

Minutes from Workshop on Managing the Black-tailed Godwit in EU in Brussels on the 17 March 2006

Introduction

A draft EU Management Plan for the Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*) has been prepared under the Sustainable Hunting Initiative. The long-term objective of the plan is to restore the Black-tailed Godwit (BTG) to a favourable conservation status in the EU. This cannot realistically be achieved during the 3-years running period of the first EU Management Plan and the short term aim of the plan is therefore to address the most urgent issues to halt the decline of the Black-tailed Godwit populations in the EU.

The that workshop took place at the European Commission in Brussels on the 17 March 2006 aimed at reviewing the data presented in the draft plan and to discuss which activities should be proposed in the plan to halt most effectively the decline of the Black-tailed Godwit. In addition to three national delegates of the Ornithological Committee, representatives from the following NGOs are present: Wetlands International, Oiseaux Migrateurs du Paléarctique Occidental (OMPO), Federation of Associations for Hunting and Conservation of the E.U (FACE), BirdLife International and the International Wader Study Group. Finally, Gerrit Gerritsen, project manager of the Nederland-Gruttoland project was invited to present new information on Godwit management in the Netherlands. All participants are listed in Annex A.

Following a welcome by Ms. Anne Teller (EC, DG Env.) who also chaired the workshop, Flemming P. Jensen briefly outlined that background for the workshop and the structure of the meeting with three sessions. The workshop was then divided into three sessions, each of which started with one or two short presentations that gave an overview of the issues to be discussed.

Session 1

Christian Perennou gave an overview of the information on numbers and populations of breeding, staging and wintering in the EU as they are presented in the draft management plan.

In the discussion after the presentation, the following new information was presented:

- BirdLife International: In May 2006 the IUCN Global Conservation status of the Black-tailed Godwit will change from **Least Concern** to **Near Threatened** because of the massive, continuing decline of several populations, including the population breeding in Western Europe.

Wader study Group : The winter population in France comprises about 17,000 birds and there is no evidence that *Limosa l. limosa* is present in winter.

Wader study Group/ Nederland-Gruttoland project: The breeding population in the Netherlands is probably only about 62,000 pairs (in 2005) and declining. The wintering numbers in Guiné-Bissau, as surveyed by the WSG, have probably declined by ca. 50% in the last 20 years.

Wetlands International: More recent mid-winter count data than included in the draft plan exist (part of it in grey literature), and will be made available by WI for the plan.

National representative for Belgium: The breeding estimate for Belgium is too high in draft plan, and should be 600-700 pairs instead. However, the population is increasing as stated in the plan.

Participants also highlighted additional relevant information in Session 2, i.e. that in 3 key countries (Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands) the range has contracted westwards over recent decades.

Anne Teller concluded the session by remarking that apart from these minor amendments to be made, the status as described in the Draft Plan and presented at the beginning of the session is overall correct and shared by all participants.

Session 2

Session two started with an overview by Flemming P. Jensen on the main threats to the Black-tailed Godwits in the EU:

- Loss and degradation of breeding, staging and wintering habitat
- Hunting
- Human disturbance
- Pollution
- Nest predation

It was pointed out that in the Draft Plan, the loss and degradation of breeding habitats is identified as the main threat to the populations breeding in EU. Although little exact knowledge is available about the bag size in France – the only Member States where hunting is allowed – hunting is identified as a significant threat. The calculations behind the bag size figures in the plan were explained. In the hunting season 1998-99 (the most recent season where data are available) 115,250 waders belonging to 11 species were shot (ONCFS survey). Separately and over several years, ONCFS estimated that in a part of NW France where the highest bag of waders is made, 16-25% of these waders were "godwits" - that is Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwits (*Limosa lapponica*). FACE suggests that equal numbers of the two species are shot – that is 15-20,000 annually. LPO - BirdLife in France – believe that these figure are too low and suggested 20-30,000 as a "guesstimate".

Based on the same ONCFS data, but taking into account the relative proportions of Black-tailed and Bar-tailed godwits wintering in - or migrating through - France, the authors of the Draft Plan arrived at an estimate of ca. 6-8,000 Black-tailed Godwits bagged annually in France, at the time when waterbird hunting was allowed from August to February (this new calculation was presented first-hand, as it was not included in the circulated draft of the Plan).

Christian Perennou subsequently presented an analysis of post-1987 ringing recovery data from the French Museum of Natural History (the result of this exercise has not been included in the draft action plan). Out of 65 birds that were shot in France about 2/3 were believed to

belong to the subspecies *Limosa l. limosa*; but unknown differences in ringing pressure between both subspecies means that it is impossible to assess whether any of them supports a relatively higher hunting pressure. Of the 48 hunted birds of known origin 26 were shot in February (and all of these were *Limosa l. limosa*). The other birds shot in France were more or less evenly distributed between July-September (*Limosa l. limosa*), or August-January (*Limosa l. islandica*), with particularly low numbers of BTG being shot in October-December. Of particular interest for the management of the BTG in the EU, it was explained that hunting of BTG (and other waterbirds) in February has been closed for the last four years: a prediction was therefore highlighted, that if hunting indeed had a significant effect on the demography of *Limosa l. limosa*, then this recent relaxed hunting pressure should soon have positive effects (decline either stopped or slowed down).

Bertrand Trolliet from the French Office National de la Chasse et de la Faune Sauvage then gave a thorough description of the distribution, trend and hunting of Black-tailed Godwits in France. Regarding hunting of BTG in France no exact bag data is available. The most recent data are from the hunting season 1998-99, when 115,250 waders belonging to 11 species were shot. An estimated 16-25% of these were "godwits" that is Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwits (*Limosa lapponica*). An estimate by Beintema and Drost from 1986 suggested that 1,300 Black-tailed Godwits of the Dutch population used to be shot annually in France. This bag was mainly made in March and July, when hunting was then still legal. Finally, it was highlighted that despite the BTG hunting ban in Italy after 1997 (to protect the look-alike Slender-billed Curlew), populations in Eastern Europe that migrate through Italy still continued to decline.

A minor change was then made to the programme as it was agreed that Gerrit Gerritsen, Nederland-Gruttoland project made his presentation at this stage because some of the information he presented would feed into the discussion of the threats to the BTG. Gerrit Gerritsen explained that today 2/3 of the BTG in the Netherlands (currently 49-75,000 pairs in total) breed in farmland (plus 1/3 in nature reserves), and that the population decline is about 5% annually. Draining of the farmland is no longer the key problem, whilst early mowing of the grassland has become the big problem. Nest predation of chicks by Stoat, Buzzards, Grey Heron and other birds also seems to be increasing issue. The suspected reason for this is that the openness of the landscape is disappearing, which make it easier for birds of prey, crows and other nest predators to move into the farmland. Recent studies suggest that the annual adult survival rate is 80-85% whilst the number of young pr. pair is only 0.3, which is only half the level necessary to keep the population stable. The present low production is seen as the main reason for the BTG decline of 5% annually in the Netherlands. Production has been decreasing on nature reserves too, albeit at a slower pace than on farmland. It was highlighted how even a small increase in adult survival could significantly affect positively the population numbers. Major efforts are now made to convince farmers to delay the first mowing and 2.3 million EUROS are invested annually by the Gruttoland project to conserve the species. In summary, the main reasons for the decline of the Dutch BTG breeding population are believed to be early mowing which destroys the nests and/or kills the chicks, and increased nest predation.

This was followed by a lengthy discussion on the threat to the BTG in the EU. In particular the impact of the hunting that takes place in France was discussed. The draft management plan tentatively identified hunting as having a negative impact on the population and suggested that a temporary hunting ban be implemented in the EU.

The real impact of the French hunting on the breeding population of BTG in the EU was questioned by OMPO, FACE and Bertrand Trolliet from ONCFS. They pointed out that there is no evidence that the additional mortality from hunting in France has a significant impact on the BTGs breeding in the EU, because:

- The number of BTG shot in France is low.
- The open season in France does not include February, March or July any more – the months when most BTGs were previously shot
- even in the month with the highest remaining hunting pressure (although residual as compared to the 1980's), i.e. August, the hunting pressure is likely to have been reduced since earlier studies, since (1) hunting is then open only on less than 50% of the French Public Coastal Land (DPM) and nowhere else, and (2) the number of registered hunters on the DPM has declined nationally by 50% over the last 9 years (mainly in the last five) ;.

Session 3

Flemming Pagh Jensen initiated this last session with a brief reminder of key activities planned in the Draft Action Plan to reverse the BTG decline.

From this presentation and following up on discussions raised during Session 2, some important features arose :

- BLI highlighted that for a globally Near-Threatened species, any additional mortality may be unacceptable ; the principle of precaution should apply ;
- given the species demographic characteristics, the same improvement in population status can be obtained by either a small increase in adult survival rate, or a large increase in breeding output ;
- in the Netherlands a lot is already being done for the breeding phase, which did not stop the decline ; it is therefore vital, in parallel to pursuing these efforts, to act upon other negative factors ;
- conservationists and tax-payers in NW EU do not see positively their efforts being partly offset by a continuing hunting pressure, whether significant or not in terms of demography ;
- even if currently no *Limosa l. limosa* are shot during return migration (February) in France, the very general trend for earlier returning dates for many migrating birds (likely linked to climate change) will eventually mean that the BTG might soon migrate northwards in January, i.e. during the open season in France ;
- the hunting community was called to consider that the BTG is the only hunted species in an Unfavourable state for which the Action Plan proposes a temporary hunting ban, so the effort requested is not a major one overall ;
- closing the BTG hunting will be difficult to accept by French hunters, when data clearly does not demonstrate that hunting has a negative impact on the species demography (and instead suggests it may not have a major one) ;
- even if the number of BTG shot annually is small (and hence a hunting ban would not affect many hunters), the fear of the hunting community is that look-alike species too might become protected at the same time (Bar-tailed Godwit, all Curlews) ;
- a window for negotiation may be the possibility to close the BTG while making a commitment that hunting of look-alike species will not be closed ;
- although EU Action plans are not mandatory, following the adoption of AEWA by the EU Commission this plan is also made jointly under the AEWA umbrella, which contains obligations for its signatory Parties (including France). France might thus be under the obligation to act under some AEWA requirements, e.g. "modification of hunting practises".

Conclusions

In conclusion, the Commission took note that an agreement could not be reached among the participants of the workshop on the introduction of a temporary ban on hunting for the Black-tailed Godwit in the EU, mainly because of France. This was regrettable and surprising since it is the only plan among the 20 management plans prepared under the Sustainable Hunting Initiative for birds considered to be in an unfavourable conservation status, which contained such a proposed measure. In conclusion, this issue will need to be further discussed at the next Ornis Committee meeting.

All participants were thanked for taking their time to participate in this important workshop.

Christian Perennou & Flemming Pagh Jensen

Workshop on

“Managing the Black-tailed Godwit in EU”

17 March 2006

European Commission, DG Environment, Avenue de Beaulieu 5, B-1160
Brussels (Auderghem) Room BU-5 C

Programme

Scene setting

09:30 Welcome by DG ENV

09:40 Introduction by FPJ

- The background for this workshop and expected outcome
- Introduction of participants
- The working method

Session 1

Status and distribution of the Black-tailed Godwit in EU

This session aims at assessing our knowledge on the distribution, size and trend of European breeding and wintering populations.

- 09:50 Our current knowledge on the status of the Black-tailed Godwit in EU (CP)
- Overview of information collected for the management plan.
 - Initial comments by experts from the Wader Study Group
- 10:10 Discussion (30 min)
- Do we have the most up-to-date information regarding:
- distribution, size and trend of western European breeding population?
 - size and trend of Icelandic breeding population?
 - distribution, size and trend of wintering population in the EU?
 - link to areas outside EU
- 10:40 Conclusions of discussion
- 10:45 Coffee break

Session 2

Threats to the European Black-tailed Godwits

This session aims at obtaining an overview of human activities that are believed to have a negative impact on the European population of Black-tailed Godwit.

- 11:00 Introduction on what is identified as the main threats in the draft plan (FPJ)
- 11:15 Interpretation of new ringing data from the French Museum of Natural History (CP)
- 11:30 The impact of hunting (Bertrand Trollet, the French "Office National de la Chasse et de la Faune Sauvage" - ONCFS)
- 11:45 Discussion (1 hour)
- What are the main threats to the EU populations?
- Loss and degradation of breeding habitat
 - Hunting (in France)
 - Pollution – including lead shoots
 - Human disturbance
 - Other issues (nest predation)
- 12:45 Conclusions of discussion
- 13:00 Lunch

Session 3

Activities to reverse the decline

The purpose of the last session is to discuss which activities should be prioritised and included in the EU Management Plan for Black-tailed Godwit.

- 14:00 Introduction on what does the plan propose (FPJ)
- 14:10 Experiences with management of Black-tailed Godwit in the Netherlands (Gerrit Gerritsen, Nederland-Gruttoland project)
- 14:25 Comments by BirdLife & FACE
- 14:45 Discussion
- Possible measures to be included in the Management Plan:
- Protection and management of breeding areas
 - Protection and management of staging and wintering sites
 - The role of SPA network for this species
 - Management of hunting, including possible temporary ban
 - Further research and monitoring
 - International co-operation
- 16:20 Conclusions of discussion and next steps

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Annex II

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