

**WeBS Steering Group – 45th meeting
JNCC Peterborough
24th October 2012**

Present at meeting

Simon Wotton, RSPB, Chair [SW]
David Stroud, JNCC [DS]
Andy Musgrove, BTO [AM]

Chas Holt, BTO [CH]
Richard Hearn, WWT [RH]

Referred to in minutes (not present at meeting)

Heidi Mellan, BTO [HM]
Neil Calbrade, BTO [NC]
James Pearce-Higgins, BTO [JPH]

Graham Austin, BTO [GA]
Viola Ross-Smith, BTO [VRS]

1. Introduction and adoption of agenda

The agenda was adopted. SW chaired. CH/AM reported and took minutes.

2. Minutes of 44th WeBS Steering Group meeting

The minutes from the previous meeting were adopted.

DS raised one point. He could not recall if a formal document regarding the WeBS Contingency Fund had been produced and signed by all parties. All others confirmed that this had been done; DS asked for a copy.

AP45/2/1: Ensure DS receives a copy of final documentation relating to WeBS Contingency Fund. [AM]

3. Progress on Action Points (APs).

The action points arising from earlier meetings were considered. Most were either complete or considered later in meeting, as follows. **New (and on-going) actions arising are show in in red.**

AP44/2/1: Remove initials of people not present at SG meetings. [CH] **Completed**

AP44/2/2: Produce a general principles statement for website, regarding species monitored by WeBS. [CH] **Completed**

AP42/6/3: Regional press releases to be prepared ahead of publication of WITUK 1011 [CH] **Completed**

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

AP43/5/1/: Contact other national scheme organisers about training issues [CH/NC] **Completed**

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

AP43/8/2: Organise a WeBS stakeholder workshop [CH] **Completed**

- AP43/11/1:** Undertake a review of data request charges in April 2012 [AM/NC/BTO Dev.] **Completed (5 % rise based on inflationary increase over three-year period)**
- AP43/11/2:** Principles and guidelines for WeBS service level agreements to be drafted [NC *et al.*] **On-going**
- AP43/12/1:** Contact CAFF re possible development of indicators for remote Arctic monitoring [CH] **Completed; potential for work on-going**
- AP44/3/1/:** Continue stratification work and produce timetable for progress on stratification. [GA, VRS] **Timetable completed; work on-going**
- AP44/3/2/:** Submit gaps analysis proposal to the country agencies (cc JNCC) [AM/CH]. It was suggested that this work could be developed into an on-going process (compatible with reporting developments). **Completed**
- AP44/4/1/:** Contact regional RSPB office to ascertain who will be LO for North Kent Estuaries. [HM/SW]. **Jeff Orton (BTO RR, Kent) considering taking on the role**
- AP44/4/2/:** Maximise RSPB links in Mersey area, both for recruitment of new LO and counters. [SW/HM]. **On-going; progress has been made. Natural England instigated a meeting (attended by NC on 4 October). They are to provide staff coverage for Core counts. LTC being done 2012/13 by RSPB staff.**
- 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**
- AP43/5/1/:** Advise relevant press teams of intention for regional press releases w.r.t. WITUK1011. [CH] **Completed**
- AP43/6/1/:** Partners to check WeBS website and send copies (to HM) of any missing reports and other relevant waterbird articles to which they have access. [All] **Completed**
- AP43/7/1/:** Produce a short report for next SG meeting on Core v Low Tide counts – comparative totals; how/when LTC used in place of Core; recommendations if necessary for some sites. [CH/NC] **Completed**
- AP43/8/1/:** Include trends for shag and snipe in next WITUK, with appropriate caveats and interpretation. [CH] **Completed**
- AP43/9/1/:** Partners to review specification for developments to WeBS reporting and suggest any further additions as necessary. [All]. **Completed**
- AP44/10/1:** Finalise date(s) for the workshop a.s.a.p. and invite selected delegates. [CH]. **Completed**
- AP44/11/1:** Contact BTO Scotland about details of SNH funding for volunteer engagement. [AM] **Completed**
- 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**
- AP44/12/1:** Service level agreement to be proposed to MOD, and progressed as necessary. [NC/BTO Dev.] **Completed (MOD did not progress further)**

AP44/12/2: Establish IEEM accreditation rules and what is stated regarding data availability. [AM]
Completed

AP44/12/3: Relay the need to increase effort in following up reports that should have been forwarded to WeBS office. This could begin with a selection from last year from consultancies and other groups who are regular purchasers of WeBS data. [NC/HM] **Completed**

AP44/12/4: JNCC to remind Natural England about requirement to send copies of reports to WeBS. [DS]
Completed via WeBS

AP44/13/1: Produce work-plan and timeline against which to measure progress with historic datasets. [CH]
Completed

4. Counter network

CH provided an update (on behalf of HM), and vacancies among Local Organisers were reviewed. New LOs have been recruited for: Mersey Estuary, Greater Manchester, Severn Estuary (Wales), Harris and Lewis, North Kent Marshes. Current gaps in LO coverage are: Carlingford Lough; Cheshire North; Clwyd; Co. Antrim; Co. Armagh; Co. Down; Co. Fermanagh; Co. Londonderry; Co. Tyrone; Derbyshire; Durham; East Lancashire and Fylde; 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.

RH suggested that it would be useful to have the vacant LO regions as a more visible feature on all the WeBS website, and also on Twitter and Facebook. Currently LO vacancies are listed within the list of all regions; a discrete section on "Vacancies" with a brief summary of the role is required.

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

Following a meeting of NE, BTO, RSPB and others, coverage of Mersey Estuary in 2012/13 will be boosted by some staff time from Natural England. This situation will be reviewed annually.

5. WeBS publicity and training

A WeBS training course will be held at Snettisham (The Wash) in November 2012.

AP45/5/1: Consider more intermediate-level WeBS training courses for 2013/14. [NC, CH]

Online tutorials to (i) help with use of *WeBS Online* and (ii) guide best practice in the field, will be developed this winter and uploaded to the website.

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

WeBS team had noted that some volunteers had posted videos on the internet of themselves carrying out WeBS counts. All agreed that WeBS could perhaps harness this by encouraging counters to also post Youtube videos etc within a designated part of the WeBS website.

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]

WeBS continues to be featured in the media and bird-watching press. For example, the period of October to December 2012 will see articles in *BTO News* and *British Birds*.

In terms of future publicity surrounding the annual report, all agreed that WeBS should continue with national press releases to coincide with publication of the report. This requires input and quotes from the relevant Country Agencies, which is to be arranged through the Inter-Agency Ornithology Liaison Group.

DS suggested that it would be useful to improve education of counters about local SPA requirements in order to maximise the efficacy of their data collection. It would be good if all counters were better enlightened about designation boundaries and the particular SPA features of the sites which they visit.

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.*]

6. Website and WeBS Online

CH reported that WeBS Online is operating smoothly and that the proportion of data submitted on-line continues to increase each year (now at approximately 75%). Recent updates to the website have included the facility to download historic annual reports (back to 1940s) and Low Tide Count distribution maps (for all sites back to 2007/08). All agreed that these represented useful additions. AM noted that IS developments mean that Low Tide maps will be able to be produced automatically from the raw data in the future.

CH described that work on the development of an on-line mapping tool was continuing steadily. This will enable WeBS Local Organisers (and counters) to provide boundary information for new and existing WeBS sites. This work is now at a stage where it is being tested by the LOAC and other representatives of the counter network. These developments are being undertaken in tandem with the revamp to WeBS reporting, thereby maximising synergies as far as possible. These online developments represent the primary focus of WeBS work over the next six months.

7. Low Tide Counts

CH reported (on behalf of NC) that 12 months of Natural England-funded Low Tide Counts on the Humber were completed successfully in October 2012. The work had gone smoothly, a team of 20+ counters had been involved, and it was envisaged that the work could work well as a Low Tide Count feature in next year's new format paper WeBS report.

AP45/7/1: Include Humber Low Tide Counts as a feature in the next WeBS report. [CH, NC]

Among the estuaries to be covered at Low Tide in 2012/13 include important sites such as Ribble, Mersey, Ythan and Tay.

CH provided a review paper which updated the comparison of Core and Low Tide data at individual sites. This focused on the count totals derived from the two methods at the site- and species-specific level. It showed that collection of low tide data at some sites provides a better indication of sites' use (and hence importance) by particular species. All agreed that this information could be used to inform the prioritisation of certain sites with the Low Tide Count schedule (which currently aims to have sites counted every six years).

8. WeBS report

Paper report

The final *Waterbirds in the UK* in its current format was published in autumn 2012. CH reported that press releases and “Official Statistics” procedures were completed successfully. Validation of 2011/12 data will begin before the end of 2012 calendar year.

Content of the new format paper report is likely to include elements of some, or all, of the following:

- Headline species from the year
- Country reviews; country specific tabular breakdown
- Summary of recently published literature and research.
- International review: results from elsewhere in flyway.
- A section on the uses of WeBS data and associated conservation science.
- The current *Principal Sites Table*, but with further elaboration.
- A country-specific tabular breakdown.
- Different summaries for inland and coastal sites.
- Low Tide Counts

During the planning stage, CH will seek to ensure complementarity with the WeBS newsletter and other outputs such as *State of UK's Birds*. It is envisaged the WeBS newsletter will assume more of a Counter Network focus, with emphasis on sites, worth of data collection, counter articles, etc. All agreed that the first of the new format paper reports should be a reasonably substantial report, with the option to reduce the number of pages in the future; AM suggested that this approach would soften any criticism of change.

AP45/8/1: Produce a page plan of new paper report as soon as possible. [CH *et al.*]

New online report

Developments for the new online report are underway; the WeBS team is working closely with BTO's IS/website staff. Specifications for new online reporting systems for the core annual outputs and the three-yearly Alerts have been produced, and were provided to the group for reference. The summary document from the WeBS Stakeholder workshop (held at BTO in Sept 2012) was also provided. CH also presented a simplified schematic of the new online reporting framework. This was largely based on recommendations emanating from the WeBS stakeholder workshop. All agreed that the reporting structure, including integration of *WeBS Alerts* was appropriate; DS noted that in addition to “Site” or “Species” routes into the system, inclusion of a “Habitats” option would be useful.

AP45/8/2: Include facility within online system to view data by wetland habitat categories . [CH, GA]

AP45/8/3: Ensure on-line publication of *WeBS Alerts* by March 2013. [GA *et al.*]

9. WeBS Data Requests

CH reported that the WeBS data request system continues to operate smoothly. In the period 1 April to 1 October 2012, there were 92 requests for WeBS data (which is similar to totals for recent years). Wording of a potential service level agreement with respect to WeBS data requests is still to be finalised (see AP43/11/2). The basic rationale behind how much to charge and how often this should be reviewed was again discussed by the group.

AP45/9/1: Finalise wording of service level agreement . [BTO Dev., NC]

10. Review of WeBS development list

The group briefly revisited the list of potential developments. Attention focused on three main items:

Conservation drones

All agreed that potential investment in a drone would represent a good use of any WeBS surplus. The group discussed the range of uses that this technology could be used for, e.g. counting seaduck and divers, offshore, counting waterbirds in dispersed and remote areas, Low Tide Counts on large estuaries, NEWS on inaccessible coasts, etc. The group agreed in principle about the purchase of a drone, but there will be a need to keep all parties progressively informed. All agreed that serious consideration would need to be given to insurance, flying regulations, training, etc.

AP45/10/1: Produce a summary document detailing the costs (equipment and staff time) of testing the feasibility of using drones for different elements of waterbird monitoring in UK. [AM *et al.*]

NEWS (Non Estuarine Waterbirds Survey)

Originally planned for winter 2013/14, all agreed that it would probably be better to defer the next NEWS to 2014/15. Current and future WeBS developments will markedly increase the efficacy of NEWS, as it is anticipated that a WeBS-Online type interface will be used for the survey. The WeBS surplus may supplement part of the survey, but it was agreed that the majority of funding would need to be sourced from outside WeBS. CH stated that there are potential possibilities with respect to MSFD recommendations. A proposal and estimated budget is required soon. Consideration should be given to inclusion of other groups such as seaducks, rock pipits, otters, etc.

AP45/10/2: Proposal and estimated budget for next NEWS to be circulated as soon as possible. [AM *et al.*]

Methods paper

It was decided that the plan for a previously proposed semi-systematic review of indexing methods should be revised so that it would be more of a paper on methods of counting, accuracy and repeatability. The objective would be to produce more of a defensive review than a developmental one. DS suggested that this could potentially take the form of an AEWA Technical Guidance Note.

AP45/10/3: Progress work on this methods paper, including consultation with AEWA. [CH *et al.*]

11. Progress on sub-projects

CH provided progress updates on two major on-going long-term pieces of WeBS work:

Mobilisation of historic datasets

CH reviewed progress with mobilisation of the historic waterbird datasets, and provided a long-term timetable (recently produced by HM). All agreed that the efforts of volunteer inputters were a considerable help in this task. Updates will be provided at each WeBS SG, as necessary.

WeBS stratification

A timetable with associated milestones for delivery of this work has been produced. Progress is being made by VRS; the following are expected to have been completed by March 2013: literature review, completion of data processing, modelling and validation of different approaches, drafting of a paper contrasting the generation of population estimates by different methods.

AP45/11/1: Progress work on stratification; aim for paper to be drafted by SG46. [VRS *et al.*]

12. Water Rails

CH updated the group that, following an article by NC in *WeBS News*, there had been interest from ca.10 volunteers to help with trial using tape lures to assist in the estimation of numbers of Water Rails at sites. Methods were being finalised, but the trial will compare standard monthly Core visits (Dec-Feb) with paired visits using a lure. Basic habitat data and other information will also be collected. RH suggested that it might be worth contacting ringers who have undertaken mark-recapture studies of Water Rails.

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

13. WeBS contribution to MCCIP

The group were asked to consider funding time to enable a contribution to the annual report card of the MCCIP (Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership). Two days of time were agreed for BTO's Climate Change specialist, with support from CH.

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

14. Conferences, meeting, other events

RH provided a brief overview of the Third Pan European Duck Symposium and associated Seaduck Workshop. CH briefly updated the group on recent activities of the Waterbird Monitoring Partnership.

15. AOB

RH asked if there were plans for a UK survey as part of the Cormorant census being undertaken across Europe this winter. AM stated that data collected through WeBS would provide the UK contribution but plans for a dedicated roost census had not been funded/organised.

RH provided a brief update on plans for a review of seaducks in the UK, which will take the form of a paper in *British Birds*. It is anticipated that significant progress will be made on this during the coming winter.

AP45/15/1: Collaborative paper between WWT and others (including WeBS) to be advanced. [RH, CH]

RH provided notice that there would be a Strategic Review of WWT's Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme. This would necessitate discussion between GSMP and WeBS regarding various issues, such as inclusion of geese in WeBS Alerts and various matters surrounding Greylag Geese.

AP45/15/2: GSMP & WeBS to continue discussions relating to GSMP-monitored geese and swans. [RH, CH]

16. Next meeting

WeBS 46th SG: 6th March 2013 (10.30am) @ JNCC Peterborough