

Why are Lesser White-fronted geese from Sweden shot in Norway?

The decision by the Norwegian Environment Agency to kill a second Lesser White-fronted Goose (LWfG) from the Swedish captive bred population has caused great attention. To kill a globally threatened bird species, which also is subject of extensive conservation measures in a number of countries, is obviously extremely controversial but fortunately unique. The remarkable decision taken by the Environment Agency ought to be based on well-founded and scientific arguments, but we have not been able to find any such basic data. BirdLife Norway, however, on its webpage, has made an effort to explain the consideration of the authority and how important it was to kill an additional Lesser White-front. Unfortunately there is nothing in this text that has a solid scientific base or gives an explanation from conservation biology point of view. Instead it means another attempt to blacken the conservation work being done in Sweden.

Since long BirdLife Norway has orchestrated a hard, almost spiteful, line against Swedish Lesser White-fronts in general and the Swedish LWfG Project in particular. As usual BirdLife Norway does not hesitate to present arguments and allegations without any attempt to verify them. The latest document found on the website, is presented as a “scientific” text and we suspect that these are the arguments that have made the Norwegian authority to take the decision to kill Lesser White-fronts. In this context, references to literature normally are attached, thus giving the reader an opportunity to scrutinize the sources. It is not a coincidence that this document lacks such references.

Rather than responding to the document in a similar manner we would like to offer you as a reader an opportunity to establish an opinion about the ongoing conflict. So far, the Swedish LWfG Project has chosen not to criticize the work being done in Norway. We hope that BirdLife Norway is successful in its efforts and that both countries succeed in saving the threatened species. In a few sentences below we have tried to summarize some points to facilitate for the reader and critically review what is said in the lengthy Norwegian document. We have also included references where the text concerns scientific issues.

1. *It is not natural for Lesser white-fronts in Fennoscandia to spend the winter in Germany and the Netherlands and the Swedish birds constitute a threat to the Fennoscandian populations' way of life.*

We have looked in scientific data-bases for references related to the migration route of the Lesser White-fronts in the Nordic region. We can find 4 papers¹⁻⁴ in all, which describe hundreds of observations in Western Europe before the Swedish LWfG Project started. If ever there was a flyway of importance in Western Europe is difficult to say⁵, but no one can claim that it is unnatural for Lesser White-fronts to spend the winter in the Netherlands and Germany. Contrary to the Norwegian opinion, the question of whether the western migration route is a natural one or not is not regarded an overriding issue internationally and spontaneous broad-scale changes have been observed in goose migrations across Europe⁵.

2. *In the document it is said that there is no scientific basis to say that the bird that was shot could have become a resource for the Norwegian subpopulation.* But the released birds in

Sweden originates from wild-caught Lesser White-fronts from the population breeding in North-western Russia. Through the mixing of Russian males and Norwegian females valuable genes have been added, which have improved the genetic variation of the Norwegian subpopulation⁶. The paper describing this condition also states that *Therefore maintenance of genetic variability is crucial goal in conservation biology*". One of the co-authors, Tomas Aarvak, is active in the Norwegian LWfG project. If the individual that was shot had mated a Norwegian bird, this would have meant an important genetic contribution, quite in line with international recommendations⁷.

3. *The Norwegian document claims that the Swedish Hunters Association always has been the sole responsible organization, which is unfair to the involvement made by previous and present partners. During many years, WWF Sweden had a central role in the project and today Nordens Ark is an equivalent partner in the project. Since 2010 the project is part of the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency's work to save threatened species, and running with necessary permits according to the National Action Plan for LWfG⁸ valid 2011-2015.*
4. *In the Norwegian document the Swedish project is also blamed for violating international agreements. We assume that reference is made to the International Action Plan (ISSAP) under AEWA. In its old version, valid from 2008 and now being revised, the genetic make-up of the old population in captivity (now dismantled) and the released birds were mentioned as a potential threat. This has nothing to do with the shot bird as this individual comes from the new captive bred population founded on wild-caught Russian birds.*
5. *The genetic make-up characterizing the old dismantled breeding population in captivity is frequently mentioned in the document and the released birds are described as hybrids. But this population was dismantled during 2000 following the discovery that some of the birds carried genes from Greater White-fronted Goose⁹. According to the Swedish Action Plan⁸, it was calculated that 5-10% of the birds released in Sweden until 1999 might be carrying genes from Greater White-fronted Goose. The criticism delivered at that time has been an important element in the activities of the Swedish Project and considerable efforts have been made to come to grips with the problem. No genetic analyses have been made on the wild LWfG population breeding in Sweden. To use genetic shortages existing in a captive bred population dismantled 15 years ago to explain why a bird from another captive bred population, used today, has to be killed, is remarkable.*
6. *The existence of hybrids between Lesser White-fronts and Barnacle Geese is given great attention in the Norwegian document. The hybridization is described as extensive. During 2014 the number of such hybrids still in life was estimated to 6-10 birds. None of these birds have been seen to follow Lesser White-fronts, but the mother species Barnacle Goose. Following discussions with *i.a.* BirdLife Sweden, we have previously decided to kill as many of the birds still alive in 2014 to avoid being criticized *e.g.* by BirdLife Norway. We find it difficult to understand the rationale behind making reference to these hybrids as an excuse for killing the actual bird.*

7. *In the Norwegian document it is claimed that the number of wintering Lesser white-fronts in Sweden and Denmark has increased, and that this is explained by the increased number of released birds.* We ask ourselves where figures are found that can verify an increased number of birds wintering in these countries. Besides, the majority of Lesser White-fronts observed in Sweden (Scania) during the winter are unringed, indicating that the birds are born in a wild population (Russia, Norway, Sweden).
8. It is also mentioned that Lesser White-fronts have started to breed in the Netherlands, which is true. This has, however, nothing to do with the Swedish project. Lesser White-fronts, similar to species like Egyptian Goose, Red-breasted Goose, Greater White-fronted Goose, and Ruddy Shelduck are breeding in the wild in the Netherlands¹⁰ after having escaped from zoos or bird farms. *It is also mentioned that Swedish Lesser White-fronts are breeding on offshore Islands,* which probably refers to the fact that one (1) pair was breeding in the archipelago off Medelpad during 2006. No other breeding outside Lapland is known.
9. *The Norwegian document has taken great efforts to criticize BirdLife Sweden as this organization has questioned the killing of the Lesser White-front.* BirdLife Sweden does not take an active role in our project and has to speak for itself. We can, however, establish that BirdLife Sweden is not the only BirdLife partner challenging the reason for the killing. Furthermore, the Swedish subpopulation is included in the European Red List recently published by BirdLife International for the European Communities¹¹, a document, which in contrast to Birdlife Norway, does not describe the Swedish subpopulation as a threat (http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/userfiles/file/Species/erlob/summarypdfs/22679886_anser_erythropus.pdf)
10. *In the Norwegian document all conservation activities related to Lesser White-fronts in Sweden are rejected ("In reality, Sweden today is not contributing to conservation work on Lesser White-fronted Geese").* By claiming this, Swedish authorities (including the National Action Plan), different organizations participating in the conservation of the species, as well as all voluntary contributors are being not only ignored but dismissed. This is a clear insult against many years of hard work by the LWfG Project in Sweden and others, carried out to save the species in Sweden, and starting long before corresponding efforts started in Norway. Even by Norwegian standards, this statement is remarkable.
11. The Norwegian document ends by revealing a real sensation: *"A few pairs for the wild Fennoscandian population probably breed in northern Sweden, and we would gladly cooperate together with Swedish colleagues to safeguard the wild Lesser White-fronts, and hope that this might one day be achieved"*. If the information about breeding Lesser white-fronts in Sweden is correct this is news to the Swedish Project, as well as to authorities and ornithologists in the country. Information on breeding sites should be reported as soon as possible, so that these sites could be protected and the birds be subject to conservation measures. Keeping such information undisclosed threatens the conservation work and is hardly an invitation to future cooperation.

We cannot find any scientific or conservation biology data in the Norwegian document that supports the killing of the Lesser White-fronted goose. Furthermore, it has become evident that BirdLife Norway's position implies that the Swedish LWfG population has no value at all and should be eradicated, whereas all resources should be directed to the work being done in Norway. This is the only logical conclusion and consequence based on the argumentation presented by the organization, but this question remains unanswered by BirdLife Norway.

We are totally in agreement with one message found in the Norwegian document – the conflict between the conservation work in Sweden and Norway takes away focus from real problems and constitutes an extra burden upon the task. Still the problem is easily solved! It is true that we work along different lines to save the Lesser White-fronted Goose from disappearing from our region. We do respect and not oppose to the work being done in Norway. We only wish the same respect for our project and the Swedish Lesser White-fronts be shown in return.

References

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