

WeBS Local Organiser Advisory Committee
Minutes of 9th Meeting: 15th July 2014

Attendees

Chair: Nick Mason (Deben)

John Armitage (Islay), Neil Calbrade (BTO), Chas Holt (BTO), Heidi Mellan (BTO), Brian Moore (Leicestershire), Cathy Smyth (NIEA), Shane Wolsey (Belfast Lough), Simon Wotton (RSPB).

1 Apologies for absence

Neil Bielby (Central), Gladys Grant (Tamar), Colette Hall (WWT), Richard Hearn (WWT), Andrew King (Breconshire), David Stroud (JNCC).

2 Welcome and introductions

All attendees of the WeBS Local Organiser Advisory Committee (LOAC) introduced themselves. The Chair welcomed everyone.

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 Minutes of last meeting and matters arising

Nick Mason indicated that he would like to step down from LOAC and asked that a replacement be found.

AP/LOAC9/1 HM to contact invite Local Organisers to join the LOAC as the South-East Representative.

AP/LOAC9/2 HM to contact all LOAC members to see who would like to Chair the next meeting.

There was a short discussion regarding WeBS training and recruitment. Shane Wolsey regularly holds WeBS training days – the next one is on 12th September 2014 – the venue is free and the attendees don't have to pay but they do need to provide their own refreshments. Shane has a network of people/volunteers that he emails with details of available training days.

The issue of how to input goose counts was raised as some LOs have had several queries regarding the codes that are available. It was noted that an article is planned for the newsletter that will explain the general background behind the various codes etc.

The issue of double counting was discussed, it was noted that we do get a lot but that there are rigorous checks in place that flag these up. This includes Low Tide counts.

It was noted that a newsletter hadn't been produced since the last meeting; this is due to a second report being produced during 2014. The next newsletter will be published in September/October

2014. As the reports will now be produced in the spring (March/April) the newsletters will be produced in the autumn.

Nick Mason confirmed he is still able to write an article for the newsletter

A Water Rail article will be included in the next newsletter to explain the results but basically the results showed that more birds were recorded when tapes were used.

Nick Mason confirmed that the Deben counters are willing to use tape lures if future trials are planned.

The use of Social Media for WeBS was discussed. It was noted that the WeBS Office find it difficult to generate a lot of interesting items throughout the year for social media sites but several messages/posts were planned to coincide with the release of the report.

It was suggested that Twitter is the more interactive of the social media sites as followers are seeing what is being talked about in real time and can respond quite quickly. The WeBS Office often tweet about key sites that require counters which, in a couple of instances, has resulted in a new volunteer stepping forward. Tweets often circulate mentioning that a WeBS count weekend is coming up; these are regularly retweeted by non-WeBS people which all helps to raise awareness of the scheme. It was felt that the use of Twitter and other social media sites can't be detrimental, it can only help.

It was noted that several years ago WeBS produced leaflets that were distributed to holiday accommodation in the hopes that it would help with recruitment. Unfortunately nothing happened as the leaflets are all still on display at the end of the season.

It was agreed that whilst social media and leaflets or publications left on display can help, personal contact (networking) was considered to be the best method of recruitment.

5 Counter network

WITUK

The majority of the feedback on the new style of report has been positive. The online reporting interface allows users to do so much more and gives more detail than the old-style report. The new paper version is also a lot more readable than before. It was noted that there is the possibility of developing the online interface further by adding more tabs for extra surveys.

It was felt that the new style report was something you could now sit down and read but the old style was something you only dipped into. It was also felt that external, non-WeBS counters, would find report readable but newsletter more topical.

It was noted that 4000 copies of the paper report were produced, it was confirmed that one was sent to each counter (unless they had opted out of this) and some were sent out to the Partners. The new format means that the paper report is a lot thinner and can be used for promotion – the old-style report was a bit too bulky for that.

AP/LOAC9/3 HM to send 60 copies to SW for his conference in October.

AP/LOAC9/4 HM send BM 3 copies of the newsletter for bird club.

AP/LOAC9/5 HM to contact LOs to see if they'd like additional copies to send to their local Bird Club.

It was confirmed that the report and newsletter would still both be produced once a year. The new timing of the newsletter will allow us to highlight species that will turn up over winter.

AP/LOAC9/6 HM to put BM in touch with Chris Morley so he can register his bird club with the BTO Bird Club Partnership

Newsletter

The issue of encouraging counters to submit articles for the website was discussed. It was noted that a request for counter articles is included every year and occasionally people come forward. E.g. the Jack Snipe study article, the author contacted us but that's very unusual.

It was suggested that we need to reach people who don't see themselves as counters but are birding as a hobby. These people may not be members of any bird club. It was also suggested that a regular blog feature in the newsletter might encourage people to come forward.

It was queried whether the WeBS Office has access to the names of BirdTrack users. At SSSIs where WeBS counts are not completed but people are submitting data to BirdTrack could the WeBS Office contact those BirdTrack users to suggest they submit data to WeBS?

AP/LOAC9/7 NC/HM to look at the possibility of contacting BirdTrack users at vacant SSSIs/SPAs/Priority sites

As BirdTrack records are usually forwarded to the County Bird Recorder it was suggested that the recorder may be able to put us in touch with potential WeBS counters. BM already uses this method to find new WeBS counters.

There was a short discussion about Casual Counts. It was noted that volunteers have to register for WeBS in order to submit casual records for existing or newly registered WeBS sites. It was also noted that Casual counts are best used for species that are not covered very well with WeBS e.g. seaducks.

It was noted that supplementary data are not used to calculate population trends but do get used for distribution and overall numbers (these appear in orange on the online reporting interface).

There was a discussion about utilising commercial survey count data. It was noted that in Northern Ireland consultancies are encouraged to make their data available. It was suggested that in many instances the data are deemed to be confidential for several years. There is also the question of which survey should receive the data. It was noted that a similar discussion had taken place at a previous WeBS Steering Group meeting where it was suggested that JNCC should be the driving force behind this.

NC requested ideas for features to be included in future newsletters – any suggestions should be forwarded to him at neil.calbrade@bto.org

6 WeBS progress update

Low Tide

Pagham Harbour were pushed by Simon Wotton to do a count. Other sites that completed Low Tide counts for 2013/14 were Cleddau Estuary; Rough Firth; Blyth Estuary (Northumberland); Loch Fleet; Breydon Water; Adur Estuary; Deben Estuary; Stour and Orwell Estuaries; Medway Estuary; Langstone Harbour; Belfast Lough; Strangford Lough; Burry Inlet; and Swansea Bay.

Alt Estuary; Hamford Water; Dee Estuary; Portsmouth Harbour; are due to be counted in 2014/15

Suggestions for other sites that might benefit from a Low Tide count were discussed:

- Blyth Estuary in Suffolk - NM suggested that he might be able to find counters to cover this site.
- Exe Estuary – there is lots of work going in the area so we are trying to get them to complete a count.
- Morecambe Bay – there are five smaller estuaries that feed into Morecambe Bay so it will be a big undertaking. Last time Natural England had paid fieldworkers filling the gaps.
- Southampton Water; Thames Estuary; Firth of Clyde and Lough Foyle would all benefit

CS offered to try to organise a Low Tide count on Lough Foyle.

Training

We haven't run any WeBS training course here at BTO HQ recently, however, the BTO training team occasionally arrange bird ID courses around the UK which include an introduction to WeBS. It was noted that we only ran basic beginner courses here but that they were not well attended and the conversion rate was very low.

Consultancies have contacted us requesting bespoke WeBS training, there is a course planned for the week after BirdFair. BTO do offer professional training but they only touch on WeBS whereas we offer full WeBS training.

It has been suggested that Natural England staff would benefit with WeBS Training, including looking at the report and what data are produced. However, whilst Natural England are keen for this to happen, it is all dependent upon funding.

ShW runs a training day for WeBS once a year which includes an indoor and outdoor element as well as flock counting. The flock counting helps the volunteers get a feel of whether WeBS is for them, it also helps to ensure their binoculars are up to the job.

ShW noted that he would prefer new counters to take part in his training days so that he could put them in touch with Local Organisers but the Local Organisers have been sending counters to him.

Other ways to help train volunteers were suggested including course books; You Tube videos; more about winger plumage; encouraging counters to take a friend along. It was noted that the BTO produce bird ID videos which are linked to from the WeBS website under Taking Part/Counter Resources.

It was noted that the BBS Organiser had filmed a video of her completing her count and there was talk of a WeBS version.

It was suggested that we should use Shane's material to replicate his training module in the UK.

WeBS surveyed the online counters included the age demographics. The results highlighted that more engagement with youngsters is needed. It was felt that the younger birders seem to be going down the twitching route rather than counting/monitoring. It was suggested that younger birders like the competitiveness of twitching whereas the older generation didn't have the opportunity to travel all over to twitch a bird so a local patch was more likely.

It was also suggested that it isn't just that more transport is available but that more information is available with instant access so twitching is more interesting rather than monitoring. It is useful to try to bring youngsters on board now, although you will lose them to family life/work etc., they will come back down the line.

It was suggested that we need to push the idea that taking part in a BTO Survey should be seen as something good to add to your CV – RSPB in NI have been employing people who have monitoring experience on their CVs.

It was also suggested that we make more of an effort to visit universities and give talks.

It was suggested that Ringing training events attract a large number of people and it would be useful if they received copies of the Volunteer magazine.

AP/LOAC9/8 HM to find out whether Ringers receive copies of the Volunteer magazine.

There was a discussion about the loss of counters, especially at complex sites (e.g. Humber Estuary), and the merits of recruiting volunteers at dole centres. It was decided that there would be too many concerns about ID skills and the length of time they would be able to commit to counts.

It was suggested that Autumn/Winter Watch could give WeBS a mention.

7 WeBS Social Media

In Nov (2013) we had 200 Twitter followers – we now have 750 followers. The more interactive you are the more people follow and retweet. Trying to be more active have linked Facebook and Twitter.

The WeBS report is due to be published on 30th July; a month of tweeting is planned.

8 Reports from partners

RSPB

Lots of work has been going on behind the scenes:

SPA review (BTO heading this up) is ongoing,

EU Birds and Habitats Directive has been under attack, the nature of the attack is anti-development, WeBS data are quite key as they highlight important areas.

Assessing habitat creation and compensation, bit sensitive at the moment as developers need to approve the report but is potentially quite interesting.

Side issues: Medmerry (Sussex) had breeding black-winged stilts – maybe have something in the newsletter regarding breeding waders.

We were going to use the Somerset Levels in a press release for the last report but ended up being quite sensitive so the press release was cancelled at the last minute. Had Little Egrets breeding there, plus a large number of booming bitterns.

Several annual scarcer surveys – Chough survey last year, Twite survey showed large declines.

Next year Golden Eagle, Corn Crake, Bunting surveys – Corn Crake crashed by about ¼ last April due to the cold spring but could decline again this year as no successful nests last year and high adult mortality.

Seabird survey – dependent upon funding but 2016 is now looking likely.

BTO

Monitoring: Atlas was launched on the day of the last LOAC meeting, it has been well received and you can now access maps online.

BirdTrack Global has been launched.

BBS and WBBS have been combined and you can now submit your WBBS counts online.

This October the international survey of Golden Plovers will take place on a fixed weekend, Oct 11/12th; there will be a coordinated count of Golden Plovers across the globe to get a snapshot of the population. However WeBS is not great for Golden Plovers so additional counts from counters would be great. BTO involved in writing it up.

AP/LOAC9/9 CH to send out reminder of Golden Plover weekend

This will be publicised by WeBS and BTO.

Future – next year plan for wider House Martin survey.

We are still hoping to get NEWS funded for 2015/16. In the past this has been funded by country agencies. SNH is a big player as they have a large number of remote coastal areas. If this goes ahead it will be announced soon.

Sierra Leone, a coordinated count across the whole flyway. Largely led by Netherlands to collect and improve data collection. Small group from UK went to train and collect data, they engaged with local communities which helped to form a relationship so hopefully we'll be involved in any follow up work.

WWT

The next International Swan Census takes place on 15th January 2015; this coincides with the WeBS count to help us get a full count of whoopers and greylags. Colette Hall will be contacting Local Organiser regarding the Swan Census. NIEA usually coordinates the Northern Ireland counts but very few Bewicks now in Northern Ireland – they were on Lough Foyle and Strangford Lough but long gone now. There will be an article in newsletter.

Last August SNH organised a Scotland wide census of greylags. – JA to follow up whether this went ahead.

9 Any other business

Goose Management

Islay Sustainable Goose Management Strategy is being drawn together for the next 10 year. The consultation period is now over and the aim is to reduce the Barnacle Goose population (via

shooting) down to 25000 from 30000. Once the shooting starts we may see a displacement across to Northern Ireland or to mainland Scotland. Three shooters will be employed this time around whereas, in the past, there was only one.

This has been in response to farming related pressures. If they get the numbers down to 25000 there may be additional pressures to maintain this level.

Drones

ShW has secured funding for survey work using drones. Initially it will be used in Northern Ireland but it could potentially be used anywhere. There are several limitations – you have to keep the drone in sight; it is not waterproof weather conditions have to be dry; there mustn't be high winds; batteries only last 20 minutes etc.

Having the drone waterproofed would make it a "custom design" so the build price would skyrocket. The drone also needs to be licensed for business use and can only be flown by licensed pilots. There are limitations on the size/weight of the drone and you have to have permission to fly the drone in congested areas (which is pretty much everywhere) and it can't be flown over populated areas without everyone's consent.

We should be fully licensed by August for a drone up to 20kg – any larger than 20kg and there are tougher licensing regulations – and our license allows us to fly it up to 20m off the ground.

It will be interesting to see how the birds react to it but would be useful to trial other uses for it e.g. Seal surveys. The images/videos it produces are high quality. Infra-red/thermal cameras are available but flying at night brings more limitations and administrative problems, but would like to try to acquire that in the next round of funding.

LOAC Member Responsibilities

There was a short discussion about the responsibilities of the LOAC Members. It was decided that LOAC Members should be in contact with the other Local Organisers within their LOAC region and to report back with anything that might be of interest to them (planned developments, special surveys etc.). If any of the Local Organisers in the region then raise concerns or have any comments, suggestions or feedback, LOAC Members can report those back to us either at the next LOAC meeting or earlier if the matter requires urgent attention.

It was suggested that Go To Meeting could be used for the next LOAC meeting to enable more people to attend.

10 Date of next meeting

The 10th meeting of the LOAC has been provisionally set as Thursday 16th July 2015, 10.00 am, at the British Trust for Ornithology, Thetford. TBC