

CMS Scientific Council 13, Nairobi, Kenya
Friday 18th November 2005

Lesser White-fronted Goose (*Anser erythropus*): recommendation from the Scientific Council on unresolved issues

As noted in paper ScC.13/ Doc.9, produced for the Scientific Council, a workshop was held in Lammi, Finland, in April 2005 at which participants with a deep interest and involvement in the conservation of the Lesser Whitefront agreed to request the opinion of the Council on a number of issues, which have for some time seriously divided conservationists interested in a better future for this species.

In addition to the Council paper, also needing to be taken into account are the numerous representations that have been received by the CMS Secretariat from interested bodies and individuals as well as an independent review obtained by the CMS Secretariat from a professional population geneticist. (A list of these is given in Annex 1.)

At the 13th Meeting of the Scientific Council, consideration of this issue began with an introduction to the background by the CMS Secretariat. The Technical Officer of the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement then gave more detail of the history of efforts to conserve the species, including the introduction into the wild of birds of captive-bred origin. Further comments were then made by Scientific Councillors, some from the Range States directly involved, others not. In order for the Scientific Council to make progress and attempt to comment meaningfully on the key issues, the Chairman of the Scientific Council requested that the Appointed Councillor for Birds should make a review, concentrating in particular on drawing out the views of Councillors from Range States other than those involved in the intense discussions which have been going on surrounding this bird. Sweden was one of the Range States in the latter category.

The Councillor for Birds spoke to several Councillors, and was approached by others. A small working group assisted with identifying the key issues and determining the possible position of the Scientific Council.

It should be stated from the outset that some difficult and complex issues are involved in the conservation of the species. In some cases, a clear and undisputed scientific answer to a particular question does not appear possible, at least currently. Where such is the case, it has seemed appropriate to take a cautious approach, however always bearing in mind that the passage of time is an important consideration in the conservation of this particular species.

There is no doubt of the genuine intentions of the individuals on all sides of the argument. Indeed, it is the deeply held concern for the conservation of the species that has made for much of the controversy in the case. Nor is the scientific and professional integrity of those involved doubted. However, opinions of those involved do differ, and the Scientific Council is being asked to make decisions among them: this we do in good faith.

Our first conclusion is that it is desirable to have a wide genetic diversity among wild Lesser Whitefronts. We have read the arguments, and taken into consideration the known wintering ranges of the populations, and there appears to be no undisputed answer at present to the question of whether the Fennoscandian population (as represented by the birds breeding in Norway) is genetically distinct from the nearest breeding birds to the east, in northern Russia. Given the uncertainty, we take the cautious approach that there might be a potentially valuable genetic distinction, and that we should not deliberately interfere with it (for instance, by boosting the Fennoscandian population with wild birds from elsewhere), unless or until such interference may become inevitable.

Our second conclusion is that given the small size of the wild Fennoscandian population, if possible, a captive breeding population of birds from this source should be established and maintained as a priority. We recognise that there are risks involved in taking eggs and/or young birds from the wild population, but that careful use of a known surplus (that is, those birds that would have died or been killed in their first winter) may be a practical conservation option.

We consider that every effort should be made to conserve the Fennoscandian birds down their traditional migration routes into south-eastern Europe and the Caspian/Central Asian region. We recognise that this is a major challenge. We endorse the current LIFE project that aims to safeguard the birds and their habitats along the western route. It is our opinion that all appropriate efforts should also be made to conserve the wild populations of the species in its other flyways.

We also consider that doubts do remain about the genetic make-up of the existing free-flying birds, originally introduced into the wild in Fennoscandia, and which winter in the Netherlands. It does seem to us that not all, but a large part, of the scientific community will never be completely satisfied concerning the level of genetic contamination from the Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* and other species, which many will regard as impossible to eliminate. Despite genuine efforts to improve the genetic purity of existing captive flocks, we consider that these flocks are not to be regarded as potential sources for release to the wild.

Given the possibility that the above mentioned free-flying birds, or their descendants, may pose a risk to the genetic make-up of the wild Fennoscandian population, the Scientific Council is of the opinion that these birds should be caught or otherwise removed from the wild. We do not say this lightly, nor underestimate the practical and other difficulties involved. We recommend that a feasibility study be undertaken as a matter of urgency.

We believe that there is nothing against establishing a group in captivity of purebred Lesser Whitefronts from the wild, western Russian stock, and it may well prove valuable to have such a group in the future. However, we do not believe that it is appropriate to release such birds to the wild now or in the immediate future.

For the present, we do not support the introduction of Lesser Whitefronts into flyways where they do not occur naturally. We have borne in mind the powerful argument concerning the improved safety of birds in these flyways, as well as practical considerations, such as current proposals that could quickly be put into effect. However, we consider that modifying the natural behaviour of Lesser Whitefronts in this respect, as well as unknown ecological effects in the chosen new flyways, and other such considerations, make this technique inappropriate until such time as it may become essential, particularly when major disruption or destruction occurs of key components of the natural flyways. We do not believe that to be the case at present.

We give due weight to arguments about the continuing decline of the very small Fennoscandian population, and to the estimates of how long it may continue to be viable, but we are not persuaded that such a fact alone is enough to justify radical action.

We consider that it would be appropriate to re-examine the issues once more in five years.

The conclusions set out above were approved by consensus at the Scientific Council meeting, on Friday 18th November 2005. The Chairman of the Scientific Council undertook to transmit them to those who had raised the matter with the Council.

ATTACHMENT

List of representations that have been received by the CMS Secretariat (1-13):

1. Comments from Dr. Johan H. Mooij on the Scientific Council paper ScC.13/ Doc.9.
2. Comments from Prof. Dr. Juha Merila, Petteri Tolvanen, and Dr. Minna Ruokonen on the Scientific Council paper ScC.13/ Doc.9.
3. Comments from Morten Ekker, Dr. Ingar J. Oien, and Tomas Aarvak on the Scientific Council paper ScC.13/ Doc.9.
4. Information on the conservation genetics of the Lesser White-fronted Goose by Dr. Minna Ruokonen and Anna-Carin Andersson.
5. Ruokonen, M., L. Kvist, H. Tegelstrom & J. Lumme (2000). Goose hybrids, captive breeding and restocking of the Fennoscandian populations of the Lesser White-fronted Goose (*Anser erythropus*). *Conservation Genetics* 1: 277-283.

6. Ruokonen, M., L. Kvist, T. Aarvak, J. Markkola, V. Morozov, I. J. Oien, E. Syroechkovsky Jr., P. Tolvanen & J. Lumme (2004). Population genetic structure and conservation of the Lesser White-fronted Goose (*Anser erythropus*). *Conservation Genetics* 5: 501-512.
7. Ruokonen, M., A-C. Andersson & H. Tegelstrom (manuscript). Using historical captive populations in conservation of currently threatened species. The case of the Lesser White-fronted Goose.
8. Report 2001/2002: Analyses of the captive populations of the Lesser White-fronted Goose, by Dr. Marina V. Kholodova.
9. Review on the genetics of the Fennoscandian population of the Lesser White-fronted Goose, by Dr. Johan H. Mooij in cooperation with Prof. Dr. Allan Baker and Prof. Dr. Michael Wink.
10. A new migration route for the Lesser White-fronted Goose, presentation by Dr. Johan H. Mooij at the workshop in Lammi, Finland, April 2005.
11. Protection of genetic biodiversity – conservation and management units with special reference to the Lesser White-fronted Goose, presentation by Prof. Dr. Juha Merila at the workshop in Lammi, Finland, April 2005.
12. Recommendations for a reintroduction program of Lesser White-fronted Geese *Anser erythropus*: A genetic perspective, information by Prof. Dr. Michael Wink.
13. Comments on the genetic issues related to the new Action Plan for the Lesser White-fronted Goose, independent review by Dr. Robert C. Lacy.