



WeBS Steering Group – 53rd Meeting

David Attenborough Building, Cambridge 1st February 2017

Present at meeting:

Dawn Balmer (DB), BTO
Teresa Frost (TF) BTO
Neil Calbrade (NC), BTO
Andy Musgrove (AM), BTO

Richard Hearn (RH), WWT
David Stroud (DAS), JNCC (Chair)
Deborah Proctor (DP), JNCC
Simon Wotton (SW), RSPB

Referred to in minutes (not present at meeting):

Kathryn Ross (KR), ex-BTO

Apologies: None

1. Introduction and adoption of agenda

The agenda was adopted with the order amended to discuss the WeBS Agreement before the Operation Report. DAS (JNCC) chaired. DB took minutes.

2. Strategic Review: Low Tide Counts

Following the discussion at the July 2016 52nd Steering Committee meeting, discussion on Low Tide Counts (LTC) at the WeBS Stakeholders meeting in October 2016 confirmed that Low Tide Counts provided valuable information for country agencies and others. Key messages from stakeholders had included the need to work together with a longer planning framework for LTCs, and that promoting the scheme in person to potential volunteers and increasing support for organisers would be beneficial.

NC provided the group with an overview of the 34 estuaries that are overdue LTC according to the current six year rolling programme, and when the other 52 estuaries would be due. Some (c. 10) sites are counted only at low tide. Some site counts are higher at low tide than at high tide counts; these are shown as supplementary counts in the peak numbers table on the WeBS Online Report.

Information on the consistency of feeding areas at different tide states and whether feeding distributions change within sites over time is needed to inform strategic coverage of estuaries and the frequency of survey needed for statutory use. Questions include: are there scale differences relating to the size of the estuary? Do local disturbance factors influence change in feeding behaviour? Does the snapshot of counts/data under the current methodology and periodicity provide sufficient evidence for most purposes, or are more or fewer repeat surveys needed?

There has not been a formal analysis of LTC data to assess change over time, beyond some species/site examples in WeBS annual reports. It was recognised that such information is critical to decisions regarding optimal frequency of survey – do feeding distributions stay moderately constant, or is there change over time? In this respect, there is also a need to review what related research on changes over time has been done, for example on frequently surveyed sites such as the Severn/Cardiff Bay, Humber, Tees, and Exe (through the tide counts). As well as informing LTC survey strategy, communicating the results to volunteers could help motivate LTC coverage.

Large sites, particularly those covering several WeBS regions can be very challenging to organise completely but with a local dynamic lead person complete coverage of such sites is possible. The possibility of change of approach on the bigger estuaries, for example a paid local co-ordinator, was raised. For very large sites (e.g. The Wash, Morecambe Bay) aerial counts or drones may need to be considered.

A revised strategy for LTC should be produced in the next Agreement period. This would include site-specific plans on what species should be counted (e.g. include gulls at certain sites), key months for specific species (links to review of SPAs), and attempts to encourage counters to better record survey logistics (e.g. viewpoints and count locations) so as better to document changes in survey methodologies over time.

Effective organising of LTC in the future will require a greater understanding of what is needed and why, and how this may differ between sites. This should consider the needs of data users including country agencies, RSPB, other conservation charities and consultants. BTO recently contacted commercial users about data services; the results should be reviewed and if necessary a follow-up survey conducted specifically for users of LTC information.

AP53.1: Flag the sites where LTC are used as core counts in routine WeBS reporting (NC).

AP53.2: Compile information on consistency of feeding areas at low tide over years, including spatial analysis of LTC data and review of other UK studies (BTO).

AP53.3: Compile information on LTC data user needs (BTO).

3. Strategic Review: WeBS Core Count Prioritisation

“Priority” WeBS sites influence which sites are allocated by Local Organisers and from which data are proactively sought. Sites in the WeBS Principal Sites Table (holding large aggregations of birds), or internationally important numbers of one or more species, have been flagged as priority sites in WeBS Online.

TF suggested that when prioritising sites, WeBS’s aims and objectives could be considered more holistically to include:

1. Population estimates – value in data capturing geographic and habitat variation for widespread species

2. Species trends – value in having long-term data at sites

3. Sites holding nationally/internationally important numbers of birds – value for species and site monitoring

4. Decision making – value in data that may be used as evidence

5. Monitoring of designated sites – value for site monitoring and reporting

DAS noted two other formal aims of WeBS: assessing importance of habitats for waterbirds and assessing their national conservation status. These have similar requirements to population estimates and species trends.

The new WeBS Vacant Sites tool displays four levels of prioritisation. For the launch of the new tool, sites were scored by criteria relating to principal sites and nationally important numbers of species (1) and site species trends (2, for wildfowl only at present). Site prioritisation can also be increased manually, for example this has been done for some sites that need covering for a research project. The help for the tool explains that prioritisation relates to sites (including all count sectors of sites) that are important for waterbirds or WeBS analyses, and this is being communicated to WeBS Local Organisers.

TF showed maps demonstrating that although most SPAs had already been scored highly without explicitly considering criteria relating to (5,) there were some SPA sectors that had not been prioritised. The group suggested that it would be useful to score SPAs designated for non-breeding waterbirds but this may need manually overriding for areas where access is difficult or impractical. The new Vacant Sites tool and database developments mean it is now possible to mark sectors as access is dangerous, impractical, forbidden by the landowner or other constraints and this shows on the vacant sites site information pages. Local Organisers are being asked to provide this information, to increase the transparency of places where WeBS cannot count sites.

The group did not consider it necessary to score other site designations such as A/SSSIs at present.

AP53.4: Draft statement of priorities for WeBS core count coverage for use as an annex in WeBS Agreement and publication on web-site. (BTO)

Information for scoring sites by decision-making need (i.e. sites with high potential pressure for development and thus Environmental Impact Assessment needs) could be gathered under a risk-based assessment. Resurrecting the earlier proposal to look at this would help identify sites considered to be of development pressure or risk by country agency or RSPB conservation staff. RSPB are keen to look at this again and if funding can be found.

AP53.5: Revisit the 2012 England proposal for risk-based assessment and prioritisation of data gaps and cost for other countries. Explore potential funding. (BTO/RSPB)

As part of the triennial East Atlantic Flyway Assessment, it has been requested that WeBS fill in environmental monitoring forms for all our 'main waterbird sites'. This would involve the collation and reporting of significant data and information for between 50 and 200 sites depending on how exactly we define these. The organisers, SOVON/Wetlands International, explain the purpose is for effective waterbird monitoring to register threats to sites and effective conservation action but it was unclear how the exercise related to other international reporting exercise – against which there was conceptual, if not practical overlap. The group expressed reservations about the scale of the request and the comparison value of the data that would be collected, and the lack of clarity as to how, and by whom, the data would actually be used.

AP53.6: Circulate details of the East Atlantic Flyway environmental monitoring questionnaire (TF) and decide whether we can respond to this request (all).

4. WeBS Agreement

AM updated the group on the progress of the new BTO – JNCC agreement, which will need to be in place by 1st April. Daughter Agreements, including the WeBS Agreement, need to be delivered at the same time as the main agreement and will often will need to refer back to the main agreement, for example terms and conditions.

Other surveys such as NEWS and WinGS are unlikely to be deliverable as part of the agreement, but it would be good to have an indicative timetable in the agreement. Could also assign indicative costs to broader scheme development ideas.

Presently £38,000 of the WeBS income from data products and services for commercial users contributes to the core WeBS budget, with other income received from this source covering the costs of servicing the requests and other research and development work and projects such as NEWS. If the new agreement precluded charging for data requests as part of a change to make freely available raw data, it is unclear what the financial consequences would be. A direct consequence could be a significant gap in the budget that would need to be met. It might be possible under this scenario to continue to recover the immediate costs of supplying data, or to sell the interpretation

of data. However, it was not clear what alternative funding mechanisms could make up for gap in funding for other surveys, and research and development activities.

AP53.7: BTO, WWT, RSPB to discuss their organisations' views on continuing to use income from commercial data products and services towards the running and development of WeBS and related surveys and research.

AP53.8: Produce the text for the next WeBS Agreement, send out a new draft, to be discussed at meeting end of Feb/early March (BTO).

5. WeBS Operational Report

TF gave an overview of recent developments and progress. Recent work in the WeBS Online Local Organiser sections was demonstrated, which will allow users to be allocated as core sector counters (as opposed to having input rights for other reasons, such as casual visits). Once this is operational sites not allocated to one or more users will be regarded as vacant in the context of the vacant sites tool. Work is also ongoing to aid validation of counts by Local Organisers so that it is clear which visits have been checked.

AP53.9: Once figures for 2016/17 are available, discuss by email/meeting how to allocate the data request funds for 2017/18 (all).

AP53.10: Advertise/recruit volunteers for historic data input (BTO, RSPB, WWT).

AP53.11: Update the last paper on progress of historic data input including costed scenarios for completion (BTO).

AP53.12: Work with KR to deliver a draft of the protected sites paper (BTO).

AP53.13: Find out latest state of Arctic Indicators paper (BTO).

6. WeBS Annual Report

Suggested additions to the proposed flat plan included a summary of the third SPA Review and extracts from previous reports ("50 years ago"). WWT may be able to assist with the focus on seaducks.

7. NEWS

NEWS reporting has had some issues which are being worked through, and work on the online interface is progressing. The NEWS online report and paper report are due for delivery to Country Agencies by end of February.

AP53.14: Delivery of a draft NEWS paper focusing on observed changes by end of May.

8. Population estimates

It is proposed to calculate estimates using the same methodology as last time. For inland widespread species, these should be compared with estimates from Veronica Mendez.

AP53.15: Get draft table of estimates by mid-February (BTO).

AP53.16: Speak to colleagues regarding seaduck information for population estimates (JNCC/WWT).

9. 70th anniversary

Of the available venues, it was decided the celebration conference should be held at Martin Mere on the 30th September 2017. There should be cake.

- AP53.17:** Suggest possible topics and speakers for WeBS 70 conference (all).
- AP53.18:** Produce draft programme for WeBS 70 conference and circulate (BTO).
- AP53.19:** Promote conference in WeBS Report (BTO).

10. Progress on action points

Outstanding Actions from previous meetings:

- AP52.2: Send data to IWC as soon as possible (TF). – *In discussions with Wetlands International. They may only want some sites rather than all in future.*
- AP52.3: Contact Regional Network to suggest candidates for WeBS Local Organiser vacancies (HM).
- AP52.4: Ask Bird Clubs to advertise gaps in coverage (HM/Local Organisers). – *Have been waiting for vacant sites tool completion. Have given Local Organisers instructions how to use URLs on vacant sites.*
- AP52.8: Add threat assessment for Low Tide sites to WeBS development ideas spreadsheet (TF).
- AP52.11: Transfer data from Core Counts to LTC for relevant estuaries (NC).
- AP52.18: Produce an online survey on NEWS (topics to include: wrack; scope of survey (extra species); were habitat descriptions acceptable; sector definitions) (TF/HM). *Drafted but not circulated.*
- AP52.21: Contact Country Agencies to remind them if they are commissioning work data needs to feed into WeBS (DAS).
- AP52.25: Source additional seaduck data and any other pertinent datasets for waterbird population estimates (TF).
- AP52.30: Speak to BTO Communications about 2017 anniversary featuring on Autumnwatch or Winterwatch (TF).
- AP52.31: Add worksheet to excel “dev-doc” file with spending history for WeBS related projects (TF).
- AP52.36: Update development worksheet in the “DevDoc” file (TF).
- AP51.5: Article in WeBS Newsletter about importance SPA monitoring, especially during passage periods (NC, DAS).
- AP51.6: Combine Cotswold Water Park sites in WeBS database and inform local counters that understanding the movement between the pits would be vital if they are considering promoting statutory site recognition (HM, TF).
- AP51.17: Think about small incremental increase in costs for April (TF, NC). See also AP50/12/1 Look at our charging structure and recognise it needs to be part of wider discussion between partners. Aim for 15% contribution from data sales to the budget? (DEB, AJM, all). *Ongoing, charges are online at <http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/webs/data/data-request-charges>.*
- AP51.28: Investigate Cabinet Office fund & register & Defra (DS, TF). (See also AP50/12/4 Is there an opportunity for fundraising to raise cash to undertake analysis of historical data?)
- AP50/12/8 Come up with a list of top 20 research ideas and promote to universities eg non-natives (UEA post-doc). Have a brainstorm at a future meeting.
- AP50/12/6 WeBS was one of the first online applications to be built by BTO and is in need of a refresh to give it a fresh feel. Discuss with BTO IS Team about scheduling this work (DB, AM). *Initial estimate of time from discussion with IS. Not a trivial job as every page will need rebuilding, however*
- AP50/12/7 Better recording of academic uses of WeBS data. Need copies of paper and report from research. Mostly undergraduates need to chase.

11. Minutes of 52nd Meeting

The minutes were adopted.

12. AOB

BOU have adopted the IOC taxonomic list of species, which includes treating Tundra/Taiga Bean Geese as separate species.

Wetlands International on behalf of the African-Eurasian Waterbird Monitoring Partnership have launched the Waterbird Fund to support waterbird monitoring. <https://waterbird.fund/>.

There should be a standing item on agenda for international feedback.

The next Pan-European Duck Symposium is confirmed for 6-8 April 2018 on the Isle of Cumbrae, Scotland.

13. Date of Next Meeting

Thursday 7th September at The Lodge, Sandy.