



Released captive bred bird equipped with satellite transmitter, together with three conspecifics, temporarily visiting Minsmere, England in 2014.

Foto: David Fairhurst.

Project Lesser White-fronted Goose

Annual Report 2014

Introduction and reflection

This report aims to illustrate the work being carried out during 2014 by the Swedish Lesser White-fronted Goose (LWfG) Project as part of the implementation of the National Single Species Action Plan (Åtgärdsprogram för fjällgås). The plan is valid until 31 December 2015 and the efforts made and the results achieved will be reviewed prior to an expected revision of the Plan during spring 2016. The Plan is mainly financed by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) within the framework of National Action Plans for Threatened Species, but contributions from foundations and funds are also important.

The following report focus on the work carried out within Sweden in cooperation with countries sharing the LWfG population breeding in Sweden. During 2014, a significant amount of time has been devoted to the revision of the obsolete International Single Species Action Plan (ISSAP). This work has been carried out within AEWa (African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement). Details on this work is not presented in this report.

The population development during 2014 brought increased hope for the population. The high mortality recorded during moult and breeding in 2012 and 2013 was not repeated. The breeding result in 2014 was relatively satisfactory, resulting in at least 11 fledged young. Observations of released birds indicate a high survival rate, but so far it is not possible to estimate the proportion of the released birds that have associated to the wild population.

Surveillance of the wild population

Wintering

LWfG breeding in Sweden spend the winter mainly in the Netherlands. Depending on weather conditions, the geese can choose to stay in Germany and Belgium, and during severe cold, probably also in France. In the Netherlands, two areas are favoured by the geese; Oudeland van Strijen and de Petten, both designated as Natura 2000 sites for the species.

The first two geese arrived at Oudeland van Strijen on 28 September 2013, after which the number increased to 28 birds on 25 October. In early December most birds left Oudeland van Strijen, and on 4 December 30 specimens were found in de Petten. The peak number at the Petten was reached by mid-December, when 37 birds were found. Normally more birds are sighted at de Petten compared to Oudeland van Strijen. According to our Dutch colleagues this is most likely explained by the fact that the birds are more easily counted (shorter distance, lower vegetation) at the first-mentioned site. Observations of colour-ringed birds indicate that the differences in numbers possibly could be explained by the presence of different flocks gathering at de Petten.

In early February 2014 the birds diverged from the traditional pattern and chose to return to Oudeland van Strijen, a trait not recorded previously. The return to this site might have been triggered by disturbances at de Petten area, caused by helicopter traffic, possibly also by repeated visits from White-tailed Eagles. The birds then stayed at Oudeland van Strijen until the beginning of spring migration.

Based on observations made in the two mentioned sites, coupled with knowledge about additional separate individuals, we can assume that the total number of LWfG in the Netherlands during the winter 2013/2014 exceeded 40 specimens.

Spring migration 2014

Normally birds returning from the Netherlands are first recorded in the County of Östergötland. The first sighting in spring 2014, however, was reported not far from Asköviken (County of Västmanland), where a single bird stayed for nearly one month. The first flock arrived at Lake Östen (County of Västergötland), where 4 unringed birds arrived on 6 April. Four days later, another flock of 4 birds was reported from the mouth of River Svartån (County of Östergötland).

On 17 April the total sum of birds reported from Sweden was 33 specimens, divided into 18 at Hudiksvall (County of Hälsingland), 11 in County of Östergötland) and 4 in the surroundings of Umeå (County of Västerbotten). The peak figures for a single site in Sweden was reached on 6 May at Hudiksvall where 26 birds were observed, and at Stornäset Nature Reserve outside Sundsvall (County of Medelpad) on 9 May, where 27 birds were recorded. A conservative estimation of the total number of birds in Sweden during spring migration gives 40-45 individuals.

Breeding and observations in the core area

Within the breeding area, surveys were carried out during two periods: 28-30 June and 2-12 July, respectively. For different reasons, the inventory effort during the breeding season was lower than the year before. During June no LWfG were observed at all. It is normal that significantly lower numbers of birds are seen during the end of June since the birds are generally inconspicuous and the females are incubating. Still the lack of observations clearly indicate another year of low reproduction. On 8 July a flock consisting of 5 adults and at least 1 pullus was seen for a short moment among the willows. Many geese left the area during the second half of June, and already on 20 June the first birds arrived at Hudiksvall to moult.

During the study of released birds 4-7 August, a few observations of wild geese were made within the core area.

Moult

The first unringed geese turned up in Hudiksvall on 20 June. On 4 July the number had increased to 28 specimens, including 5 birds released in 2013. The birds stayed until the autumn migration started.

Autumn migration 2014

By the end of August the number of LWfG in Hudiksvall had increased as a result of incoming birds. On 27 August the number peaked at 37. The last sighting of LWfG in Hudiksvall was made 11 September.



Together with four conspecifics, a bird equipped with a satellite transmitter stayed at Makkevikka outside Trondheim, Norway. Later the birds flew to England, where they became a great attraction. Finally they arrived to Belgium, where they spent the winter. The same birds as on the cover picture. Photo: Frank Grønningsæter.

During the autumn, observations of single birds or small flocks were reported from an unusual high number of sites. To avoid over-estimation of the population size, birds were regarded part of the wild population only if it was clear whether they were ringed or not.

Several interesting observations were made at Lake Östen. During autumn 2014, at least 21 specimens were recorded in the surroundings, some of them staying until 25 December. Among the birds, two clutches consisting of 3 and 7 young, respectively, were recorded. This information, together with other information during the autumn migration, led to the conclusion that at least 43 adult and 11 young birds flew to the wintering quarters. In addition, there are some observations in the Netherlands early in 2015 indicating that the number of young birds might be even somewhat higher.

Luckily, it seems as if the high adult mortality that was recorded during the summers 2012 and 2013 was not repeated during 2014.



The breeding centre at Öster Malma during spring 2014. The photo shows guarding males while the females are sitting on the eggs. All males in the breeding cages chose the same position thereby forming one single line, something that looked almost comical. The male preferred an elevated spot near the place where they met the female when she briefly left the nest. Photo: Swedish LWfG Project.

Breeding and release

Population in captivity 2014

All the birds in the two populations bred in captivity originates from wild birds caught in the breeding areas in northern Russia. During 2014 the two breeding stations were able to use their full capacity. Most pairs having separate breeding cages were successful in producing young. However, at Nordens Ark, heavy rainfall and flooding caused some clutches to fail. Birds at Öster Malma were more successful compared to the previous year, probably depending on the fact that they were more experienced and that facilities in the station had been improved.

Altogether 16 pairs laid eggs, of these 14 produced young. Totally 44 birds were fledged, of which 34 were released in the mountainous area. In total 10 birds, 5 from each station, were kept to be released the following year as 2cy-birds.

Today, the size and costs connected with the breeding are the limiting factors for the production of young, rather than the constitution of the population. Investment in more breeding cages would probably make an annual production of close to 100 fledged birds possible.



Building of release pen in Arjeplog mountains. Photo: Swedish LWfG Project.

Release of birds in 2014

During 2014 birds were only released within the present breeding area. The timing of the release had been discussed thoroughly and the discussions ended by a decision to start after the moult, more exactly on 1 August. The reason to postpone the release was fear for attracting eagles in the area, which might pose a threat to moulting wild adult birds.

In all five release pens were erected in the breeding area. Altogether 54 birds were released; 34 of them 1cy, 20 were 2cy, that is to say born 2013. A total of 5 birds were equipped with satellite transmitters.

During four days (4-7 August), six people visited the Arjeplog mountains to see if the movements of the birds could be documented. In all 5-8 released birds and 2 wild birds were spotted. No birds were seen near the release pens. Birds observed were described as shy, reacting on approaching humans.

Out of a total number of 54 released birds, 38 had been seen during migration or in wintering areas until 17 January 2015. This means that 70% of the birds released have been observed outside the breeding area, which is a high figure compared to previous years. The positive result can partly be explained by the satellite transmitters, which have enabled us to contact local ornithologists for verification. But even if such actions are taken into account, an unusual number of birds have been reported.

The transmitters have worked without problems. All five birds reached the wintering area following different routes, and stayed during the main wintering period in the Netherlands, Germany or Belgium. One of the birds taking a western route could be followed to Norway, England, and finally Belgium. The remaining four crossed Sweden, often in the company of Greylag Geese and Bean Geese.

Thanks to the satellite transmitters and the willingness among observers in all countries concerned to report observations, a lot of valuable information has been obtained. There are indications that the mobility of the birds are high, and they often seem to move from one flock to another.

The high survival rate is very positive and hopefully this will contribute to a significant reinforcement of the wild population. However, if this will come true cannot be confirmed before the summer 2015, or rather in 2016, when the released birds from 2014 are sexually mature.

Other national activities

National seminar

In late autumn, authorities responsible for the conservation of the species and national NGOs were invited to a two-days seminar to discuss the conservation work related to LWfG. In all 17 people participated, representing a wide variety of authorities together with a number of regional ornithological societies. During the first day, the knowledge of today related to LWfG was reviewed, and during the second day a workshop on how to proceed was held. The meeting was characterised by open discussions and a relatively common view on the terms and the direction of the future LWfG conservation work in Sweden.

Efforts to catch wild birds

As part of the cooperation with Dutch and German scientists, two attempts were made during the year to catch LWfG. This work is supported by BirdLife Germany (NABU). In de Petten (the Netherlands), an area frequently used by wintering birds, attempts were made during one week in the end of March. No birds, however, came in the right position for the cannon net. The second attempt was made in Hudiksvall (Sweden) in September. This was also a failure as the birds demonstrated great suspicion and actively avoided the trapping device.

The cooperation continued throughout the year through exchange of experiences, and discussions about common future activities were deepened. 2014 is the third and second last year of the satellite transmitter project, and still no wild LWfG has been equipped with a transmitter, designed to map the flyways of the birds breeding in Sweden.

Human disturbance and the need for restrictions

During certain periods in the summer 2014 human disturbances were recorded within the breeding area almost on a daily basis. The main activity was recreational fishing. Such activities, however, are quite legal as there are no restrictions in access, and fishing is allowed in streamy water between the lakes. The present situation means that fishermen and hikers are free to move around also in the willows around the most important breeding habitat for LWfG. This possibility has unfortunate consequences for the conservation of the species. Therefore, a formal decision about restriction in access within the core breeding area should be given top priority among responsible authorities.

Lesser White-fronted Goose x Barnacle Goose hybrids

All LWfG males that was erroneously imprinted during the period until 1999 when Barnacle Geese were used as foster parents now seem to be dead. The last observation of one of these males came from the Netherlands during late 2013. We know that Barnacle Geese have paired with 5 LWfG males, 3 of which have been taken out by the Project. This chapter in the history of the project has been difficult to deal with, and the killing of the offspring has never been given priority from a conservation point of view. From the aspect of public relation, on the other hand, the existence of hybrids does not promote the project.

First generation hybrids between LWfG and Barnacle Goose have been reported more or less annually since 2002 in Sweden. There has been no verified observation of second generation hybrids. The hybrids have never been seen in the company of LWfG (with the exception of the parent male). The lack of association between hybrids and LWfG is also verified through observations at Hudiksvall, an area used as resting or moulting site by a large part of the birds breeding in Sweden. Hybrids have never been seen in this area, in spite of the fact that the site is situated between two localities frequently visited by hybrids. Therefore it is clear that the hybrids never had contact with, or in any other way have been part of, the LWfG population breeding in Sweden. Still the Swedish LWfG project will try to put down the remaining hybrids, the number of which was estimated to 6-10 individuals in 2014.



The project leader visiting Dutch LWfG experts in the Netherlands. Photo: Swedish LWfG Project.

International cooperation

Visit to the Netherlands

During a few days in autumn 2014 the Swedish LWfG Project leader visited the Netherlands to study the geese in the field, and to participate in a number of meetings. After all, the LWfG breeding in Sweden spend more time in the wintering quarters than in Sweden during a year, and the responsibility for the population therefore is at least as great in the other countries concerned, *i.e.* primarily the Netherlands.

Among large flocks of different species of geese, a total number of about 10 LWfG were seen. From a Swedish perspective, the protected sites in the Netherlands are small and the pressure from human activities is high. At the same time the number of ducks and geese are high. The sites traditionally used by LWfG are well protected and the management seems to be adequate. The Dutch hosts showed great hospitality and the visit offered good opportunities to discuss cooperation, *i.a.* regarding plans to apply for EU LIFE funding. During the visit we had additional experiences regarding the difficulties associated with the catching of wild LWfG.

International work and criticism against the Swedish LWfG Project

The Swedish LWfG Project has been questioned since long by parties in primarily Finland and Norway. Previously we have chosen not to respond to the accusations to avoid a deepening of the conflict. Unfortunately this strategy has turned out to be futile. Rather than reducing the conflict, the criticism in letters and on the Norwegian website (www.piskulka.set) has increased. Unfortunately, many comments have been unfounded and have meant pure slander. For that reason we have found it necessary to reply to the accusations on our own website (<http://jagareforbundet.se/projekt-fjallgas>). Due to the heated debate, particularly during the summer and autumn, we decided to respond to allegations wherever appropriate. This became a time-consuming task, particularly during late 2014 (and early 2015), especially as we decided to use strict scientific arguments in our replies. But this work gave us confidence, as it turned out that the arguments against our line had no or very weak scientific ground. Our collected response was submitted to BirdLife International to serve as background material in the decision on whether the population breeding in Sweden should be included in the European Red List or not.

In our effort to defend ongoing activities, the Project has been supported by different actors, among others our partners in the Netherlands and Germany. The Swedish LWfG Project has also taken part in ongoing efforts within AEWA to revise the International Action Plan (ISSAP) for LWfG. It is our hope that both BirdLife International and AEWA will take account of facts rather than to repeated and boisterous accusations lacking scientific ground.

Funding and support

For activities within the framework of the National Action Plan for the species, the Swedish LWfG Project has been financially supported by the Swedish EPA and the County Administration Boards of Norrbotten and Gävleborg. We have also received generous support from the Swedish Wetland Fund and the Sveriges Vildnad Foundation.

The Swedish Association for Hunting and Wildlife Management and Nordens Ark contribute through the payment of staff, office and other operating cost. The Swedish EPA is responsible for contacts with EU and AEWA. Like previous years, the helicopter transports have been sponsored by Fjällflygarna AB Kjell Johansson. The Sami Parliament has offered access to a mountain cottage, and Hudiksvall Municipality has facilitated our work at Lake Lillfjärden.

The Swedish LWfG Project would like to thank all for all contributions, which have made different activities related to the conservation of the species possible.

We will also thank all the volunteers who have spent time in the field, particularly those working in the mountainous areas, fighting with mosquitos and heavy equipment, but also all those who has given us invaluable information along the migration route and in the wintering areas. Special thanks goes to the ornithologists in Hudiksvall – especially Lars Göran Lindström – and the observers at Hjälstaviken, who all have given us valuable information and support during our field activities.

Our German and Dutch colleagues have been very active and have as usual made a lot of efforts to collect information and assisted in the field work, all in the spirit of future common projects.

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