

European Bird Census Council: Chairmans's report to the 2022 Annual General Meeting



Presented by EBCC Chair, Mark Eaton, on 6th April 2022 in Lucerne, Switzerland

This report gives an overview on EBCC activities over the three years since our last conference, before giving news of a couple of developments intended to build capacity in the EBCC and across its network. I should first start by thanking those Board members and observers who have helped me assemble this report.

Furthermore, I should thank all the board members, observers, and those who work on our projects for the immense effort they have made in the last three years to enable the activities of the EBCC – it truly is a monumental collective effort, together with the support with all of you, all those in the EBCC network. The last two years have been trying, with difficult circumstances for us all personally, as well as having to learn new ways of working together through the pandemic. Despite this, the work of the EBCC has continued and even flourished. The board has remained as it was at the end of our conference in Evora three years ago: myself, Verena Keller, Dawn Balmer, Chris van Tournhout, Henning Heldberg, Aleksi Lehikoinen, Jean-Yves Pacquet, Danae Portolou, Ainars Aunins and Mikhail Kalykin. In addition an important role is played by the Observers to the Board – Gabriel Gargallo, Alena Klavnova, Sergi Herrando, Szabolcs Nagy, Anna Staneva and Petr Voricek.

The board meeting on Monday 4th April was the first we have held physically together since autumn 2019, but we have continued with meetings every six months via zoom, and begun holding short meetings in the three month intervals between. We have also held two AGMs via zoom, the first time we have opened up attendance to AGMs between conferences, and we will continue to do so – in addition, a recording of the 2022 AGM will be made available online.

I will start by reporting on progress with the EBCC's three main projects: Pan-European Common Bird Monitoring, EuroBirdPortal, and European Breeding Bird Atlas 2.

Pan-European Common Bird Monitoring (with thanks to Alena Klavnova for this report)

Over the last three, years the PECBMS team have been busy with the data revision, development and implementation of the new programs in R and online tools for data delivery and checks. They have made many innovations to the tools and dataset in this period, which led to improved supranational species indices and indicators, and speeded up the process of data gathering, data control and calculations.

Since 2020 the project has been covered by an EC tender called "Technical and scientific support in relation to the delivery and development of wild bird indicators for the EU", led by the Czech Society for Ornithology with the RSPB, BirdLife Europe, Catalan Institute for Ornithology (ICO), and University of East Anglia (UEA) as the subcontractors.

The population trends and indices of 170 common European bird species and common bird indicators have been published annually. Since 2019, there have been several improvements in presentation, for example the indicators are provided as a smoothed line with shaded 95% confidence limits. In the 2020 update, for the first time, the indicators for the year 2018 were estimated using the moving average to save time to allow for the general data set revision, which enabled us to implement new tools (RTRIM-shell, RSWAN), revise the database, and finally to improve data quality controls and speed up all the processes needed for the production of species trends and indicators in the next years. In the last, 2021 update, we included two new monitoring schemes' data from Croatia and Flanders (Belgium as a country is completely covered by three regional schemes: Brussels, Wallonia and Flanders), so the outputs were based on data covering 40 years from 29 countries including 26 EU member states – that's all but Malta.

Since the last physical workshop at our last conference in Evora, online webinars have been run for the coordinators, and many AGM attendees will have attended the workshop earlier this week. There is also a new PECBMS Forum on Slack to coordinators as a tool for fast communication and advice.

The PECBMS site-level database, which consists of annual bird abundances at georeferenced census sites from 31 monitoring schemes (29 European countries), has been revised. So far, it contains information from 25,666 locations and 497 species. The update of the site-level data has been performed in parallel with the development of the site-level data online tool, which allows for more efficient data checks and management, and communication with national coordinators.

Of course, communication is important, and so we update the network with regular newsletters and web articles, as well as news published via social networks. From 2020 onwards PECBMS has had its own logo.

The PECBMS data was used in 18 scientific papers published in respected peer-reviewed journals. Among them, in March 2021, the PECBMS network, comprising sixty-six European scientists, published a landmark data paper describing the methods, outputs and their use in the research and conservation in *Scientific Data*. In addition, the database containing supra-national and national population indices is publicly available at the Zenodo repository.

In 2020 we started to create a project, International Census Plots, which aims to develop common bird monitoring schemes in southern and eastern European countries which currently don't have capacity for full scale national schemes, but can contribute to a regional scheme. Based on the experience from Serbia in the pilot year 2021, we invited Moldova and Montenegro to participate and we plan to develop the approach further.

There are a range of other activities fulfilled by the team – meeting with the project's stakeholders on regular basis and provide answers and advice upon request; assisting DG Environment with involving the farmland bird indicator in the new EU nature restoration law preparation; participating in a UK NERC project aiming to advance the understanding of stability within and among ecosystems and across ecological scales; delivering Turtle dove indices and trends for different European flyways based on the PECBMS data to an international project.

EuroBirdPortal (with thanks to Gabriel Gargallo for this report)

During the last three years the EuroBirdPortal (EBP) project has continued to grow and develop towards its two main aims of 1) describing large-scale spatiotemporal patterns of bird distributions (seasonal distributional changes, migratory patterns, phenology) and their changes over time, and 2) improving the value of online data gathering portals by increasing the relevance and interest of the data collected, promoting standardisation and best practices, and improving cooperation amongst birdwatchers and organisations.

Russia and Iceland joined the partnership and started to submit data in 2021. Currently, the EBP has partners from 34 different countries, including all 27 EU countries except Malta (99.9% of the EU), with 21 online systems contributing.

Three EBP general meetings have taken place since 2019. The first meeting was held in Barcelona in March 2020, just days before the COVID lockdowns started, and the last two ones have been organized in online format.

Currently, 16 out of the 21 online systems submitting data to the EBP are doing so automatically on a daily basis. In terms of total volume of data, this means 99.5% of all the data collected by the EBP is submitted automatically. All in all, the portals contributing to the EBP have collected 472 million bird records between 2010 and 2021, attaining a new historic mark in 2021, when more than 60 million bird records were collected in a single year. Collection of more structured data has also improved significantly and, currently, about one third of the whole data is comprised in complete or fixed lists. In fact, the overall quantity of data collected this way has been doubled since 2016. Very importantly, Sweden started to collect complete lists in 2019. A big step forward, as the lack of complete lists in the very far north of Europe was a considerable handicap.

In June 2020 the live EBP viewer (launched in April 2019) was improved in order to allow easy comparison of the most recent bird occurrence patterns with those that took place one year ago. To do so, the user now can compare the distribution patterns of "last 52 weeks" (i.e. most recent one year of data) with the "Previous last 52 weeks" (i.e. the previous year data).

To fulfil European Food and Safety Authority (EFSA) needs (see below), in 2021 32 new species were added to the EBP data flow, increasing from 105 to 137 the total number of species available in the central database and the EBP viewer. The live EBP viewer has attracted the attention of the general public since its release in spring 2019. Excluding the viewers of EBP viewer's maps embedded in external websites, the site counted with 33,377 unique users in 2020 and 38,248 in 2021 (an increase of 15%).

After the completion of the LIFE EBP project in spring 2019, the bulk of the EBP work has been funded by EFSA in the context of avian influenza surveillance in Europe. Additional funding has been provided by the Swiss Ornithological Institute, who has been giving continued support to the project since its inception.

Since 2019, on an annual basis, the EBP provides bird occurrence and observation effort data for the 50 bird species targeted by EFSA in relation to avian influenza surveillance. In 2020 two contracts were signed with them to produce a new version of the EURING Migration Mapping Tool, which was

publicly launched yesterday evening and displays distribution and connectivity patterns of the 50 EFSA Avian Influenza surveillance target bird species. The distribution data is based on the information provided by the EBP while the connectivity information is based on the ring recovery data stored in the EURING databank. The MMT includes two EBP data layers, one based on the last year of data, the other showing the last five years – both are updated weekly. If you haven't looked at it already, please do so, it's another amazing resource.

In summer 2021 a third 12 month contract was signed with EFSA in order to develop a proof of concept of an early warning system for avian influenza in the Europe, again based on EBP and EURING data. The work is developed jointly with EURING and Ausvet, a global consultancy specialized in veterinary epidemiology.

European Breeding Bird Atlas 2 (with thanks to Sergi Herrando, Petr Voricsek and Verena Keller for this report)

Since our last conference in 2019, the focus for the EBBA2 project has been on analysing and interpreting all the data provided by national coordinators in previous years, publishing the EBBA2 book, and then producing the new EBBA2 website a year after that.

During 2019, work on EBBA2 focused on finalising the databases and production of the species accounts and of the general chapters for the book. Further data provision, then checks and improvements resulted in a finalised 50-km dataset, and the final modelled maps were run in summer. A total of 348 authors contributed texts for 556 species accounts, and a total of 46 artists provided original artwork to illustrate the species accounts in the book. The final editing of these accounts by the coordination team took place in December in collaboration with an external language editor.

During 2020, work was focussed on the book publication. All material for the book, i.e. maps, texts, illustrations by artists, graphs for general chapters and photographs was provided to the publisher, Lynx edicions, by end of March 2020. Layout work at Lynx edicions started later than planned and book production was affected by circumstance related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite these difficulties, the publisher provided the first proofs for the species accounts at the end of July. Thanks to the coordinated effort of the EBBA2 coordination team and the layout team at Lynx from August to October, it was possible to keep to the time plan and printing started at the beginning of November. The book was launched on 3 December at an online event streamed from Barcelona, Prague and Sempach. Book sales exceeded the expectation of the publisher. In total, 7500 books have been sold so far. *The European Breeding Bird Atlas 2: Distribution, Abundance and Change* won the British Birds and the British Trust for Ornithology award for Best Bird Book of the Year 2021. I think we can all agree that it was one of the pinnacles of EBCC achievement.

During 2021, work was mainly focussed on the preparation of the new EBBA2 website (www.ebba2.info), a complement to the EBBA2 book that which was finally published in early 2022. The concept for online publication of the maps was prepared and discussed with the Atlas Steering

Committee in early 2021 and various tasks were implemented from then on. The new website was ready for last tests by mid-December and was launched on 7 February 2022.

There were multiple other tasks related to EBBA2 over the last three years, such as providing technical and scientific support to researchers, conservationists and policy makers. EBBA2 research priorities were also developed.

The core activities were supported by the communication activities incl. publication of articles at (now old) web site, promotion via social media, news in the EBCC Newsletter and a webinar for BirdLife partners in Europe. Supporting materials were provided to the national coordinators to assist them with the communication at national level.

Much of the work in the latter period of the project was supported by funding from the MAVA Foundation, but in addition the species sponsorship scheme raised nearly 103 K Euro for EBBA2, funds were also provided by some artists contributing to the book, who sold their paintings and shared their income. There was also massive support from project partners, not least the Swiss Ornithological Institute.

Additional activities

I am sure you will agree that there has been outstanding progress and achievement across all three of the EBCC's major projects. Sometimes it is nice to receive external recognition of your work, and it is notable that in the last three years there have been three BTO Marsh Awards in recognition of work on EBCC projects. One was to a project – EBP received the Marsh Award for Innovation in Ornithology in 2019. And two individuals, Petr Voricek and Verena Keller, have received well-deserved Marsh Awards for International Ornithology, related to their work on PECBMS and EBBA2.

Delegates

Of course, the EBCC is far more than simply its projects – it is a community, a network. Henning Heldberg, our Delegate officer, will report on our network of delegates separately, but will summarise that with 89 national delegates representing 47 countries across Europe, it is in good health – and I am pleased to see so many delegates in attendance at the AGM.

Communication

Communication is a vital component of maintaining a healthy, functioning community, and the EBCC is increasingly active using a wide range of tools.

We produce a quarterly newsletter full of news about EBCC projects, and activities, events, projects and publications from right across the EBCC network. Please do let Alena Klavnova know if you have got any items you want including in the newsletter.

In addition, we are active on social media, with facebook accounts for both EBBA2 and the EBCC – we are likely to migrate those to a single account soon. We also have twitter accounts for EBBA2 and the EBCC.

And, of course, we were very busy preparing for the 2022 conference, although if truth be told the local organising committee, superbly led by Peter Knaus and with Verena Keller acting as the link to the EBCC board, has needed little help from us. We have, of course, created the scientific programme, ably led by Jean-Yves Paquet and helped by the superb quality of the submissions received and the willingness of a range of fantastic plenary speakers to attend.

Bird Census News

The editorial team (led by Aleksí with help from Henning, Jean-Yves and myself) managed to get 20 papers published. We are very thankful to Olga Voltzit for her excellent lay-out work and the artist Evgeniy Koblik for the free use of the bird drawings. Since the last conference, three volumes of Bird Census News have been published, in four issues. Volume 32 was a special issue about migration counts in Europe. In 2020 onwards two new series of articles have been added to BCN: i) introductions of members of the EBCC board and observers and ii) examples of online portals of national monitoring schemes.

Please do consider BCN for publications, and promote our issues when they are published. We intend some themed issues in the future – such as on the monitoring of taxa other than birds which happens alongside bird monitoring programmes – for which we may be appealing for contributions.

Further developments

I hope you will agree that the EBCC has achieved remarkable things in the last few years. This has been possible through the massive efforts of thousands of volunteers, and the ornithologists, scientists and conservationists who coordinate their efforts, and then work with our projects. From the EBCC's perspective, we have achieved a huge amount with often periodic and insecure funding for projects, and with no funding for what we might call "core" activities, and the board often struggle to find time for EBCC duties against the calls of their other work. Imagine what we could do with some core funding!

At present – as you will hear from our Treasurer, Chris van Turnhout, shortly, thanks largely to atlas sales EBCC finances are currently healthy. So we intend to take an exciting step forward, in two directions.

An EBCC Secretariat

Firstly, we intend to establish a central permanent EBCC Secretariat intended to assist with core duties. I am sure that it will come as no surprise to you that this will be based in the Czech Society for Ornithology in Prague – CSO have proved a crucial partner in EBCC work for many years. Equally, you

may not be surprised to hear that Petr Voricek and Alena Klavnova will carry out the duties of the Secretariat, starting this spring. The secretariat will work on tasks such as

- Organisational and logistical tasks, including contributing to conference organisation and to the organisation of dedicated meetings.
- Communications to external audiences, for example through the website, e-newsletter, social media, meetings, conferences.
- Assisting with the production of BCN.
- Fundraising for the EBCC core costs and assisting with fundraising for priority programmes.
- Coordinating EBCC responses to research opportunities/funding calls.
- Developing capacity across the EBCC network (supporting new projects, training, administering small grants fund).
- Maintaining and developing partnership, assisting the Delegate Officer.
- Maintaining and building contacts with other organisations, EU, etc.
- Supporting the Board officers – Chair, vice-Chair, Secretary and Treasurer – with tasks as required.

Some of these tasks are covered already by the PECBMS tender, but to deliver all these work areas requires a considerable additional investment. We are committing to this using EBCC resources, but also helped by a very generous contribution of 10,000 francs from the Swiss Ornithological Institute. But we do not have resources to maintain funding of the secretariat indefinitely – indeed, not beyond a year or so. A crucial task of the secretariat will be to secure ongoing funding to support its activities, enable that resourcing to replace that from the EBCC's core funds.

As part of that we will be asking organisations across the EBCC network to consider whether they can contribute towards the Secretariat. We believe that the EBCC delivers huge value in terms of monitoring, of science, of policy-relevant outputs, in providing data to enable others to do the same, and nurturing and supporting similar activities at a national scale. We would like all delegates to consider whether their organisations are in a position to help us with this, if only in a small way. Of course, we appreciate that for many this will not be possible, and we do not intend to introduce any requirement for this – there will not be EBCC subscriptions. But we think that some of the larger, better-financed organisations within our network might see the logic and benefits in supporting us in this. There will be a more formal request on this in due course.

Small Grant Fund

The EBCC has long worked to support the development of monitoring, particularly in eastern and southeastern Europe. We wish to take a step forward in this respect by financing national projects to improve monitoring, particularly in low- and middle-income countries in Europe, through the development of a Small Grant Fund able to give targeted, and limited, support. This could support things such as start-up funding for new monitoring schemes, which will include participation in the International Census Plots as I mentioned earlier, emergency funding to fill gaps in monitoring schemes, national atlases, start-up funding for online tools or capacity-building activities (e.g. to increase the number of skilled participants). The EBCC has been working on a full development of the scheme including raising the finances for the fund, and we will soon unveil how those from across the network can apply for grants. As with the Secretariat, at present we have limited resources to give

grants, so we will be looking for funding sources – again, it would be great to hear from organisations across the EBCC network looking to contribute to this.

I hope you will agree with us that these are two exciting but necessary steps in the evolution of the EBCC. We have achieved great things in recent years, and feel that the EBCC has gathered real momentum. Obviously the publication of the atlas was a real high point, but we have much to do with the data resource that the atlas has given us, and to build on the development of capacity and knowledge across many countries that atlas enabled. And PECBMS continues to strengthen, and EBP is achieving amazing things... we want to maintain that momentum, and believe now is the time to take that step forward, particularly with the Secretariat, so the EBCC continues to push forward, delivering ground-breaking monitoring and research to support the conservation of birds, biodiversity and the wider environment, and in doing so enriching the lives of humans right across Europe.

Dr Mark Eaton, 6th April 2022