

Minutes of the 6th Conference of European Rarities Committees 26 - 30 September 2001 on Hel Peninsula, Poland

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Participants



AERC: Tom Conzemius, Gabor Magyar, Marnix Vandegehuchte; Belarus: Alexandre E. Vintchevski; Belgium: Gunter De Smet, René-Marie Lafontaine; Cyprus: Jeff Gordon; Czech Republic: Martin Vavrik; Denmark: Troels Eske Ortvad; Finland: Annika Forsten, Antero Lindholm, Visa Rauste; France: Philippe Dubois, Marc Duquet; Germany: Christine Barthel, Peter H. Barthel; Great Britain: Tony Marr, Andy Stoddart; Hungary: Janos Olah jr., András Schmidt; Italy: Andrea Corso, Ottavio Janni; Lithuania: Zydrunas Preiksa; Luxembourg: Patric Lorgé; Poland: Jan Lontkowski, Przemek Chylarecki, Tadeusz Stawarczyk; Romania: Janos Botond Kiss, Laszlo Szabo, Spain: Ricard Gutiérrez; Ukraine: Igor Gorban, Oleksandr Ruchko; Sweden: Per Alström (lecturer), Christian Cederroth, Cecilia Johansson; Switzerland: Lionel Maumary

Format

Delegates arrived at the Pelican Hotel in Jurata, Hel Peninsula, by Wednesday evening 26 September. Thursday all day and Saturday all day were taken up by indoor conference sessions; Friday was a field day birding around the Gulf of Gdansk; and Friday and Saturday evenings included presentations by Per Alström on identification of *flava* and *alba* wagtails from his forthcoming book (expected in 2002). Delegates left for home after breakfast on Sunday morning 30th. The organisation was excellently handled by Polish representatives Jan Lontkowski and

Tadeusz Stawarczyk.

AERC Home-page

<http://www.birding.yucom.be/AERC/> or <http://mypage.org/AERC>

e-mail AERC@yucom.be

The AERC Website is the link between AERC and birdwatchers. Its main aim is the promotion of submitting records to the national Rarities Committees. The information on the AERC Homepage enables every birder travelling in Europe to have instant access to addresses of national Rarities Committees and national lists of birds to be reported. There was a lengthy discussion on the effectiveness of the website, and agreement that more stimulating pages were needed to get the website more widely known within the birding community.

The following topics will be included on our homepage:

- summaries of every published Rarities report
- a library of reference pictures of European rarities, mainly on difficult species (e.g. orange-billed terns) (Gunter de Smet)
- a library of identification papers published in Europe (starting with the year 2001 and going back to 1995 (1994 was the last year included in the reference guide by Adolfsson & Cherrug, 1995). The references should include the original title, language, english title, number of pages and pictures, information if english summary and captions available. First results should be found on the homepage within the next weeks. (Patric Lorgé, Gabor Magyar & Marnix Vandegehuchte)
- pictures of unidentified birds in Europe submitted by national Rarities Committee and set on the web with full description.

A promotion campaign should be started via the european mailing lists and journals.

EUROPEAN LIST

The complete list including data of all countries will be published on the AERC homepage by december 31st 2001. The list will be available via a database with search functions.

There followed a long discussion about which systematic should be used for the European List. Three options were proposed: staying with Voous, adopting the Sibley, Ahlquist & Monroe systematics or using state of the art systematics based on Wetmore and all published DNA studies up to 31.12.2001 (*Checklist of the Birds of Europe* proposed by Andreas Helbig, presented at the meeting). No agreement could be found, as several countries opted for stability whereas others prefer to adopt the new scientific evidence now at the turn of the millennium. The decision was made to pass the Helbig list to the TAC and to ask for their advice. The conclusions were that it was far too early to reach agreement on the Helbig List there and then, but important to await formal publication, peer review and the opinions of the various national taxonomic committees in due course.

AERC Guidelines

Already before the meeting a discussion about the different handling of category D and E by several European countries started on the AERC mailing list. In the AERC guidelines the definition of category D and E are as follows:

D - every other species unless it is almost certainly a genuine vagrant (in which case it enters

Cat. A), or almost certainly an escape from captivity (Cat. E).

E - escapes from captivity

Category D should always be published in the annual report, even if it is not a part of the national list. Category E should be kept on file and published to help other European countries to evaluate the possibilities of escapes.

It is obvious that different countries are using these categories in a different way.

The delegates agreed on the following approach to category D and E:

- Keep category D as small as possible. After evaluation of the occurrence of a species in the different European countries (information on trade and captivity stocks can be asked via the AERC mailing list), keep only these birds in category D which are still doubtful. Certain **and** almost certain escapes are put in category E.
- Thus the new definition of category E in the AERC Guidelines will be: **Certain and almost certain** escapes from captivity
- publish category D birds in the annual report (appendix) and list them within your national list marked D (not counted)
- make birders aware that these birds may become one day category A birds.

SYSTEMATICS AND TAXONOMY

The Conference considered a Report from its four-member TAC dated September 2001. This included a list of some 13 species splits released on the AERC website since the formation of the TAC in 1997. No member of the TAC was present. Delegates expressed disappointment at the slow rate of progress in the four years since the TAC's formation, pointing out that most of the splits listed had been made several years ago, with very few agreed since the last Conference two years ago. This was not helping the various rarities committees in the preparation and maintenance of their national lists, when they turned to the AERC for advice.

It had been apparent for some time that the TAC had been established without terms of reference, programme, reporting procedures or accountability, the absence of which were considered to have contributed to the current unsatisfactory situation. A joint BOURC/BBRC proposal of measures to overcome these problems was discussed in detail.

The following Terms of Reference for the TAC were agreed, to take effect immediately:

- Membership to comprise one member from each country which currently has its own taxonomic committee (Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden)
- Individual's appointments to be for two years, renewable by a majority agreement at the next AERC Conference
- An independent Chairman to be elected by AERC, ideally from a different country, and preferably not a taxonomist, also to serve for a two year period, renewable by a majority agreement at the next AERC Conference
- The Chairman to co-ordinate activities by the member countries, and to request recommendations from all at six-monthly intervals (1 January and 1 July each year)
- TAC Chairman to be non-voting on taxonomic recommendations
- Taxonomic recommendations best to be made unanimously by the TAC; if 2 members do not agree, the final recommendation will be postponed, if one member does not agree, the chairman can make a decision.
- Announcements, usually in the form of press releases, to include a brief summary of the reasons for any split, with an indication of where and when a full paper is likely to be

published; and where appropriate, to include statements about species where insufficient evidence exists for a split at the current time

- The Chairman to circulate draft announcements of recommendations to all AERC members for comment before publication, allowing a period of one month for responses and presentation of new or unpublished scientific evidence.

Gunter De Smet (Belgium) was elected as TAC Chairman by a considerable majority.

The members of the TAC appointed by their national Record Committee are:

- France : Pierre-André Crochet
- Germany : Andreas Helbig
- Great Britain : Martin Collinson
- The Netherlands : to be decided in December
- Sweden : Björn Anderson

The following points were also agreed:

- TAC Chairman to obtain a copy of the species guidelines when agreed by the existing four TAC members and circulate these to each taxonomic committee.
- TAC Chairman to prepare a new working list of species for consideration, based on the German list by Andreas Helbig.

The Redpoll problem

Several countries were not happy with the split of the Redpoll complex into *C.flammea* and *C.cabaret*. New, unpublished scientific evidence from Poland, Switzerland, Finland and Sweden should be added to the Redpoll file for reconsideration by the TAC.

A Taxon List: Species or forms?

There was a spirited discussion, led by Ricard Gutiérrez (Spain) on the merits of creating European and national bird lists using either species and subspecies, or forms or taxa. Opinions were divided. A view expressed was that the AERC should be the link between science and birdwatchers, and thus any list which includes forms which are both recognisable in the field and scientifically accepted should be encouraged. References were made to the subspecies shown in *The Handbook of British Birds* and the forms listed by *Birding World*. No final conclusions were reached, but several countries (Spain, France, Italy, Switzerland and Great Britain) will try to compile such a Taxon-list. The main aim of such a list would be to raise awareness of certain taxa, considered as subspecies so far, but being of considerable interest both for science and conservation. Birdwatchers (and scientists) should pay more attention to any identifiable form and collect information already before a taxon is split and upgraded to specific status.

Swedish Bird Reporting System

Christian Cederroth gave a presentation describing a remarkable new computerised national bird reporting and recording system now operational in Sweden. Birders send in their observations by computer, or even via their rare bird alert system, to a website where the records appear under species in a list by place, date, time and observer, linked to maps on various scales which give the location of the records.

The web address is:

<http://svalan.environ.se/rappsyst/index.htm>

Digiscoping

Rarities Committee's members should be aware that nowadays it is extremely easy to fake digital pictures. This was demonstrated by Ricard who created within seconds several new subspecies of Yellow Wagtail never observed in the field but perhaps submitted to a Rarities Committee in a near future.

Next meeting

Agreed to be in Romania in September 2003.