



*AGREEMENT ON THE CONSERVATION OF
AFRICAN-EURASIAN MIGRATORY WATERBIRDS*

**4th Meeting of the Committee for Captive Breeding, Reintroduction and
Supplementation of Lesser White-fronted Geese in Fennoscandia (RECAP 4)**

16 June 2011, UN Campus Bonn, Germany

MEETING REPORT



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Introduction

Acting AEWA Executive Secretary Marco Barbieri opened the meeting by welcoming all participants to the UN Campus in Bonn. Barbieri inquired whether, following the change of management at the UNEP/AEWA Secretariat, the RECAP Committee members still agreed with having the Secretariat continue as Chair of the Committee. All Committee members agreed.

Decision: The UNEP/AEWA Secretariat will for the time being continue to chair the RECAP Committee.

Adoption of the Agenda

Decision: The agenda (Doc. LWfG RECAP 4.1 rev. 2) was adopted.

Independent Review of Lesser White-fronted Flyways

As requested by the Committee, the UNEP/AEWA Secretariat had commissioned an expert organization to undertake an independent scientific review of Lesser White-fronted Goose flyways in Europe based on available scientific and peer-reviewed literature (*Doc. LWfG RECAP 4.2*). The review was conducted by the British Trust for Ornithology led by John Marchant and Andy Musgrove, who were present at the meeting and made a presentation on the main findings and conclusions of the review.

Questions and discussion:

The chair invited comments from Committee members and observers on the factual elements and the conclusions of the review.

Concerning historic sightings of LWfG made in the UK Norway commented that old UK ornithologists should have been able to distinguish between LWfG and GWfG, and therefore the sightings could be considered to be fairly accurate. Marchant agreed and added that this had led to the conclusion that the species was always rare in Great Britain. At no point were adult and young LWfG seen together, only individuals caught up in flocks of GWfG. Commenting on the causes of the decline of LWfG populations, Norway added that during the 1940s and 50s the steppe was cultivated in the Soviet Union. This led to a dramatic decline in the natural grasslands, which in turn might have led to the dramatic decline in LWfG numbers – further aggravated by excessive hunting.

Sweden noted that BTO had not taken web-based data on bird observations into consideration in the review. Not all observations are published in the more traditional sense in the journals. Data found in the web-based databases could give a slightly different view than when looking only at published data, and could therefore have led to slightly different conclusions. Web-based data might compliment the picture to some extent. The Swedish database “Artportalen” has recently been receiving a lot of information on observations of LWfG, including information from observations dating back to the 50s and 60s. There are numerous observations of LWfG in southern Sweden, with records of up to four individuals moving south together. This information could have been given more attention in the review. Marchant replied that the kind of information that would be needed for a change of the conclusions would be of birds moving from A to B. If the information only consists of sightings of birds, it doesn't provide more insight on how they got there. However, if there is additional data that might alter the conclusions of the review, it would of course have to be considered. Johann Mooij's paper from 2010 was quite extensive on LWfG sightings in Europe, although Marchant was not sure if he had taken web-based information into account. Musgrove added that one has to be cautious when looking at data from web-based records and particularly old records, keeping in mind that LWfG are extremely difficult to identify. Germany added that there is evidence from the 19th century of LWfG occurring regularly in Germany, recorded in the regional avifauna records. These were also not mentioned in the background documents of the review. There is a long tradition of natural presence of LWfG in Germany. Marchant replied that Mooij's paper covered records from

Germany quite well. Sweden added that there are also peer-reviewed web-based databases, where submitted observations are scrutinized by ornithologists (rarities committee etc.).

Sweden inquired whether there are any other studies on bird species that migrate to the south-west and asked what the likelihood would have been that LWfG occurring along the so-called Atlantic flyway would have been correctly identified. Marchant replied that there are – to his knowledge - no other such reviews for other species. There is evidence that there used to be large goose flocks wintering in the Spanish steppe – LWfG could potentially have been hiding there and would not have been recorded. But there is no evidence of this now.

The chair sought for a confirmation by the Committee that the information base used in the report was adequate. Norway noted that the information base corresponded with what was set out in the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the review, and had therefore to be accepted as adequate. The question was if web-based databases should be looked at in addition to the work already done.

Sweden found the draft report to be good, but suggested that some revisions be made. The web-based data system Artportalen that has been peer-reviewed should also be used. The review should consider observations of LWfG from southern and south-western Sweden, which number at least 20-60. Musgrove added that he doesn't have a problem with records coming in on the web, but more so with records coming in after 40-50 years. Observer bias must also be taken into account; most people live in southern Sweden so there will be more records there compared to other areas. Marchant added that it will be difficult to prove that these were birds coming directly from the breeding areas in Sweden and going on to the Netherlands. It is difficult to imagine that extra records from Sweden would change the conclusions of the report.

Germany found the discussion in the review around the use of the term migration route instead of flyway good. Migration route better describes the actual situation, where there is a scattered distribution of birds alongside the main corridor, the implication of which is that the natural occurrence of the species is broader than the main migration corridor. Sweden agreed that the authors are correct in moving away from the flyway expression and using the term migration route instead, and suggested that migration route be used throughout the review instead of flyways. BTO inquired as to what extent it is expected to make changes to the review. The chair replied that the BTO review is independent and that the Committee is not requesting that the conclusions be changed. If factual elements need changing and everyone agrees, such changes could be considered. The Committee members should submit their suggestions for changes in writing and BTO can include these suggestions at their discretion. Including the additional review of other datasets would require an extension of the current agreement with BTO as well as additional funding as this would be in addition to what was agreed on in the ToR.

Germany proposed the following addition to the beginning of the eighth point of the executive summary: *"The regular natural migration possibilities of a species are larger than the main migration route. Furthermore we feel that the question of whether the western migration route is a natural one or not should not be the overriding issue..."*. Sweden added that it would like the report to focus on the subject of the review and suggested that all text on genetics etc. be omitted. In addition the section on the RECAP Committee should be cut down to one paragraph instead of four. The text concerning the International Single Species Action Plan should be corrected; the SSAP does not require anything, it is a guideline. The Swedish LWfG population is not reintroduced but supplemented. The Swedish Environment Protection Agency wants BTO to look at web-based information. The conclusions should state more precisely if based on the evidence reviewed the possibility that there was an Atlantic flyway can be discarded. It seems difficult to discard that there has been some sort of migration over southern Sweden. The chair commented that he understood BTO's conclusions to be very clear. Norway added that whilst additional information is welcome, BTO should write the report independently and the content should not be dictated by the Committee. Responding to Norway's question regarding the publication of the review the Secretariat confirmed that once finalized it will be made publicly available on the AEWA website. Sweden confirmed that the review is independent and added that the things pointed out were merely suggestions. Norway added that the text concerning the Aktion Zwerggans project on page 13 should be amended, as the decision concerning the project was postponed again at the third RECAP Committee meeting in October 2010.

The chair summarized the discussion and concluded that the RECAP Committee accepts the conclusions of the BTO review on the basis of the information base that the report has used having fulfilled the task as set out in the ToR. The wish expressed by Sweden that additional data sets possibly not considered in the review should be looked at should be considered as a new assignment and would therefore require an extension of the current contract with BTO. Additional funds will be needed for this. Sweden made a preliminary indication that it would be able to supply up to 5000€ for a brief survey of web-based data sets. Mikander (UNEP/AEWA Secretariat) added that some Swedish funds might be left over from previous voluntary contributions to the Secretariat. Musgrove replied that the BTO is willing to take on the additional work. The first step would be to have a look at the data set in order to calculate the time needed for the work and what kind of analysis is needed in order to be able to calculate the cost.

Decision: - The RECAP Committee accepts the conclusions of the BTO review on the basis of the information base used.

- Countries will submit their suggestions for corrections to BTO in writing. BTO are free to consider these suggestions at their discretion.

- BTO will look at the data concerning LWfG observations contained in the Swedish web-based database "Artportalen" and submit a quote to the UNEP/AEWA Secretariat for the costs of the additional work within the next two weeks. The Secretariat will liaise with Sweden concerning the costs and if adequate funding is available will extent the small scale funding agreement with BTO to include this task.

Finland – Country Activity Update

The implementation of the Finnish National Action Plan for the LWfG is being carried out. The control of red fox numbers is being continued in the potential breeding areas. Management plans are in place for the old core breeding areas. No birds have been sighted during the annual surveys of the breeding areas, but Finland is still optimistic with an estimate of 0-5 breeding pairs. Surveys of peat lands are also being conducted in an area which used to be a major molting site for LWfG. At the staging areas still used by LWfG today the goal is to protect all known sites as nature reserves. Management activities are being carried out in an attempt to attract LWfG to these areas. The preliminary results of the annual monitoring in 2011 counted 30 individuals in the staging areas during spring migration. These staging areas are also used by other endangered species.

A good relationship with the hunters has been established within the framework of the Action Plan for Hunting. A voluntary early-warning system has been set up and within one day all hunting organizations can spread the word to their members that rare species have been sighted and that hunters should exercise caution.

The captive breeding and most likely also re-introduction activities of the Finnish NGO Friends of the Lesser White-fronted Goose are still ongoing. Some success has been achieved against their activities in a district court, where the NGO has been fined for its actions. The Friends have, however, appealed to higher administrative court.

A national coordinator for the implementation of the NSSAP has been appointed. His name is Tuomo Ollilla from the Metsähallitus (Finnish Forestry Service). The work of the Finnish LWfG task force also continues. The Ministry is preparing guidelines for offshore windfarms, which would be on the western coast of Finland (where the geese fly). The guidelines will highlight that environmental impact assessments should take the birds into account.

Norway - Country Activity Update

2010 was a good breeding year, probably as a result of extensive red fox culling. Good breeding results mean that families will migrate along the safer western route. Many individuals have returned to the breeding site this year,

marking a positive trend. The culling of foxes was again carried out this spring and it is hoped that this – coupled with the high numbers of lemmings - will again contribute positively to the breeding of the LWfG. A LWfG poster as well as short film and leaflet are being produced for the CMS COP. Not sure whether satellite-tagging of individuals from the Norwegian population will take place this year, but smaller satellite tags which are placed in neck collars have been ordered in an effort to reduce stress and also to in order to make the tags less visible to hunters.

The core breeding area is still not officially protected, but will hopefully be designated as a nature reserve next year. The management of the area is ongoing nonetheless and all local/regional authorities are aware of the importance of the area. Following information received from one of the satellite tagged released juveniles last year, new information was obtained showing that some LWfG flew back to breeding area in August/September. As it was previously not known that the LWfG return to the area after breeding, hunting is allowed in the area at that time (mainly for willow grouse). This must be followed up to see if this was just a one off occurrence as well as to determine whether further measures such as the closing of hunting are needed.

The Norwegian National Action Plan for the LWfG is being implemented and is now available in English (will be sent to RECAP Committee members by the Secretariat). In total 3.5 million NOK have been allocated for national and international LWfG conservation measures in 2011. In addition DN has promised 350.000€ for the envisaged EU LIFE+ project should it be approved by the Commission this July. DN is also funding several small scale conservation projects as suggested and facilitated by the UNEP/AEWA Secretariat, with a total of 71.000€ having been allocated so far this year. The LWfG has been approved by the government as a priority species, which means that an additional 50.000-60.000€ will be secured for the conservation of the species per year. In addition new national legislation for the LWfG has been approved which will lead to a further tightening of its protection. Following the trial supplementation effort last year discussions on improvements are ongoing. Discussions on a repetition of the supplementation effort this year are being conducted with Sweden.

Norway stressed that conservation efforts need to concentrate on protecting the remaining critical sites as LWfG rely on these habitats.

Discussion:

Sweden inquired whether one of the released birds has been seen back in Valdak this year. Norway confirmed that one of the released individuals has returned to Valdak and has been sighted together with the other non-breeders.

Sweden – Country Activity Update

The Swedish National Action Plan for the LWfG was adopted in March 2011 following a lengthy consultation process. The captive breeding programme is continuing and Sweden is increasing its cooperation with Norway in this field. The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency is providing funding for the building of an additional captive breeding facility at Östermalma, which will increase Sweden's capacity for having a larger captive breeding colony. In total 126.000€ have been invested in LWfG since last RECAP meeting.

Nine new wild birds (8 males/1 female) from Russia were received in early 2011. Arrangements for the import of more birds this coming autumn are ongoing. The wild Swedish population was counted at 92 individuals at the main wintering grounds in the Netherlands, with 74-76 individuals counted in Sweden during spring migration. The results of the counts are similar to the 2010 numbers. At the breeding facility at Nordens Ark, there are currently three pairs with four chicks each, one pair with five chicks and two eggs waiting to hatch in an incubator, bring the current total number of chicks to 19. Sweden is working on creating a pedigree record based on genetic samples in order to determine the relations between the wild caught birds. The total number of captive birds is currently 55 (19 of which are females) plus the chicks born this year. Breeding LWfG in captivity continues to be

tricky, as the geese remain picky in their choice of partner etc. Following the initial test releasing of captive bred birds in 2010, Sweden will try three different release methods in 2011: releasing 2nd cycle birds at the molting site to associate with the wild flock; releasing 1st cycle birds with a wild bird caught in the breeding area that will act as guide; and releasing 1st cycle birds without the accompaniment of adult birds but close to breeding areas (most closely resembles 2010 release method). More work is also needed on a flyway based survival analysis for the Swedish wild population as it is thought that birds are being lost during migration and the causes are unknown. In addition work will continue to find unknown molting and stop-over sites as well as to understand the low level of breeding dispersal.

Discussion:

Germany inquired whether Sweden knows exactly where the geese winter, as perhaps the cause for the decrease is at the wintering sites. Sweden replied that contacts with the Netherlands and Germany are good, but they have not been able to explain the decrease. Molting birds caught last year in Swedish Lapland were in bad condition, perhaps due to rivalry over food with growing populations of Greylag Geese populations that are on the rise. Norway inquired whether Sweden has tried satellite-tagging in order to find out the unknown sites. Sweden replied that satellite-tagging is being considered, but that it would require substantial additional funds.

Germany – Country Activity Update

The German Federal Ministry of the Environment has been continuing its support towards the international conservation efforts for the LWfG mainly by funding activities under AEWA, such as the workshop on the conservation of the LWfG organized in Kazakhstan in October 2010. Germany has also provided funding for the production of various information materials such as LWfG stickers and posters.

Revision of Information Concerning the Swedish LWfG Population in the SSAP

Sweden presented its suggestions for revision of the background information on the Swedish LWfG population in the AEWA International Single Species Action Plan (SSAP). The LWfG was never recorded as extinct in Sweden. Old observations made by several independent observers of LWfG in the area where the captive bred birds were released have been analyzed and show that LWfG were still breeding in the area when the releases commenced. The IUCN (1998) terminology states that when there is an extant population the appropriate term is reinforced or supplemented. This leads to the conclusion that the Swedish population was supplemented – not reintroduced as is currently stated in the SSAP. Therefore Sweden suggests editing the background information on the Swedish LWfG population in the SSAP so that there is a correct picture of what happened in Sweden. The text should be revised in order to be in conformity with IUCN terminology.

Discussion:

The chair opened the discussion by noting that there seemed to be three different types of issues to address regarding the Swedish request: 1) If, in the opinion of the Committee, the new data presented by Sweden justifies the revision of the SSAP; 2) besides the IUCN definition itself, whether there are any criteria that would determine whether the Swedish project was a reintroduction or a supplementation; and 3) if there is support for the revision of the SSAP, how this can be carried out in practice. Sweden commented that the changes suggested concern the background information about the Swedish population, and would therefore not change any actions and goals in the SSAP. The foreword of SSAP states that the action plan can be revised at any time.

The chair asked the other Committee members for their opinions on the new information provided by Sweden and whether they were ready to agree to a revision of the SSAP on the basis thereof. Norway commented that a revision of the SSAP should be dealt with by the AEWA MOP; so far no SSAPs have been revised outside of the MOP. Norway added that there is no proof that the wild and introduced birds ever mixed. Sweden replied that the IUCN guidelines did not specify whether, in the case of a re-inforcement/supplementation, released individuals

had to mix with those of the existing population. It added that old data has been revisited in an attempt to prove the mixing of the birds. However, the first unringed birds were seen together with ringed released birds two years after the beginning of the project. It is therefore difficult to tell whether these were birds belonging to the original wild population or whether they were young birds resulting from the breeding of the introduced birds. However, male birds tend to follow female birds, i.e. if there are supplemented female birds wild males would follow them on a new migration route.

Dereliev (UNEP/AEWA Secretariat) commented that the practice or protocol of how the release of birds was done should be looked into in order to determine whether the Swedish LWfG can be rated as a supplementation or a reintroduction project at this point and time. Sweden countered that in 1981 when the releases of birds started the IUCN guidelines were not available. One observation of a wild LWfG was found in a notebook from Lambert von Essen's, but all the other observations of LWfG in the area have been found in birding notes from independent observers. The basic approach was to release birds to build up a population, at the time it was not well known how many wild birds there were during the release or not. Sweden inquired what was meant by protocol. Dereliev replied that the protocol of a project is the guidelines you use to plan the project and the activities and procedures adopted for its implementation. In the case of a supplementation the wild population is identified, the captive bred birds are brought into contact with the wild ones and it is attempted to ensure that they interact. The chair inquired whether the modalities of the releases are documented somewhere so that an expert would be able to look into them and to assess what protocol was followed. Sweden replied that the documentation of the project has not been published so far, but that the original project notebooks are available.

Norway agreed that different protocols are much more developed and available today, but it should also be remembered that the released LWfG were not genetically pure. It shouldn't be considered a supplementation, because the released and the wild birds had two different genetic identities. Sweden replied that the genetic issues were not known in the 1980s. Seven of the founders of the captive bred population were from Sweden and people were naïve; they assumed that because the birds all looked like LWfG, they had pure LWfG and released them. This kind of reasoning and considering the genetic makeup of the birds did not exist at that time.

Dereliev suggested that perhaps there is still a possibility to look into the history of the project and see how it was carried out. Sweden replied that the data set is complete, and that there is no necessity for any additional review of the data by any independent expert. The wild and supplemented birds were mixing. This can be concluded by looking at male behavior as compared to female behavior; released females will have been approached by wild males. Why should the wild birds not have associated with the released ones? This is happening now with the goslings being released in Norway and Sweden.

Norway proposed that Sweden submit its proposal to the next Meeting of the Parties (MOP) to AEWA. Dereliev continued that a complete revision of the SSAP is planned for 2013 and inquired whether Sweden would prefer to have an update now or to wait for the complete revision. Sweden replied that both the Swedish Environment Protection Agency as well as the Department of Environment (Ministry) want the revision to be done at once. The negative image of the reintroduction label is a problem. Sweden feels that the information in the SSAP should be correct and is only suggesting changing the background on the Swedish population. The issue is being blown out of proportion and does not need to go to the Standing Committee and the MOP.

Dereliev noted that the IUCN guidelines also refer to the natural range of the species and questioned whether the population can be considered as supplemented when they are not using the original flyway. Germany countered that there was surely a natural occurrence of LWfG - not in high numbers but on a regular basis - in the area used by the current population. As it is very difficult to count LWfG in large flocks of GWfG the numbers of LWfG will surely have been higher than officially counted. Dereliev suggested that the Committee could get advice on the issue from an independent expert, who could better determine whether - taking into account the possible lacking contact with the other birds and the modified flyway - this be considered a supplementation.

Heredia (CMS Secretariat) asked whether there are any legal implications linked with this change of terminology in Sweden to which Sweden added that there are no legal implications, a permit for the release was all that was needed when the project was undertaken. Sweden reiterated that it has no hidden agenda, but wishes that the correct terminology be used for the Swedish population. Norway agreed with the Secretariat that more time and some expert opinion should be gotten on this issue, and strongly urged Sweden to present the proposed amendments to the AEWA StC and the MOP.

The chair noted the differences of opinion in the Committee, but also clearly saw the need to move the proposal forward as requested by Sweden. The SSAP does leave room for revisions to be done earlier than foreseen. At the same time, changes in the SSAP have to be endorsed by a body of the Agreement with the power to do so. After considerable discussion, consensus emerged that the meeting of the AEWA Standing Committee scheduled to take place in November 2011 can constitute the closest opportunity for a decision on the possible amendment of the SSAP, subject to a confirmation that this was within the mandate of the Committee. Submitting the proposal to the meeting of the AEWA Technical Committee was the first step.

The chair invited Sweden to submit a specific proposal with the Swedish amendments along with a justification to the 10th Meeting of the AEWA Technical Committee in September. Norway and Germany agreed with the proposal of the Chair that the StC take an interim decision and that final approval should lie with the MOP.

Decision: Sweden will submit its proposal for amendments to the SSAP including justification for the proposal to the next meeting of the AEWA Technical Committee in September 2011 for consideration, to be passed on to the AEWA Standing Committee for approval in November 2011. The UNEP/AEWA Secretariat will clarify whether the StC has the mandate to take a decision on changes to the SSAP or whether this has to be done by the AEWA MOP.

Report on the Implementation of the International Single Species Action Plan

Mikander (UNEP/AEWA Secretariat) made a short presentation on the implementation of the International SSAP in 2011 (*Doc. LWfG RECAP 4.3*). Following the first meeting of the AEWA Lesser White-fronted Goose International Working Group (LWfG IWG) on the 30th of November – 1st of December 2010 in Helsinki, the implementation of the Single Species Action Plan for the Lesser White-fronted Goose (LWfG) has moved into a new phase, which will hopefully be characterized by strengthened government ownership and intergovernmental cooperation in conservation efforts for the species. Current activities under the IWG include the development of a common monitoring scheme and of a website and workspace. In general conservation activities across the flyway continue to gain momentum and are more focused on key sites and threats. Projects being carried out this year include a workshop in Azerbaijan, spring and autumn monitoring in Kazakhstan as well as monitoring and awareness-raising in Ukraine.

Any Other Business

Germany informed the Committee of its decision not to attend the following RECAP meetings, as goslings from the Swedish captive breeding programme will not be available for the proposed Aktion Zwerggans project within the next two to three years. However, Germany would still like to receive the meeting invitations in order to be able to follow the work of the Committee and to see what is on the agenda. The chair took note of Germany's decision and added that Germany will of course continue to be welcome to attend the Committee meetings as observer if it so wishes.

Next Meeting – Conclusion

The Chair thanked all Committee members for their participation and for the fruitful meeting. The timing for the next meeting was left open, but could take place in the margins of MOP5 in France in 2012, if necessary.