023 edition of WeBS News.**

AP/LOAC12/6 GB to email LOAC with LO applications for comment after initial discussion with the applicant - **done.**

AP/LOAC12/7 Organise a Local Organiser zoom meeting for autumn 2022 - **done**.

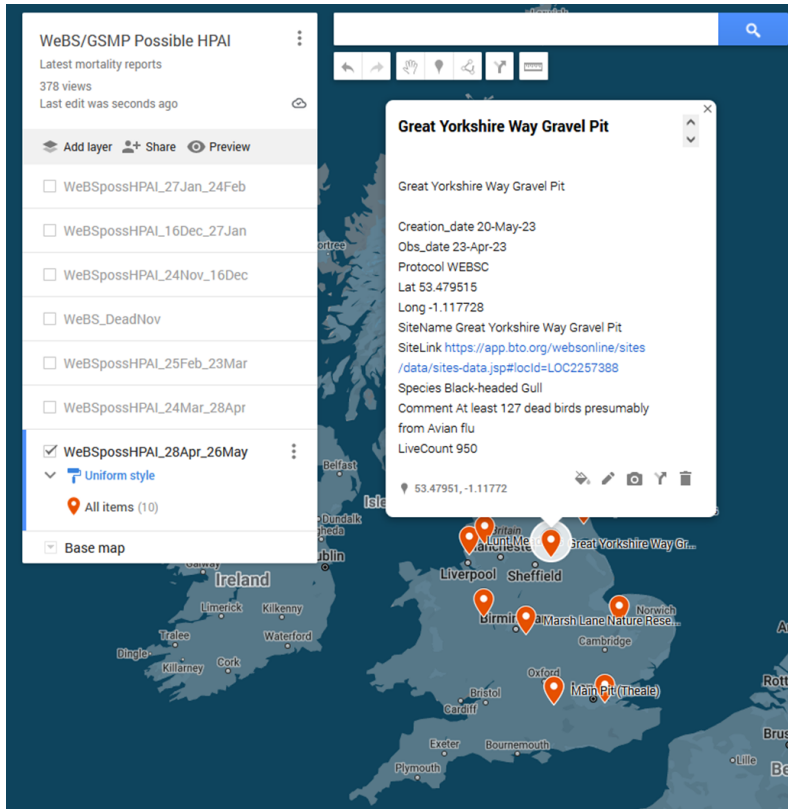
5 WeBS Progress Update

Avian Flu Update

In the Autumn 2022 edition of *WeBS News*, counters were asked to add a note in the comments mentioning flu if they found dead or sick birds to their WeBS counts, as well as reporting to Defra/Daera*. Since then we've received over 250 comments of possible cases, some of these being multiple birds or instances at a site. Every month following the WeBS core count date these are shared with colleagues from RSPB, the relevant Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies (Natural England, Natural Resources Wales, NatureScot, NI) and other relevant public bodies and combined with reports from BirdTrack and Epicollect (some key sites/reserves have been selected to collect more detailed information on wild bird mortality via the Epicollect systems - this includes some WeBS sites). This is helping to build a more quantitative picture of mortality alongside the official tested results, which only test a limited number of individuals.

Although there was a lot of avian flu around in the winter, no species stood out as particularly hard hit, although Mute Swan and Canada and Greylag Geese featured most prominently in the WeBS comments. However, in the spring reports of mortality in Black-headed Gulls started to increase, particularly at breeding colonies. BTO collated a map of the data received through all routes so far, which can be viewed at

<https://www.birdguides.com/news/black-headed-gull-bearing-brunt-of-new-wave-of-bird-flu/>



Example update of possible HPAI cases from WeBS, shared with relative organisations monthly.

* particularly where cases are suspected at a new site/area or new species, it is important to report to Defra/Daera helplines for testing as well as using BirdTrack or WeBS to note the numbers of birds involved.

AP/LOAC13/1 TF to write a short paragraph that LOAC members can share with LOs (and LOs to share with counters), as an update to avian flu and to continue reporting dead birds in WeBS Online. (Completed - above can be shared.)

Update from BTO

All BTO members and supporters have been invited to an Open Day at the Nunnery on 1st July to celebrate BTO's 90th anniversary. GB will be attending to meet any WeBS volunteers who attend. Booking is needed, which you can do on the BTO website here - <https://www.bto.org/cy/open-day-bto-90th-anniversary#:~:text=Join%20us%20on%20Saturday%201.Demonstrations>

Update from RSPB

HPAI seabird surveys

RSPB is leading on a UK-wide programme of additional targeted seabird population counts in 2023, using a coordinated and collaborative approach across the statutory bodies and conservation organisations. A full census is not logistically feasible (the previous one took over 5 years to complete), but RSPB's planned programme for 2023 has been designed to provide good geographic coverage for the key species expected to be most impacted by HPAI and includes many populations breeding within Special Protection Areas. There is a dedicated survey team working on the survey now, from mid May, together with a large number of local contacts suite of local contacts. This will all be supplemented with the routine monitoring undertaken at RSPB seabird reserves, as well as other sites as part of the Seabird Monitoring Programme. One particular focus is on breeding Bonxies in the Northern Isles.

This work is linked to SMP aswell, with details in this blog:

[Counting seabirds to understand the impacts of avian influenza - Saving Nature With Science - Our work - The RSPB Community](#)

Uist machair waders

Uist machair habitats support one of the highest densities of breeding waders in the UK, making them exceptionally important in a UK context. Machair waders are not immune to the declines experienced nationally though, with the latest extensive survey in 2022 showing a loss of 25% of breeding pairs since the 1980s. Dunlin and Ringed Plover are faring particularly badly, with nearly three quarters of their populations lost since 1983. A large part of this wader decline is attributed to egg predation by hedgehogs, which have spread in great numbers across the Uists since their introduction to the islands in the 1970s. The Uist Native Wildlife Project (UNWP) led by RSPB and NatureScot aims to respond to this issue by humanely removing hedgehogs from the Uists through live trapping and translocation to the mainland. This massive undertaking will protect waders, other ground nesting birds and machair invertebrates from hedgehog impacts. Working with other researchers,

Conservation Science are busy developing a programme of monitoring and research to support the UNWP and to understand other drivers of decline of machair breeding waders in addition to hedgehog predation.

Low-tide Update

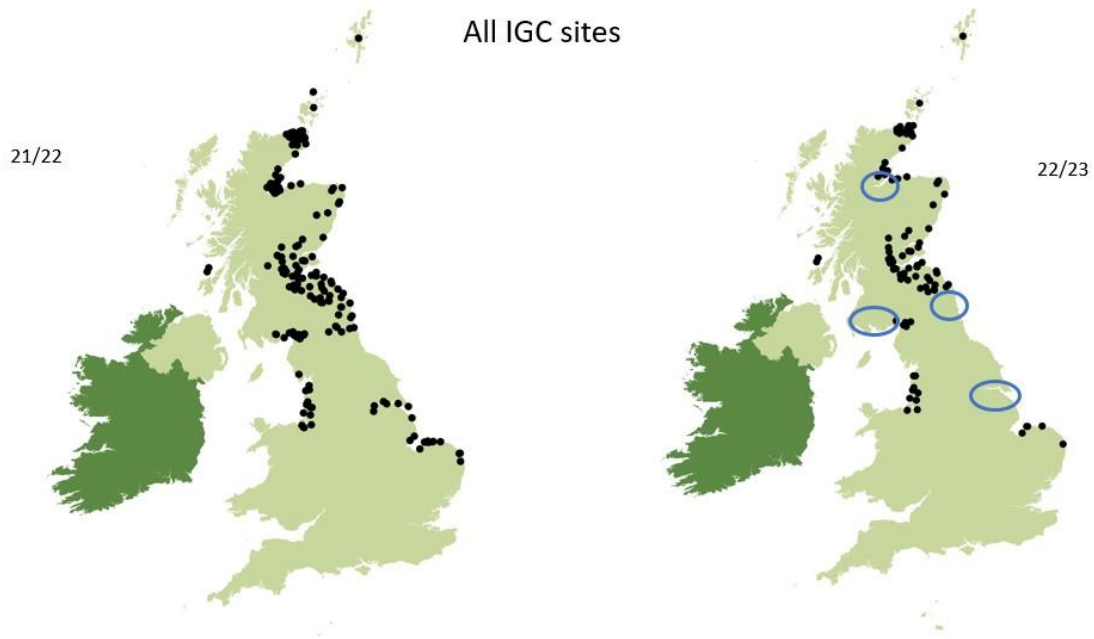
To date, we have received Low Tide Counts from 17 sites for the 22/23 winter season, with no Scottish sites covered this year. Away from the regular sites, the Alt (Merseyside), Medina Estuary (IOW) and Cleddau (Pembrokeshire) were counted as part of the cyclical coverage. Counts from a few sectors of the Swale, Crouch/Roach and Tees Estuaries were also received, but aren't included on the map as they aren't full site counts..



GSMP Update

Having only taken on the organising of the GSMP in autumn last year, the 22/23 winter was the first winter under our stewardship. The Icelandic-breeding Goose Census (IGC) is the main survey BTO organise with 2 counts carried out, one each in October and November. In 22/23, 256 sites were counted, though this included 121 on Shetland and 34 on Orkney which on the map are just represented by a single consolidated dot. Four areas where IGC Counts were carried out in 21/22 but were missing from the 22/23 counts - Northumberland, Moray & Speyside, North Solway and the Humber, the latter three were without a Local Organiser which may have been the cause of the gaps. Andy Riches offered to be GSMP Local Organiser for the North Solway.

Addendum: The following day (7th) having chased as a result of this meeting, I received counts from 6 sites on the Humber and an offer from the RSPB to act as Local Organiser for that area in future.



Reporting for the GSMP is now through *Waterbirds in the UK report* and the WeBS Newsletter.

WeBS News Update

As WeBS News is no longer just for WeBS, but includes GSMP, we may have to rebrand the newsletter to reflect this, and suggestions for a new name were asked for.

Articles for the forthcoming newsletter which will be out in about October were also requested and suggestions for one on the importance of Casual and Roost Counts, and one of the LOAC were put forward. Any further suggestions and offers of articles, please contact NC.

WeBS Online Developments

GB ran through a demonstration of two developments to WeBS Online that the WeBS team have been working on:

Create New Location:

First is Create New Location, where we are creating a single form in the Manage My Team section of WeBS Online, where Local Organisers fill in all the details required when setting up a new WeBS sector. This includes a map where they can draw in the boundary, removing the need for LOs to send this to GB separately, which is a stage that is often forgotten or difficult for LOs to complete. This form will send all the information to the WeBS team and they will be able to set up the new site without asking for extra information. It is hoped that this will stream-line the whole process, reduce the amount of admin with setting up a sector and ensure that no sectors are set up without boundaries. Along with the Vacant Sites map development (shown in the 2022 LO meeting where sites without boundaries will be shown as a point), it is hoped that we will greatly reduce the number of sectors without boundaries.

Site Split Tool:

We are also working on a tool to better aid the splitting of sites for Local Organisers. There is a lot of admin when splitting a site, mainly with trying to understand fully what an LO is envisaging, as it's important to get it right before changes are committed to the database. Therefore, we will be adding in an option when an LO goes to the 'Edit Site Boundary' page for a particular site, there will be a 'Site Splitting Tool' button which will take them to a new map. Here they can draw in the new site boundaries by splitting the original boundary, filling in the details for all the new sites, and submitting it for the WeBS team to review and approve.

We will be asking for testing for these developments so do look out for our emails about this when the time comes.

Update on Historic Form Inputting

There are many boxes of historic NWC, BoEE, WeBS forms in the WeBS office in Thetford which the WeBS team are always working their way through to input online and then archive.

In 2016, Heidi wrote a document detailing the amount of work and an estimate of when it can be completed which at that time was another 5 years or so, a target which hasn't been achieved. Progress has been steady, but it is a big job. GB works on the project when possible, organising the volunteer effort, but is only able to input significant amounts of time at the few quieter times in the WeBS year.

We have one volunteer who comes in regularly and does on average ½ - 1 day a week, but they do work on other projects so this varies. GB has put more effort into reaching out for other volunteers and we have recently had a placement student working with us every other week or so which has been really good, but they will be leaving us at the end of the month.

So we are always looking for volunteers to help with this and in the past we have advertised this in the WeBS newsletter. The difficulties are that we require someone to be in the office to do the work as in the past it has been difficult to keep tabs on the forms or people haven't inputted. Also, it's not a very exciting job so it's hard to attract people to commit long-term to it. If anyone hears of someone looking for a volunteer opportunity in the Thetford office, please let us know.

6 Reports from LOAC Regions

LOAC members were invited to contact the Local Organisers within their regions prior to the meeting to see if there was anything they would like to raise with the committee:

- Eve Tigwell gave an update that there was nothing to report from LOs ahead of the meeting. The Somerset area has a good number of volunteers and site coverage. The only problem is that validation flags come up when they get large numbers of certain species, which can be often. It was discussed how work on the verification levels is needed from the WeBS team and also if an LO ever thinks the level needs changing for a species in their region, to let the WeBS team know so that they can change this.
- Andy Riches says that no LOs responded to him so he is happy that all is okay in his LOAC region.

- The same for Dan Jenkins-Jones. Dan also raised that it can be difficult to know how Wales as a whole is doing with WeBS coverage and volunteer numbers and so was wondering if there was a way of breaking this down and accessing this data in spreadsheet form. Gill and Teresa agreed that it would be useful to be able to access this sort of data from a constituent country point of view and will have a think about how this can be done.

AP/LOAC13/2 GB and TF to see if it is viable to create a way for LOAC members to access WeBS effort statistics such as volunteer numbers, site coverage, Priority and habitat site coverage.

- Kerry Mackie reported that he hadn't heard from his LOs either. He voiced that he doesn't have much of a relationship with the LOs or really know who they are. GB said if this information is ever needed, don't hesitate to get in touch. GB will also get Kerry in touch with the new NI Engagement Officer.

AP/LOAC13/3 GB to get Kerry Mackie in touch with the new NI Engagement Officer.

7 Review of the Local Organiser application process

In LOAC meeting 12, the Local Organiser Application process was agreed between LOAC, adding in the step of GB having an information chat with applicants and sending round the application form to LOAC to review.

LOAC are happy to continue with this process and don't wish to change it going forward.

8 Future Meetings

It was agreed that we will arrange the next LOAC meeting in spring 2024. GB will send a poll closer to the time to set the date.

Any other business

No other business was raised.