

# UK SPA & RAMSAR (AVIAN) SCIENTIFIC WORKING GROUP

## 2005 ANNUAL REPORT

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### 1. Summary

- 1.1. This is the fourth report of the SPA & Ramsar (Avian) Scientific Working Group (SPAR SWG), and includes all issues considered at meetings during 2005. During this period the Group met on the following occasions; 26 January, 25 May and 5 October.
- 1.2. Feedback was received from the *Natura 2000 & Ramsar Steering Committee* (N2RSC) on the recommendations of the 2004 Annual Report, including the Ramsar Review advisory note. All but one of the recommendations were accepted. Recommendation 2004/1.6.1.5, relating to treatment of re-introduced/re-establishing species, was referred back to the SPAR SWG. The Ramsar Review advisory note was noted by the N2RSC and the primary recommendation was that further review of the Ramsar network for bird interests should be included in the 2008-2010 review of the SPA network.
- 1.3. The report includes reviews of a number of work areas: Measures outside of the SPA network; marine SPAs; cropped habitats; sites for a small number of species; national population estimates; developing a site provision index; the possible scope of the 2008-2010 review. A list of briefings presented to the Group is included in Appendix 1.
- 1.4. A provisional work programme for 2006 is appended to the report (Appendix 2).
- 1.5. A key element of the report is to summarise the decisions of the Group; those listed below are from 2005. It should be noted that because the SPAR SWG provides summary minutes of each meeting to the N2RSC, some of these decisions will have been considered by that group during the year; they are reported here for completeness, but may require no further action by the N2RSC. Summary outcomes of consideration by the N2RSC are noted in bold following each decision - they are taken from minutes of that group's meetings, but it should be noted that these may not always be available for inclusion in this report.
  - 1.5.1. **Recommendations and referrals to the UK Natura 2000 & Ramsar Steering Committee (if these have been considered by N2RSC during 2005 then they are marked with an asterisk)**
    - 1.5.1.1. *The SPAR SWG confirms to the N2RSC that* it concurs with the JNCC recommendation that boundary placement for marine extensions to provide protection for rafting Manx Shearwaters around breeding colony SPAs should be at a minimum generic distance of 4km from shore, but also advises that where colony-specific data show use of marine waters beyond this generic distance that a greater extension distance is considered and that, in this respect, the data for Rum and Bardsey are adequate (see 4.2.4).
    - 1.5.1.2. *The SPAR SWG confirms to the N2RSC that* it is supportive of the analytical techniques used for the waterbird aerial survey data in the Greater Thames marine area, and agrees with the JNCC conclusion that this area supports a qualifying population of non-breeding Red-throated Divers and should be assessed further for SPA classification (see 4.2.5).

1.5.1.3. ***The SPAR SWG recommends that the N2RSC adopts*** a generic approach to boundary determination for any future SPA designated for breeding Chough. Boundaries should be based on the inclusion of all suitable foraging and nesting habitat that occurs within a 1km radius of a nesting location (termed the minimum core foraging area). In addition, if site-specific data show that areas beyond core areas are also used regularly then these areas should also be considered for inclusion within a site (see 4.4.3).

1.5.1.4. ***The SPAR SWG recommends that the N2RSC adopts*** a site-specific approach to boundary determination for any future SPA designated for Chough outside of the breeding season. Boundaries should be based on the inclusion of suitable foraging habitat within an area under consideration that is known to be regularly used by birds (see 4.4.3).

## 2. Introduction

- 2.1. The SPA & Ramsar (Avian) Scientific Working Group is a consultative group that was established in November 2001 by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) to assist government administrations and the statutory conservation agencies in further developing the SPA and Ramsar networks within the UK, in particular promoting the coherent management of the networks and monitoring of sites.
  - 2.2. The Group considers UK-scale scientific and technical issues regarding the SPA and Ramsar (avian) networks in the terrestrial and marine environment.
  - 2.3. The Group comprises representatives from Government departments, devolved administrations and their statutory conservation agencies across the UK, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), and scientists from the voluntary conservation sector and other stakeholder groups, such as land-owners and managers, the water industry, marine and business sectors. A list of organisations represented in the Group is given in the 2001-2002 Annual Report.
  - 2.4. The Group sits within a network of fora for the consideration of Natura 2000 issues:
    - bilateral discussions between NGOs and the Country Agencies
    - the *UK Natura 2000 & Ramsar Forum*<sup>1</sup>
    - the *UK Natura 2000 & Ramsar Steering Committee (N2RSC)*It provides advice and recommendations to the *UK Natura 2000 & Ramsar Steering Committee* as well as acting on issues identified by them.
  - 2.5. Formal *Terms of Reference*, along with an initial framework for discussions, were established at the Group's inauguration (See the 2001-2002 Annual Report). This framework was further developed into a rolling work programme. The *Terms of Reference* were revised in 2004 to add consideration of development of the UK Ramsar (avian) network to the Group's remit.
  - 2.6. The Group meets at least three times per year (January, May and September). Issues for discussion are typically supported with briefing papers that are circulated prior to each meeting (a full list for 2005 is given in Appendix 1). JNCC provides the Secretariat for the Group and hosts a web-page<sup>2</sup> on which selected briefings and the approved minutes of meetings are published.
  - 2.7. The role of the *Annual Report* is to summarise active areas of work considered in the meetings of a calendar year, clearly denoting advice to Government, seeking the guidance of the *UK Natura 2000 & Ramsar Steering Committee* or other fora where relevant, and also highlighting issues of a policy nature that were raised within the year but are outside of the remit of the Group. It also provides a provisional work programme for the following year (Appendix 2).
- ### 3. Response from the Natura 2000 & Ramsar Steering Committee to the 2004 SPAR SWG Annual Report
- 3.1. Feedback was received from the *Natura 2000 & Ramsar Steering Committee (N2RSC)* on the recommendations of the 2004 Annual Report, including the Ramsar Review advisory note. All but one of the recommendations were accepted.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/ewd/natura-ramsar-forum/index.htm>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.jncc.gov.uk/species/UKSPA\\_ScientificWG/default.htm](http://www.jncc.gov.uk/species/UKSPA_ScientificWG/default.htm)

- 3.2. Recommendation 2004/1.6.1.5, relating to treatment of re-introduced/re-establishing species, was referred back to the SPAR SWG with a request for a more detailed briefing (see 4.7).
- 3.3. The Ramsar Review advisory note was noted by the N2RSC and the primary recommendation was that further review of the Ramsar network for bird interests should be included in the 2008-2010 review of the SPA network.

#### 4. Progress during 2005

##### 4.1. *Range of measures to achieve desired conservation status*

- 4.1.1. In January 2004, SPAR SWG requested that N2RSC consider the range of measures used to achieve desired conservation status and the contribution that SPA provision makes to this. N2RSC responded by requesting that the SPAR SWG develop its thinking further in a concept note and submit this to the N2RSC in future.
- 4.1.2. The work of the Chough sub-group, which reported in May 2005 (see 4.4.3 below), would inform this concept note and JNCC agreed to take the lead in drafting it in 2006. The Group discussed a number of issues that should be considered.

##### 4.2. *Marine SPAs*

- 4.2.1. As in 2004, a considerable body of work on approaches to the development of SPAs in the marine environment was presented to and discussed by the Group during 2005.
- 4.2.2. JNCC presented a paper outlining a provisional timetable for completion of survey work and advice on marine SPAs, noting dependence on funding. The Group agreed on the value of a strategic approach and also recognised that increased resources might accelerate the timetable. Some members commented that the work was required urgently for ensuring a sustainable approach to development in the marine environment.
- 4.2.3. A paper on prioritisation of seaduck surveys and analytical work was presented by JNCC. The Group was generally supportive of the prioritisation approach, but noted that other areas not listed for survey may require some coverage in future. In response to the JNCC paper, it was agreed that a steer from N2RSC was needed on establishing a coherent network of SPAs in the marine environment and further work done as part of the 2008-2010 network review. A note to the N2RSC will be prepared.
- 4.2.4. JNCC gave a presentation on the results of its three year study of the rafting behaviour of Manx Shearwaters. Around 30 birds at each of three colonies had been radio-tracked; Skomer in 2003, Rum in 2004 and Bardsey in 2005. The majority of birds rafted within 4 km from shore at Skomer, 6 km at Rum and 9 km at Bardsey. Data sufficiency and representativeness of the data were identified as concerns, but it was agreed that the data available were of high quality. However, the Group agreed that the collection of additional data at these colonies was likely to add little to our understanding and that given the expense of collecting more data and the logistics faced at other colonies that a pragmatic approach to boundary selection would be required. The Group agreed with the JNCC proposal that a minimum 4 km distance from shore be used as a generic approach to boundary setting. In addition, the Group agreed that where data demonstrate the use of waters for rafting beyond 4 km that a colony-specific approach could be considered and that, in this respect, the data for Rum and Bardsey were adequate.

4.2.4.1. ***The SPAR SWG confirms to the N2RSC that*** it concurs with the JNCC recommendation that boundary placement for marine extensions to provide protection for rafting Manx Shearwaters around breeding colony SPAs should be at a minimum generic distance of 4km from shore, but also advises that where colony-specific data show use of marine waters beyond this generic distance that a greater extension distance is considered and that, in this respect, the data for Rum and Bardsey are adequate.

4.2.5. Results from aerial surveys of seaducks and divers in the Greater Thames Estuary were presented to the Group by JNCC. The surveys, which were undertaken in 1988/89 and 2001/02-2004/05, showed that an average population of 4,300 Red-throated Divers occurred in the area. No other species occurred in significant numbers and the area did not support a waterbird assemblage in excess of 20,000 individuals. Application of the Marine Classification Criterion (MCC) showed that Red-throated Divers were sufficiently aggregated within the area to warrant consideration of a marine SPA. JNCC noted that divers were also present beyond some of the areas surveyed and that additional survey in those areas was required. Given that the surveys to date had demonstrated a large and aggregated population, with discrete concentration throughout much of the area, the Group agreed that additional survey needs should not delay further consideration of SPA provision in the area.

4.2.5.1. ***The SPAR SWG confirms to the N2RSC that*** it is supportive of the analytical techniques used for the waterbird aerial survey data in the Greater Thames marine area, and agrees with the JNCC conclusion that this area supports a qualifying population of non-breeding Red-throated Divers and should be assessed further for SPA classification.

#### 4.3. *Cropped Habitats*

4.3.1. JNCC circulated species accounts completed as the second phase of the Cropped Habitats Information Project (CHIP). A summary paper by JNCC, based on both phases of the project, was then presented to the Group late in 2005. The Group agreed that the paper needed further development, and to provide comments by the end of 2005. A final JNCC paper will be submitted to the Group in 2006 and conclusions summarised for the N2RSC.

#### 4.4. *Sites for species with data since 1997*

4.4.1. Spotted Crake: in light of the 1999 national survey and new data JNCC presented a draft advice note to the Group, which indicated that the British population may be closed and appears to be in rapid decline. It was agreed that the advice note should be finalised and submitted to N2RSC for consideration in 2006. The review of Spotted Crake undertaken by JNCC & RSPB to underpin the work of the SPAR SWG will be submitted for publication to a journal.

4.4.2. Peregrine: JNCC had drawn up a specification for analysis of the 2002 national survey data and had begun discussions with BTO over data suitability and accessing additional locally held data. JNCC will commission an analysis in 2006, following collation of necessary data.

4.4.3. Chough: The sub-group presented a detailed briefing to the May 2005 meeting that assessed current SPA provision, approaches to boundary definition, and wider countryside measures. The Group agreed that suitable habitats within a 1 km radius of a nest site represented a minimum core foraging area and should be used as a generic approach to defining boundaries for breeding Chough sites. A generic approach was not suitable for Chough outside of the breeding season and area-specific assessments of foraging range should be the basis for boundary definition. The Group agreed that JNCC would revise the sub-group's assessment of the balance between SPA provision and wider countryside

measures for Chough conservation and present this to the N2RSC. Whilst, it was agreed that the SPAR SWG should have a role in advising on UK level conservation needs for the species, a UK forum for Chough action planning was not necessary. The sub-group's work on adequacy of the SPA suite will be developed into a more generic paper on principles for site provision and will be considered by the Group in 2006.

4.4.3.1. ***The SPAR SWG recommends that the N2RSC adopts*** a generic approach to boundary determination for any future SPA designated for breeding Chough. Boundaries should be based on the inclusion of all suitable foraging and nesting habitat that occurs within a 1km radius of a nesting location (termed the minimum core foraging area). In addition, if site-specific data show that areas beyond core areas are also used regularly then these areas should also be considered for inclusion within a site.

4.4.3.2. ***The SPAR SWG recommends that the N2RSC adopts*** a site-specific approach to boundary determination for any future SPA designated for Chough outside of the breeding season. Boundaries should be based on the inclusion of suitable foraging habitat within an area under consideration that is known to be regularly used by birds.

#### 4.5. *Development of a Site Provision Index*

4.5.1. The work of the Chough sub-group included consideration of the completeness of the SPA suite for delivering site-based conservation needs for the species. It was agreed that this work should inform a more general paper on a site provision index that would provide guidance on the level of SPA provision that would be desirable for each species.

4.5.2. JNCC presented an initial briefing on developing a site provision index, which built on principles set out in the 2001 SPA Review. The Group agreed that it would be valuable to conclude this work prior to the 2008-2010 review, so that it could inform that review, and established a sub-group led by JNCC to take this forward. It was agreed that an index should not be deterministic, but should provide contextual guidance.

#### 4.6. *Population Estimates*

4.6.1. JNCC presented an overview of the new APEP (Avian Population Estimates Panel) list of GB and UK population estimates, which will be published in January 2006 and be adopted for statutory purposes soon after, and a simple risk assessment on consequences of changes in estimates with regard to the SPA network.

#### 4.7. *Re-introduced/re-establishing species*

4.7.1. In response to a request for guidance on the treatment of re-introduced/re-establishing species, the N2RSC requested that the SPAR SWG produce a more detailed briefing for its consideration; JNCC agreed to take the lead on this in 2006.

#### 4.8. *2008-2010 SPA & Ramsar Review*

4.8.1. JNCC presented a paper outlining initial thoughts on the possible scope and costs of the 2008-2010 SPA & Ramsar review. The need for review was included in the *Framework for future update of UK SPA network* agreed at Defra's establishment of the Group (see Terms of Reference), and the timing confirmed by Defra in 2004; the review will begin in 2008 and be published in 2010.

4.8.2. The initial proposal is not to repeat the 2001 review (i.e. a full network review), but to build on this by focussing on the work of the SPAR SWG and N2RSC; the Group was

generally supportive of this focus. JNCC agreed to brief the N2RSC on initial discussions and to further develop the scope of the review and present this to the Group in 2006.

#### 4.9. *RSPB IBA/SPA Project*

- 4.9.1. During 2005, the RSPB completed a review of its UK IBA/SPA project and circulated the outcomes to the Group. The RSPB considers there to be significant gaps in SPA coverage in the UK. Outcomes from the project for each country had been submitted to the relevant agency to aid in bilateral discussions and the 2008-2010 review. Generic issues were already under consideration by the SPAR SWG.

## **APPENDIX 1**

### **List of briefing papers presented to the SPAR Scientific Working Group during 2005**

Note: Many of these papers are available from the JNCC website. However, some of the papers presented to the Group were preliminary or draft briefings and most of these will not be published (these are noted).

#### **January 2005**

- Annual Report for 2004
- Update on work programme and timetable for SPAs in the marine environment (draft)
- Developing the UK network of SPAs in the marine environment: immediate priorities for further work (draft)
- Cropped Habitats Information Project: Phase 2 species accounts

#### **May 2005**

- Revision of national population estimates (JNCC PowerPoint presentation)
- Update on survey priorities for seabirds and divers
- Developing the Chough SPA suite: report from the Chough sub-group (draft)
- Site-related conservation: possible development of an index for breeding birds in the UK (preliminary briefing)
- Review of SPA suite for Spotted Crakes: main conclusions (draft)

#### **October 2005**

- Radio-telemetry studies of rafting behaviour in Manx Shearwaters at three UK colonies (JNCC PowerPoint presentation)
- Results from aerial surveys of seabirds and divers in the Greater Thames Estuary (JNCC PowerPoint presentation)
- 2008 SPA & Ramsar (avian) network review: first draft proposal for discussion (draft)
- An assessment of the use of cropped habitats by birds represented in the UK Special Protection Area network (draft)

## APPENDIX 2

### SPAR SWG provisional work programme for 2006

#### **Items for short-term consideration that will be presented to the N2RSC for consideration during 2006 (agreed for attention prior to the 2008-2010 review)**

Marine SPAs: respond to JNCC consultation requests as and when necessary; make recommendations to N2RSC as required

2008-2010 SPA & Ramsar Networks Review: consider more developed JNCC paper on possible scope and costs of the review; make initial report to N2RSC early 2006 and send advice note late 2006/early 2007

Cropped Habitats Information Project (CHIP): complete project and finalise advice to N2RSC

Site provision index sub-group to present a paper on its work, followed by an advice note to the N2RSC

JNCC to present a concept note on the roles and adequacy of the range of measures, including SPAs, implemented in the UK to meet the requirements of the Birds Directive; to be finalised and sent to N2RSC

Treatment of re-introduced/re-establishing populations: JNCC paper to be discussed and advice note sent to N2RSC

Consider and comment to N2RSC on the first Common Standards Monitoring for designated sites report

Spotted Crane: finalise both advice note on treatment under SPA Selection Guidelines and status review

Developing a framework for winter raptor monitoring

#### **Items for development/consideration that will be included in the 2008-2010 review (outcomes will not be sent to N2RSC during 2006)**

Finalise guidance on the treatment of mixed migratory waterbird populations and submit for peer-reviewed publication

Peregrine: JNCC to collate data from the 2002 national survey in a suitable form for analysis, commission analysis and report to the group in 2006

Common Eider: JNCC to report on findings from DNA study of UK populations being undertaken by Glasgow University

White-tailed Eagle: review additional information from the *Sea-eagle Team* on status and consider this in light of guidance on treatment of re-introduced/re-establishing birds

Consultation on JNCC paper on rules for deriving 1% thresholds from national population estimates for site-related purposes

Develop view on treatment of non-breeding, non-estuarine waterbirds, based on the Non-estuarine Waterbird Survey (NEWS), under the SPA Selection Guidelines