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“Strengthening Flyway Conservation in a Changing World”

DRAFT GUIDANCE ON ADDRESSING THE RISK OF ACCIDENTAL SHOOTING OF LOOK-ALIKE SPECIES OF WATERBIRDS IN THE AGREEMENT AREA

Background

Some protected species may be shot by accident because they look like huntable species or because they mix with them, for example in feeding areas or during migration. A good example is the Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus*, classified as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List with two populations listed in Categories 1a, 1b, 1c/2 of Column A, Table 1 of AEWA Annex 3, which can be confused with the Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*, whose populations are all huntable (ssp *flavirostris* only under a potential adaptive harvest management regime in the framework of an international species action plan).

In response to Resolution 4.3, which requested the Technical Committee to provide guidance on a species-by-species basis to the Parties on how to deal with look-alike species with regard to hunting i.e. on how to reduce the risk of accidental shooting of protected species caused by hunting of legitimate ‘look-alike’ quarry species, the Technical Committee compiled a guidance, which was submitted to the 6th Session of the Meeting of the Parties as document AEWA/MOP Inf. 6.1.

This guidance had a partial geographical coverage of the Western Palearctic only, thus leaving out large parts of the Agreement area, notably in Sub-Saharan Africa. Through Resolution 6.7 the MOP requested the Technical Committee to further work on this guidance and present a revised and geographically and taxonomically extended version for consideration.

After MOP6, with the revamp of the [Critical Site Network \(CSN\) Tool](#), the Technical Committee agreed to integrate into the CSN Tool a “look-alike” tool that allows each Range State to identify which species occurring on their territory can be mistaken for other similar species. This integration was completed with comprehensive coverage of all species within the Agreement area.

The present document provides an updated guidance on addressing the risk of accidental shooting of look-alike species of waterbirds utilising the available “look-alike” tool on the CSN Tool. A draft of this document was discussed at length at the 16th meeting of the Technical Committee in January 2021 and approved with some modifications for submission to the Standing Committee. The Standing Committee reviewed the draft guidance at its 16th meeting in May 2021 and approved it with a minor addition for submission to the 8th Session of the Meeting of the Parties.

Action Requested from the Meeting of the Parties

The Meeting of the Parties is requested to review the draft guidance on addressing the risk of accidental shooting of look-alike species and to adopt it for further use.

GUIDANCE ON ADDRESSING THE RISK OF ACCIDENTAL SHOOTING OF LOOK-ALIKE SPECIES OF WATERBIRDS IN THE AGREEMENT AREA

Compiled by the Technical Committee

Scope

This guidance addresses how to manage issues related to the risk of accidental shooting of species that are protected following the listing of their populations on Table 1 of AEWA Annex 3, but which are similar to other species that are legally hunted. Under the provisions of the Agreement (paragraph 2.1.1 of Annex 3 (Action Plan)) Contracting Parties shall prohibit the taking of birds belonging to populations listed on Column A of Table 1 of Annex 3. Exemption is made for those populations listed in Categories 2 and 3 marked with an asterisk and Category 4 which may be hunted on a sustainable use basis where hunting shall be conducted within the framework of an international species action plan, through which Parties will endeavour to implement the principles of adaptive harvest management.

This guidance has been compiled to assist Contracting Parties in addressing the risk of accidental shooting to those populations listed on Column A, as described above. It may, however, facilitate action for further species listed on columns B or C of Table 1, which are protected under domestic legislation.

Approach

In identifying the look-alike species of waterbirds, the Technical Committee undertook a comprehensive review of all species listed on Annex 2 of the Agreement as well as against the non-AEWA-listed species of waterbirds occurring in the Agreement area and included in the CSN Tool. Species were compared for their similarities in terms of morphology. The resulting matches of look-alike species have been displayed on the CSN Tool and can be retrieved on species-by-species basis or as country lists (“look-alike” tool).

The “look-alike” tool provides a basis for each Contracting Party to assess the possible risks of accidental shooting of protected look-alike species on its territory. Further investigation is then recommended to validate the level of risk, while invoking the precautionary principle in line with Article II.2 of the Agreement and introduce necessary measures to minimise or eliminate such risks.

Below described is a stepwise approach to undertaking an assessment of possible risks:

Step 1

To access the list of look-alike species per country, first access the [CSN Tool](#) and from the button “Countries” in the top menu open the map of the Agreement area select the respective country directly from the map and in the newly appeared menu select the button “Look-alike species”. From the list of all species/populations in the country select those which are legally hunted. For each huntable species/population open the list of its look-alike matches and identify whether any of them are listed on Column A of Table 1 of AEWA Annex 3. By clicking on the row of any of the Column-A-listed species/population an overlay map of their ranges will be displayed. This will allow identification of whether there is a broad spatial overlap in the occurrence of the two in the country. Using the “look-alike” tool, identify whether broad spatial overlap in occurrence in the country exists between the huntable and any Column-A-listed look-alike species.

A slightly extended version of this guidance to Step 1 is also available on the CSN Tool at this [link](#). Further, a video tutorial on implementing this step will be provided on the [AEWA website](#).

Step 2

If a broad spatial overlap has been identified, the next step is to identify whether there is temporal overlap in the occurrence of the two species/populations in the areas of spatial overlap. For implementing this step, a variety of sources at country level can be used, such as scientific publications (particularly on phenology), databases of bird monitoring schemes (e.g. International Waterbird Census, Common Bird Monitoring, Important Bird Areas), and citizen science platforms for recording bird observations (e.g. [eBird](#), [Observation](#), [BirdTrack](#), [Ornitho](#)).

Recommended actions to reduce the risk of accidental shooting of protected look-alike species

In response to identified risk of accidental shooting of protected waterbird species a number of actions are possible. The choice of an action or a combination of them should be appropriate to the level of risk. This can include the following:

1. Ensure adequate hunting legislation and governance

Contracting Parties shall review their hunting legislation and its governance for conformity with the provisions of the Agreement and, in particular, for its adequacy in view of the avoidance of risk of accidental shooting of protected look-alike species/populations. Where discrepancies and/or inadequacies have been identified, the legislation needs to be amended accordingly. For further guidance on national legislation please refer to the [AEWA Conservation Guidelines No. 15 on National Legislation for the Protection of Species of Migratory Waterbirds and their Habitats](#).

2. Use differential timing of hunting seasons in relation to the presence of protected look-alike species

Relating hunting regulations to phenology is one of the most effective criteria to reduce or exclude the risk of accidental shooting of protected species. The staggering of opening or closing dates for hunting seasons has been identified in the Guide to Sustainable Hunting under the Birds Directive¹ as one of the main causes of increased risk of accidental shooting of huntable look-alike species where a species for which the hunting season has not been opened yet or has been already closed can be accidentally shot if the hunting season for another look-alike species has been already opened or not closed yet (European Commission 2008). However, when the objective is to prevent accidental shooting of a protected look-alike species/population, differential opening and closing dates of hunting seasons with respect to the presence of protected look-alike species/populations will help reduce the risk of accidental shooting.

To deal with look-alike species/populations, the following procedure is recommended:

- If one or more Column A populations are implicated, when populations are spatially and/or temporally segregated, hunting seasons should be open only in the areas of occurrence and/or for the time of occurrence of the huntable population(s) (and should always exclude breeding seasons or pre-nuptial migration periods).
- Where there is spatial and temporal overlap of huntable and Column A populations, the hunting regulations should be tailored to the population with the poorer conservation status (i.e. the population listed in a higher column in AEWA Table 1) in line with paragraphs 7.1 and 7.2 of the AEWA Annex 3 (Action Plan).

3. Avoid hunting in conditions of poor visibility

Some hunting modes, such as night shooting of ducks and geese, are often assumed as factors potentially increasing the risk of accidental shooting of protected species. However, shooting distance should also be considered in this context. There is some evidence that shooting at closer range, in low light conditions, decreases the risk of accidental shooting (Noer et al. 2006). Nevertheless, areas designated for the purposes of, amongst others, reducing disturbance from hunting (e.g. buffer zones) must be respected.

4. Ensure hunting community has adequate identification skills

The issue of hunting licenses should be conditional on passing a proficiency test which includes not only the identification of quarry species but also of those protected species which look similar (in line with paragraph 4.1.8 of the AEWA Annex 3 (Action Plan)). It is important to ensure that identification skills are maintained and improved, for example, through provision of look-alike identification guidance and other educational materials and events, periodic testing and re-issuance of licences, etc. It is recommended that proficiency testing is partly carried out in the field, where real-life situations can be used to test identification skills based on both visual and aural recognition.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/conservation/wildbirds/hunting/docs/hunting_guide_en.pdf

Furthermore, as methodological advances are adopted on harvest data collection, for example using smart devices for online harvest reporting via apps, consideration should be given to developing the apps such that pictures of the bag are taken to verify identity, in combination with education of hunters on the look alike species.

5. Ensure enforcement of hunting legislation

Contracting Parties shall enforce their relevant hunting legislation and address the instances of illegal killing of birds. Where possible and appropriate, Contracting Parties may consider implementing protection for similar-looking species.

6. Raise awareness of measures that can reduce risk

It is important to make hunters aware of the conservation problems linked to the risk of shooting protected look-alike species. Some awareness-raising projects, including by hunters, have already been undertaken, underlining the value of organising hunters to coordinate activities to ensure sustainability (in line with paragraph 4.1.7 of AEW Annex 3 (Action Plan)). Two of them refer to Italian hunters and were prepared and disseminated by the Italian Hunters' Association ACMA (Associazione Cacciatori Migratoristi Acquatici). The first deals with the possible confusion of Ruff *Calidris pugnax* with other similar medium- and large-sized waders, the second relates to Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* and its look-alike species.

The problem of bird identification or misidentification in bad condition of light or at a great distance, is often well-understood by hunters. Both in the United States and Italy, identification guides of waterfowl 'at distance' have been published (e.g. Hines undated; Realini 1999) and in France, a guide has been produced for hunting wildfowl in poor light conditions (du Cheyron 1995).

Other identification guides specifically targeted at hunters have been published in Latvia (Viksne 2003), Russia (Syroechkovski et al. 2011) and Bulgaria (Iankov et al. 2012). The development of further targeted publications should be encouraged by Contracting Parties. Nevertheless, general bird identification field guides are equally useful, and hunters shall be encouraged to use the variety of regional and country field guides published in several languages.

In Finland web-based educational site 'responsible waterfowler' provides in-depth materials² for self-education on all key aspects of sustainable waterfowling including habitat and invasive predator management.

For some protected species under the Agreement such as the Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus* and Red-breasted Goose *Branta ruficollis*, alert systems have been tested in Romania to inform hunters when a protected species are present and to temporarily restrict hunting of geese. Joint patrols with local bird protection and hunting organisations have also been set up to help implement these local level restrictions³.

² <https://www.riistainfo.fi/syventavat-koulutukset/vastuullinen-vesilinnustaja>

³ <https://savebranta.org/en>

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