

News from the International Waterbird Census
Western Palearctic and Southwest Asia
Issue no. 7 – December 2004
Newsletter for coordinators of national waterbird monitoring schemes

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Introduction

The main function of this newsletter is to keep coordinators of national waterbird monitoring schemes up-to-date with developments in the International Waterbird Census (IWC) in the Western Palearctic and Southwest Asia region. For those who are behind with data submission, we also wish to kindly request that you send waterbird count data up to and including **January 2004**. This newsletter was produced by Simon Delany, with assistance from Jan Blew and Saskia Henderikse. Especially welcome in this issue are articles by Jan Beekman and Nicola Baccetti *et al.* If you have anything you wish to contribute to future issues, please get in touch. Please e-mail if you have any questions or comments: simon.delany@wetlands.org

Staff News

We are in the process of recruiting a replacement for **Lieuwe Haanstra** who took early retirement in December 2004. Lieuwe worked for three years as the IWC database manager and for four years before that as manager of the centralised Wader and Goose databases. He was central to the success of IWC in his seven years of service to Wetlands International, and we are missing his technical skills and the company of a good and valued colleague. We received Lieuwe's services as part of an agreement with our host organisation in The Netherlands, Alterra Green World

Research (formerly the Government Institute of Forestry and Nature Research), who offered early retirement to many staff as part of their restructuring in 2004. Negotiations are under way to find an appropriate replacement for Lieuwe, but we are not yet in a position to name his successor. **Jan Blew** has worked several hundred hours for us from his base in Germany this year, and is currently acting as manager of the IWC database. We are fortunate to have his skill and experience in our team and the current arrangement will continue into next year.

Count dates: January 2005

Please note that the recommended dates for IWC counts in 2005 in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia are:

12-16 January 2005

Recommendations for the counts:

- For the convenience of volunteer counters the recommended dates cover the traditional weekend nearest the middle of January. These dates are for guidance only and counts from any date in January are very welcome
- Please include non-native species in the counts
- Please submit your data in the standard manner recommended by Wetlands International, using the site names and site codes on the official site list, and providing details of any changes in, or additions to the site list

Testing our counters: why a national initiative was started and what happened

Nicola Baccetti, Luca Melega, Lorenzo Serra and Fernando Spina, INFS, Italy

Two years ago, INFS (Italian Wildlife Institute, which coordinates the IWC counts in Italy) launched a programme of validation of the quality of data gathered by the national counters' network, testing species identification and counting skills. What some counters initially perceived as a politically incorrect (if not offensive) initiative has now turned into a rewarding exercise, instrumental in acknowledging and enhancing the scientific value of their activities.

Why such tests. Our initial reasons were very 'local' ones. A national law dating back to 1992 gave INFS and local administrative authorities the duty of monitoring animal populations in the country, the IWC counts being of course one of the monitoring activities. Local administrations offered a very variable technical and/or economic support to the counts, from nil to the production of complete and reliable data collected by employing the best locally available ornithological groups. Often, however, birding groups operated independently from their respective local authorities, providing better quality data than the latter, which caused some concern at the national coordination level. Sometimes two, or even more, series of data were received for the same sites and years, with an obvious waste of public/private money both in the field and at the coordination level. Hence, our decision to accept data only if collected by qualified observers, who needed to be objectively identified. Furthermore, the tasks of INFS in its role of official governmental reference on environmental issues also suggested the opportunity of certifying data quality against the risk of criticism (e.g. possible discrepancies in data collected by hunters vs. conservationists, to be used for decisions on hunting issues). Local administrations were officially informed of our policy as soon as the testing sessions started. They had the possibility to submit their own staff to test, or to commit the activity to qualified observers present in their areas.

Choosing the test type. Waterbird identification was the main subject that needed to be tested and the easiest one to be judged. Without aiming at the virtuosity of high-level tests for bird-watchers, we presented the candidates a PowerPoint slideshow of 50 good quality photos of species regularly occurring in the country (starting from very easy ones, to increase candidates' self-confidence), followed by two photos of vagrants, two photos of flocks to be counted and three recorded calls (of very easy species e.g. teal, coot, redshank); the latter five elements were not considered for the result. We considered the test passed with 75% of correct answers. All candidates had the opportunity of being aware of their mistakes and possible ways to increase their proficiency were suggested.

Results. Tests started on 20 September 2002, and there have been 15 sessions (8 at the INFS headquarters and 7 at other locations such as Sicily and Sardinia, the latter to encourage participation from most peripheral areas). A total of 394 candidates has been examined so far; 230 of them got a positive result at their first attempt and 17 on a later attempt, for an overall percentage of 63% passing the test. We estimate that at least 100 qualified observers are still to be tested; 5-10 observers, however, did not accept the idea of being tested and informed us of their decision to suspend their IWC activities. After the first sessions, initial scepticism or a negative approach by several participants was followed by a very collaborative feeling, many local groups and some administrations organising training activities, informal tests and public slideshows at which INFS' participation is usually requested. The test results will also offer an opportunity to check the accuracy of the Italian IWC dataset and a way to monitor its future development. For more information contact Nicola Baccetti at: <mailto:infszumi@iperbole.bologna.it>

Finally...

Season's greetings to everyone involved in waterbird monitoring work throughout the Western Palearctic and southwest Asia. We hope that your counts in January are successful, rewarding and enjoyable

Many thanks indeed for your continuing contribution to the IWC