

**2nd Meeting of the Committee for Captive Breeding, Reintroduction and
Supplementation of Lesser White-fronted Geese in Fennoscandia (RECAP 2)**

7 – 8 September 2009, Nordens Ark, Sweden

MEETING REPORT



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Welcome and introduction

Bert Lenten opened the meeting by welcoming the delegations from all four countries (Finland, Norway, Sweden and Germany). He proposed to continue as chair to which all parties agreed. He especially thanked the Norwegian Directorate for Nature Management for hosting the meeting.

Adoption of agenda

The revised agenda was adopted without comments (Doc: LWfG RECAP 2.1.rev.1, 4.9.2009).

Country activity updates

Norway

The Norwegian national LWfG action plan is ready for adoption. Amongst the main actions foreseen is also the possibility to start a breeding programme to supplement the Fennoscandian population. NGOs will continue to be in the forefront of implementing the national action plan in the field. The action plan will be translated into English.

In addition to national activities international conservation efforts along the whole LWfG flyway in countries such as Kazakhstan and Russia are seen as crucial. The need to find funding and a wide scale of partners for this work is of the utmost importance. Actions needed in European countries such as Hungary or Greece should be done within the EU framework.

The Norwegian Ornithological Society gave an update on the LWfG monitoring done in Norway this summer. A total of 30 LWfG were sighted during spring migration, breeding and pre-staging. In the core breeding area 13 pairs were sighted. This year also former breeding grounds were searched and one pair may have been located outside the core breeding area. It seems once again to have been a poor breeding season for the geese. Due to poor weather conditions it was not possible to cull as many red foxes as in previous years. Foxes were sighted around the breeding grounds and perhaps this is one explanation for the low breeding success.

Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) – Feasibility study commissioned by Norway

WWT has been commissioned by the Norwegian Directorate for Nature Management to conduct a feasibility study on the possibility of reintroduction/supplementation of the Fennoscandian population and the possibility of captive breeding of LWfG from Norway. The representatives from WWT who attended the meeting as part of the Norwegian delegation, summarized the key points of their study, which is due to be completed later this year.

The costs of reintroduction/supplementation are likely to be high but the benefits can be very high as well. However, continued in situ measures are needed alongside reintroduction – they are the ones that will ensure the conservation of the species in the long run. The WWT will use population modeling in order to assess what implications taking young LWfG from the Fennoscandian population might have and to address other questions such as “how late is too late”- when should a captive breeding programme be established etc.

WWT added that for the purpose of a reintroduction/supplementation programme the Fennoscandian and Western Main populations are being considered as one. Therefore perhaps the Russian birds could be used to supplement the Fennoscandian population.

Norway added that it is not just an issue of maintaining the genetics of the Fennoscandian population but of maintaining the present migration route, which would in practice not be possible to recreate.

Sweden

No LWfG have been released in Sweden since 1999. LWfG conservation activities now focus on monitoring the free-flying population, the setting up of the LWfG breeding programme with the Russian birds at Nordens Ark and finalizing the national species action plan (in Swedish with English summary) to be sent out for consideration in early 2010. A feasibility study (see below) has been carried out.

The free-flying population currently consists of some 100 birds, with reproduction rates having been stable but low. This year however, 34 goslings were counted. The present reinforced population is geographically extremely concentrated and confined to a core breeding area of approximately 15km².

As for the breeding programme, the Russian goslings have been caught in different areas with no more than two goslings from each brood in order to increase genetic diversity. According to Russian estimates it should be feasible to extract a total of 50 birds from the Western Main population. After receiving another 10 birds from Russia by the end this year, Nordens Ark will have a total of 44 birds including the offspring of the Russian wild-caught founders.

Discussion:

WWT asked whether the Russian estimate of it being feasible to remove 50 birds from the Western main population was based on population modeling. Sweden was not aware that any modeling had been done. **Germany** asked if there is any chance of the Swedish birds mixing with the Fennoscandian population in Norway. Sweden replied that whilst it cannot be excluded that the two populations meet, it seems highly unlikely due to their separate flyways. **Norway** inquired whether Sweden has intentions of genetically screening the Russian birds and about the estimated costs of running the breeding facility. Sweden confirmed that a genetic study of the Russian birds being held at Nordens Ark will be done this winter. The total costs for the breeding facility are yet unknown.

Swedish feasibility study on catching and screening of Swedish LWfG

The Swedish feasibility study to clarify the possibilities to refine the Swedish free-flying population from birds with evident hybridization was conducted by Mr. Richard Ottvall from the University of Lund. The study attempts to evaluate the possibility of catching the Swedish LWfG population for genetic screening and to evaluate the possibility of genetically mapping the birds and so to single out individuals which show hybrid DNA. The study concludes that catching all the birds from the Swedish free-flying population would be difficult and potentially risky. There is no guarantee that all birds would be caught. Moreover, the genetic screening using microsatellite markers available today would be inconclusive and developing additional variable markers required to discriminate between pure LWfG and descendants of hybrids would be quite expensive.

Discussion:

Norway disagreed with the conclusion that catching all the birds cannot be achieved and would be very risky. According to their experience all birds can be caught (for example with canon nets) with minimum risk involved if carried out by people with experience. Catching the birds should therefore not be seen as such a problem.

Finland agreed with the genetic analysis in the feasibility study, whereas **Sweden** stated that DNA sequencing methods will be explored as a last possibility to see if they can reveal loci that show conclusive evidence of past hybridization also in later generations.

Sweden added that the estimate that the percentage of the Swedish free-flying LWfG population carrying GWfG genes would be around 36%, i.e. same as in the former captive-breeding population, is grossly overestimated. In the supplemented free-flying population this level is probably much lower, e.g. between 5-10%. The **Secretariat** stated that the flock should be refined before trying to dilute it with pure genetic material (i.e. the Russian birds). **Norway** agreed that it is important not to release the pure birds from Russia

to mix with the unrefined Swedish population. Whilst continuing to breed birds at Nordens Ark for future reintroduction/supplementation the decision on what to do with the Swedish population should be pushed a few years forward. **Sweden** added that there is very weak or no legal or political support in Sweden to kill the entire flock of LWfG with such a small proportion of genes resulting from historical introgression.

Germany enquired what would be done with the pure Russian birds in the meantime and suggested that they be used for the Lower-Rhein project of Aktion Zwerggans. The **Secretariat** replied that the flyway of the unrefined Swedish flock and the flyway proposed by Aktion Zwerggans are too close together – the birds would most certainly meet and mix in the wild.

Germany considered it to be a problem to keep the captive-bred LWfG in captivity for too long. Domestication is bound to occur after a certain period of time making a reintroduction into the wild a risk (e.g. easier to poach them due to lack of a sufficient flee distance). **WWT** countered that the level of domestication depends very much on the way the birds are handled, raised and released. If done properly, a delayed release would not be a problem.

Decision:

The Committee members agreed that Sweden will catch a small number of birds (10-15) from its free-flying population and genetically test them for signs of hybridization. The Committee will review the issue of refining the Swedish LWfG population again when the results from these tests are available. In the mean time it was recommended that no pure offspring stemming from the Russian birds will be released into the wild to reinforce (and dilute) the Swedish population. Sweden will make plans to catch the birds for testing in spring 2010, with results possibly ready by the end of 2010.

Finland

The implementation of the Finnish national LWfG action plan has started and authorities are in the process of recruiting a national LWfG coordinator to oversee the work. Activities include protection of former LWfG core breeding areas and the culling of red foxes. Annual monitoring of LWfG in Finland will of course also continue. A total of 29 birds were counted in Hailouto this spring.

Finland has no plans to reintroduce birds at this stage, even though this option is included as a possible future activity in the national action plan. Finland wishes to focus on the conservation of the remaining wild Fennoscandian population. The national action plan will be made available in English in 2010.

The Finnish NGO Friends of the Lesser White-fronted Goose have again released a small number of birds into the wild in Finnish Lapland together with Barnacle Geese foster parents this summer. They did not have a permit for the release. The local authorities have been authorized to shoot the barnacle geese (alien species to Finland) and to transport the LWfG back to the breeding facility of the NGO – should they be found. Authorities are now considering pressing criminal charges against the Friends of the LWfG.

Germany

Germany reiterated the country's status in the Committee as observer.

Germany reminded Committee members that the three year moratorium prohibiting the reintroduction of LWfG will be over in 2010. The German NGO Aktion Zwerggans wishes to proceed with its project of releasing captive-bred LWfG in northern Sweden and guiding them back to the Lower-Rhein area with the help of ultra-light planes.

Germany highlighted that genetic purity is of course the highest goal and that Aktion Zwerggans has not managed to give an internationally accepted proof of genetic purity to be able to use the captive-bred birds originally foreseen for the project. However, the consensus reached in the prior meeting was that Russian birds would not cause a problem. To start after the moratorium in 2010 appears too early, but there might be

sufficient offspring from the Russian birds being bred in Sweden in 2011 for the AZ project. Germany concluded, that it is of course up to Sweden to decide to what use they wish to give their Russian birds.

The German company Allianz has withdrawn its continued support for the project but has indicated that they are prepared to finance the project as soon as sufficient accepted birds for a release are available. Germany explained why a memorandum of understanding between Germany and Sweden drafted by Aktion Zwerggans concerning the project was rejected.

Germany explained that due to necessary preparations a decision by the Committee sufficiently in advance would be necessary in to enable Aktion Zwerggans to go ahead with their project, possibly in 2011.

Discussion:

Norway countered that it was far too premature to make a statement to support the start of the AZ project in 2011. The jointly agreed result was therefore that the decision should be postponed to the next RECAP meeting. It is also necessary to analyze when sufficient genetically pure offspring would be available. The Chair added that there is also the question of what Aktion Zwerggans' plans and aims are – to release the birds and then catch them again or to reintroduce them permanently.

WWT also stressed that if any birds are released it is essential to make sure that all parties involved are comfortable with the solution. WWT also suggested that an independent feasibility study be done of the Aktion Zwerggans project.

Decision: Question on future of Aktion Zwerggans project was delayed until the next RECAP meeting.

Terms of reference for independent scientific review of LWfG genetics

In accordance with the Committee activities decided on at the previous RECAP meeting the Secretariat presented the second revised draft Terms of Reference for an independent scientific review of literature on LWfG genetics (Doc: LWfG 2.4 rev1). The first draft had been modified based on written comments received from Sweden.

Discussion:

Norway commented that the information about the genetics of the Russian birds and the Swedish free-flying population would be important to include in the background material of the review.

Sweden proposed that the sentence in brackets in point 7 on p. 3 be omitted (“such as genetic impoverishment and inbreeding in the wild population”). The Secretariat concluded that the text had been added based on a request from Sweden at the first RECAP meeting, but could readily be omitted. WWT agreed that this information was not essential for the genetic review. The proposal to delete the text in brackets was adopted.

Germany proposed to omit the article published by Pedall et al. from the list of literature to be reviewed (ToR p. 5). Since it was jointly agreed that offspring from the Russian birds would be genetically acceptable for a release project, it is clear that the NGO Aktion Zwerggans should not go on focusing on birds from German zoological gardens, being the subject of said article. Therefore, it is no longer necessary to subject the article to a scientific review. The German proposal was adopted.

Germany also suggested that the qualifications of the independent reviewer be modified in bullet point 2 on page 6. Instead of requiring the reviewer to have experience in molecular DNA analysis of birds, Germany suggested that experience in molecular analysis of *animals* would be perfectly sufficient. The proposal was accepted.

WWT proposed that the review entail the task to clarify whether the current available methods of genetic analysis allow all hybrids in the Swedish free-flying population to be revealed or not. In addition the

independent reviewer should make an assessment about the feasibility of developing new genetic methods including a time scale within which such methods could be applied. **Sweden** commented that this was to some extent already covered in point 5, but that the wording could be clearer. The Secretariat will reword point 5 to make it clearer and to include the suggestion made by WWT.

Decision: The Secretariat will redraft the Terms of Reference on the basis of the comments received from the countries. The draft will then be circulated to countries for approval after the meeting.

Funding of review of LWfG genetics

The Secretariat pointed out that the independent review could cost somewhere around 10.000€ depending on the expert contracted and the time needed to complete the review. The Secretariat also made clear that no such funds are available from the AEWA budget; therefore the review will have to be funded by the RECAP Member States.

Decision: The Secretariat will contact the countries with a funding proposal once a suitable expert has been found and a fee has been negotiated.

Best practice guidance on how to manage captive populations

The Secretariat reported back to the Committee concerning available best practice guidelines on how to manage captive geese populations (especially LWfG). Enquiries to the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) and the European Association of Zoos and Aquariums (EAZA) – amongst others – showed that there are no such existing guidelines.

WWT Aviculture Manager Nigel Jarret added that different guidelines are needed depending on the purpose of keeping geese in captivity – the purpose in this case being captive breeding for reintroduction or supplementation into the wild. Important factors in the captive management of LWfG are good genetic management of stocks and avoiding domestication.

The Secretariat asked Committee members if they felt it necessary to develop such guidelines for the LWfG. **Germany** considered the development of guidelines unnecessary. WWT suggested that a method statement about the work being done at Nordens Ark would be useful. The Secretariat added that perhaps it would be enough to keep a record of what is being done in different breeding programmes and share knowledge. **Finland** suggested that guidelines are needed on how to confirm the genetic make-up of LWfG in captivity.

Decision: WWT and Nordens Ark accepted putting together short guidelines on the management of captive LWfG being bred for release into the wild, based on existing general guidelines and best practice experience.

Best practice of different reintroduction actions

The Secretariat also reported back on possible best practice guidelines concerning different reintroduction actions. The AEWA Secretariat has since the first RECAP meeting published a review of waterbird re-establishment projects done by WWT (Doc: LWfG Recap 2.5). Although the review is perhaps not exactly what the Committee members had in mind, it does clearly outline what factors are crucial to successful reintroductions of waterbirds. It was agreed that there is no need to produce more detailed guidelines for LWfG.

Decision: The AEWA study covers the needs of the Committee, no further guidelines or studies are needed.

Implementation of the International Single Species Action Plan

The Secretariat gave an overview of the initial plans to start the implementation of the International Single Species Action Plan which was adopted in 2008. A request has been sent to the 22 range states which are of vital importance for the species to name two national representatives for the International LWfG Working Group envisaged in the Action Plan. The number of answers received so far has unfortunately been limited. A first face to face meeting of the International Working Group is foreseen for 2010 in Bonn depending on if funding is available.

In addition to establishing the international working group the Secretariat proposes to step up efforts in those range states outside the EU where conservation action is direly needed. To this end the Secretariat plans to organize workshops in the respective countries with government officials and relevant stakeholders in order to facilitate the process of drafting national action plans.

Discussion:

Germany added that topics of the first meeting of the international working group should include the question of reintroduction, the conservation of sites and the regulation of hunting. Work should also be done to get the EU Commission on board.

Funding

A list of possible funding targets was distributed at the meeting for discussion (Doc: LWfG Recap 2.6). International LWfG conservation activities within the framework of implementing the Single Species Action Plan in need of funding include the first meeting of the International Working Group, workshops in Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Russia as well as other projects in these countries.

The Secretariat also reminded member states that continued support for the LWfG coordinator post is needed in order to ensure the continuance of the post after April 2010.

Countries were encouraged to approach the Secretariat should they have any special projects or ideas in mind that they would be interested in funding.

The assembling of an overview of different sources of funding in the Nordic counties was kept on the list of activities and will be completed by the coordinator for the LWfG in cooperation with the Committee members as soon as possible.

Tasks still pending from RECAP1

A number of Committee activities agreed upon at the first RECAP meeting in May 2008 are still pending (Doc: LWfG Recap 2.8). Countries were asked to review pending tasks in the broader context of Committee activities.

- Independent scientific review on LWfG genetics

Decision: The review will be commissioned by the AEWa Secretariat as soon as the final Terms of Reference have been adopted.

- Overview and reference list of methods and indicators used for genetic scientific assessment

Decision: No longer necessary, this will partly be covered by the independent scientific review.

- Literature support for a 'genetic review' of the suitability of wild birds (NO, RU) for captive breeding

Decision: No longer necessary, will partly be covered by WWT feasibility study

- Suggestions on practical cooperation for captive breeding, satellite tracking etc.

Decision: Norway and Sweden are recommended to start work on this and then report back to the Committee.

- Issues requiring international cooperation - activities 10 and 12-15 from RECAP1

Decision: Activities will be kept in the list to be brought up at the first meeting of the International Working Group.

- PR Strategy

Decision: The development of a PR-strategy in order to raise international awareness on the LWfG was still deemed important and will be kept in the activities list. The LWfG coordinator will draft a PR strategy and outline preliminary costs as soon as possible.

Group discussion on Committee activities

In addition to tasks pending from the first RECAP meeting Committee members were asked to make suggestions for new activities. A non-exhaustive list of possible future Committee activities was distributed by the Secretariat before the meeting (Doc: LWfG Recap 2.7).

Norway, Finland and Sweden reconfirmed their plans to translate their national action plans into English (at least in the form of a summary). The translation of national action plans into Russian was deemed unnecessary at this stage.

It was decided that an independent scientific review of both peer-reviewed and grey literature on the different historic European LWfG flyways should be commissioned. The Secretariat will prepare the Terms of Reference for such a review and submit them to the Committee for approval.

Decision: Additional new activities are the translation of the national action plans into English and the commissioning of an independent scientific review on LWfG flyways.

Next steps

The next RECAP Committee meeting will be held in Bonn the second half of 2010, possibly in October. By then more information on the Swedish free-flying population and the genetic make-up of the birds from Russia should be available as well as the final WWT study and the independent genetic review.

Germany added that the meeting in Bonn could be combined with an excursion to visit the Lower-Rhein area and the site of the Aktion Zwerggans project.

Meeting summary and conclusion

The Chair concluded that much work is being done for the conservation of the LWfG and much progress has been made but, that there is still a lot to do. He commented that it was good to see the countries coming together and talking about these issues and working towards the common goal of the long term conservation of the species.

The Chair thanked the participants for the fruitful meeting and especially thanked Norway for hosting the meeting as well as Nordens Ark for the opportunity to hold the meeting in their wonderful facility.

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Annex 2 – Overview of Committee Activities (in order which issues were dealt with at meeting)

Item	What	Who	Note
1. <i>p.2-3</i>	WWT feasibility study	WWT, Norway	Presentation of final results at next RECAP meeting
2. <i>p.3</i>	Genetic testing of Russian birds	Sweden	Birds from Russia will be subject to genetic tests (winter 2009-10), results will be presented to the Committee
3. <i>p.3-4</i>	Genetic testing of Swedish free-flying population	Sweden	Sweden will catch and test small number of birds in 2010, results will be presented at next RECAP meeting if available
4. <i>p.5-6</i>	Commission an independent scientific review of LWfG genetics	Coordinator, Committee	Secretariat will commission review after final adoption of ToR – funding dependent
5. <i>p.6</i>	Best practice guidelines on captive breeding of LWfG for reintroduction/supplementation	WWT, Nordens Ark	WWT and experts at Nordens Ark will put together short guidelines – will be distributed to Committee
6. <i>p.7</i>	Overview of funding possibilities in the Nordic countries	Coordinator, Committee	
7. <i>p.8</i>	Suggestions on practical cooperation for captive breeding (satellite tracking)	Norway, Sweden	Report back at next RECAP meeting
8. <i>p.8</i>	Issues requiring international cooperation	Coordinator	
9. <i>p.8</i>	LWfG PR strategy	Coordinator	Coordinator will draft PR strategy and outline preliminary budget asap
10. <i>p.8</i>	Translation of national action plans into English (at least summary)	Norway, Finland, Sweden	In 2010 at the latest
11. <i>p.8</i>	Commission an independent scientific review on LWfG flyway literature	Coordinator, Committee	The coordinator will draft Terms of Reference for the review, which will be commissioned after the ToR have been adopted by the countries – funding dependent