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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE  
AND NATURAL HABITATS

**Standing Committee**

40<sup>th</sup> meeting  
Strasbourg, 30 November - 4 December 2020

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**EXPERT MEETING ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ACTION PLAN  
FOR THE ERADICATION OF THE RUDDY DUCK IN EUROPE**

*Hosted by APHA and the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT)*

**25 February 2020  
London Wetland Centre (United Kingdom)**

**- MEETING REPORT -**

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## **AGENDA**

- 1. Welcome by United Kingdom and opening of the meeting**
- 2. WWT presentation on the recent Review of Progress and Revised Action Plan for the Eradication of the Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis* in the Western Palearctic**
- 3. Current situation and planned action at national level**

Updates from the different states:

  - Belgium
  - France
  - The Netherlands
  - Spain
  - United Kingdom
- 4. Possible next steps**
- 5. Any other issues**

## **1. Welcome and Opening Comments by Dr. Sarah Webster of the Invasive Non-native Species Team, UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs**

Dr. Webster welcomed all the participants to the Meeting of Experts with an especially warm welcome for the visitors from Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Spain. She noted that this was one of a series of meetings and expressed gratitude to the Council of Europe for funding attendance of several participants and for having supported and promoted the need to control Ruddy Ducks across Europe over many years. It was noted that concern over Ruddy Ducks hybridising with the native White-headed Duck was first raised over 30 years ago but that prompt and effective action by the Spanish authorities had prevented any widespread hybridisation with the White-headed Duck. However, action is still required to ensure that the threat from the Ruddy Duck is removed completely and the UK Government remains committed to ensuring full eradication.

It was noted with satisfaction that similar efforts are taking place elsewhere in Europe and that the international effort to control Ruddy Ducks and protect the native White-headed Duck is rightly regarded as one of the great successes in the fight against invasive non-native species, being based on co-operation between governments through the EU and the Council of Europe. Finally, Dr. Webster hoped that the outcome of the meeting would be a redoubling of efforts to eradicate Ruddy Ducks in our respective countries, safe in the knowledge that our colleagues across Europe are doing the same.

## **2. WWT presentation on the recent Review of Progress and Revised Action Plan for the Eradication of the Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis* in the Western Palearctic**

WWT summarised the responses from questionnaires sent to the governments of over 40 countries in the Western Palearctic. By the time of the meeting 14 countries had returned the full questionnaire and a further four had returned a short version. All five of the key countries represented at the meeting – Spain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK had returned full versions. It was noted that with the exception of these countries, there were very few Ruddy Ducks being reported elsewhere in Europe. Apart from two in Ireland in winter 2014/15, no country had reported more than a single bird in any winter since 2014/15. Based on the data provided, a continued decline in the UK population was noted as was a decline in the French population over the last four years. It was thought that the Belgian population was probably declining. An absence of data on non-breeding birds in the Netherlands in 2016 and 2017 made it difficult to identify a trend but there was no evidence of a decline in the Dutch population.

It was noted that many countries do not monitor captive birds, including Belgium and the Netherlands, while others only do so partly (including France and the UK). The returns suggested that many countries had no detailed information on the numbers of captive Ruddy Ducks held. In addition, several countries had no measures in place to actively eliminate birds in captivity (e.g. Belgium, the Netherlands, and Switzerland) while France had only partly instigated such measures.

It was felt that the EU IAS legislation was an important step forward in EU Member States and in the UK, and representatives were eager to know whether similar measures would be taken in non-EU countries. It was noted that there was an absence of data from Germany, but it was thought that given the known records from Belgium and The Netherlands, the birds were highly likely to be present in neighbouring Lander. It was agreed that WWT would make informal contacts with German ornithologists to establish the position there.

## **3. Current Situation and Planned Action at National Level**

### ***Belgium***

Although there is proof of very limited release and local breeding as well as some probable escapes, other Ruddy Ducks in Belgium most probably represent immigrants, and Ruddy Ducks are most frequently seen in the Antwerp area close to the Dutch border. The peak count in winter 2018/19 was only one bird (cf two in 2017/18) but in general winter counts are an underestimate of the real population because not all water bodies are checked and these checks concentrate on nature reserves and important water areas for water birds. Such sites are counted twice monthly between October and March. In contrast, the maximum number of birds present during summer 2019 was 10 (cf 18 in summer 2018) but this is certainly an overestimate as data from internet reports is used and movement of birds between sites almost certainly results in some double-counting.

An unusually high number in summer 2016 (32 birds) remains explained but might have been due to an influx from the Netherlands and/or breeding in Belgium might have occurred in 2015.

Ruddy Duck sightings are thought to be rare in Wallonia (in part due to unsuitable habitat) although there is a lack of information, but the EU legislation has been fully implemented through the Species Decree. Since 2012 there has been a coordinated campaign in Flanders led by ANB and INBO but guided by a steering committee of stakeholders which includes Aviornis, Hubertusvereniging Vlaanderen, Natuurpunt, and Vogelbescherming Vlaanderen. Selective culling takes place using specialized volunteer hunters and between 2017 and 2020 Ruddy Duck control occurred in four of the five Flemish provinces.

Reports appearing on websites such as Waarnemingen.be and via the That's Invasive cellphone app are monitored and a rapid response initiated wherever possible. In 2018 six Ruddy Ducks were culled - two adult males, two adult females and two juveniles. A further two were shot in 2019 but reports came from very few locations. It is possible that in 2019 breeding occurred in a protected area (De Blankaart) although it is unclear why no actions were undertaken against the Ruddy Ducks at this site. Also, because most observations in summer are by birders, there remains the possibility that some instances of breeding are missed.

Information is also provided to the owners of captive birds on keeping and legal requirements. It was noted that a closely related species which can still be kept and sold legally, the Argentine Lake Duck *Oxyura vittata*, was becoming increasingly popular on online platforms.

### ***France***

France received EU LIFE-Nature funding for the *Oxyura* project, which began in October 2018. The project will run until 2023 and has a budget of €1.6M. Five field officers have been employed by the project, whose role is to carry out counts and control. They are supported by other colleagues involved in science and administration. Although Ruddy Ducks occur in several areas of France, the highest numbers are in Bretagne and Loire-Atlantique with the country's key wintering site being Lac de Grand-Lieu near Nantes. Since the start of the LIFE-*Oxyura* project, more emphasis has been put on the systematic prospecting of potential breeding spots (even reports of a single-bird are investigated) and the reaction time has been reduced to 24-48 hours. Besides monitoring internet reports such from websites such as faune-france.org, staff made 432 visits to 238 possible breeding sites in 2019.

The French eradication programme has faced two main difficulties. Winter control on Lac de Grand-Lieu is difficult because the Ruddy Ducks are extremely wary and it is difficult to get close enough to shoot them. In the summer months the principal problem is locating the birds after they disperse from Lac de Grand-Lieu. Despite these difficulties, peak numbers on Lac de Grand-Lieu fell to 54 in winter 2019/20 (cf >90 birds in winter 2018/19, and >160 birds in winter 2017/18, before the start of LIFE *Oxyura*). Winter shooting at Lac de Grand-Lieu has resulted in the removal of only three birds (two females and one male) so this reduction is thought to be the result of breeding season shooting at Lac de Grand-Lieu and other breeding sites removing adults and reducing the number of juvenile birds being recruited into the population - over 180 Ruddy Ducks in total were culled in France in 2019. However it may also be a reflection of a poor breeding season for other reasons (e.g. weather) in 2019. Consideration is also being given to using traps with live decoys.

As regards captive Ruddy Ducks, LIFE-*Oxyura* has opened a communication channel to owners via Aviornis. Two secure cages have been built using project funds to keep any Ruddy Ducks which owners would like to give away in the light of the new EU legislation. These birds might be used as decoys in traps but owners are assured that they will be not be killed, and will be looked after until death from natural causes.



Figure 1 Peak counts of Ruddy Ducks in France and numbers of adults culled, 2001-2019

### *The Netherlands*

Efforts to control Ruddy Ducks in the Netherlands have faced a number of challenges including sometimes weak co-operation between national and provincial governments, a lack of priority at a political level, public opposition to the killing of animals, and a tendency for animal rights organisations to resort to law suits. However there is good knowledge of Ruddy Duck numbers and locations through a network of professionals and volunteer waterfowl counters and, for example, over 100,000 users of the internet reporting site waarneming.nl.

Examples of good practice were provided from Zeeland province:

- One professional hunter for the entire region (province), with legal access to all grounds
- Frequent consultation and one-on-one management
- Alert system waarneming.nl (observation.org)
- Rapid response (within 48 hours)
- During the breeding season one check every two weeks on the hot-spots

However, the effectiveness varies from province to province and despite an increase in the numbers being culled nationally in recent years (Figure 2), there has also been an apparent increase in the peak winter numbers (Figure 3) and the number of breeding pairs.

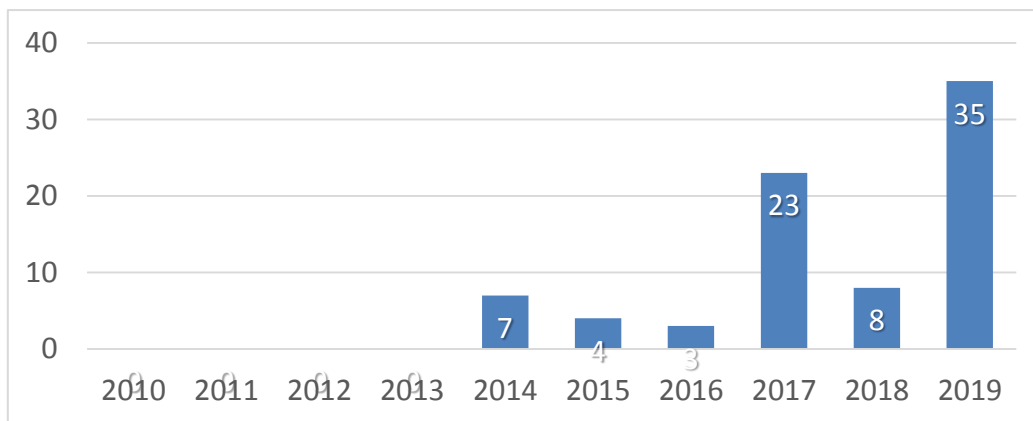


Figure 2 - numbers of Ruddy Duck culled in the Netherlands, 2010-2019

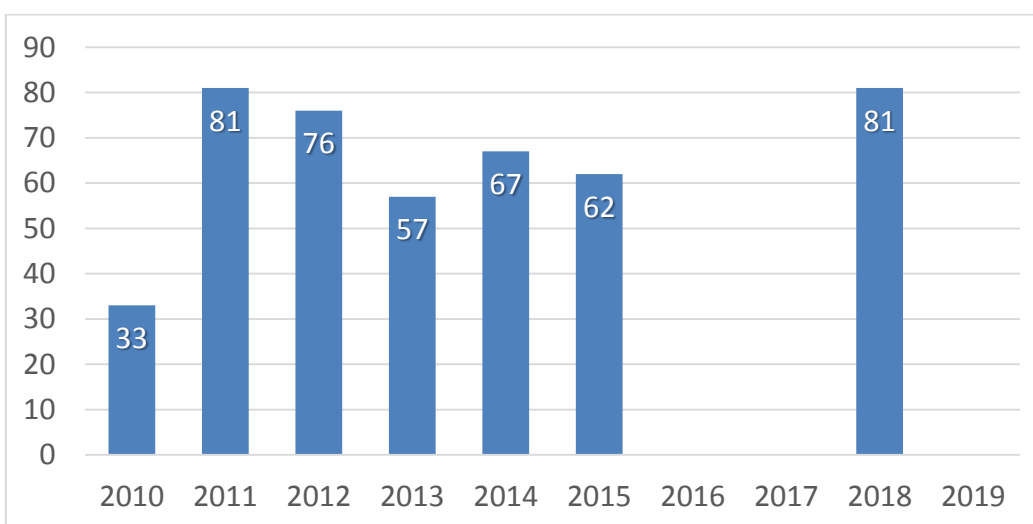


Figure 3 - peak wintering numbers of Ruddy Ducks in The Netherlands, 2010-2018

Existing hurdles to more effective control were identified as follows:-

- Good cooperation between the provinces/executive services does not exist in all cross-border areas.
- Legal barriers, in particular the regulation of N2000 areas
- Low priority among site managers of nature reserves
- Ruddy Duck are found partly on large waters where they are difficult to find and shoot, especially during winter
- Shooting in urban areas or areas with lots of recreational use is difficult - public safety comes first
- Anti-hunting sentiment; bird watchers are against shooting and many do not report sightings
- Doubt of utility and necessity: there are countless invalid arguments: eradication isn't feasible, there are not many and the numbers stay low, Spain is far away, the species is an asset to biodiversity etc.

### *Spain*

The Spanish representative informed the Group that Ruddy Ducks had become extremely rare following the strong reduction in numbers in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. An efficient monitoring programme is in place but no Ruddy Ducks have been sighted since 2016 and no Ruddy Duck x White-headed Duck hybrids

since 2011. The key for complete elimination of Ruddy Ducks and hybrids in the past has been a very effective alert system followed by very rapid response.

### ***United Kingdom***

Culling resulted in the removal of 26 Ruddy Ducks in 2018 and a further three birds (two adult females and a presumed adult female) were shot in 2019. There was no evidence of breeding anywhere in the UK in 2019 for the first time in over 50 years. From peak numbers at the turn of the century of around 6,000 birds, the latest data suggests that there may be as few as 10-15 birds remaining. These are scattered across a very wide area which reduces the chances of breeding – it is believed that there are as few as one or two breeding pairs remaining. Three members of the LIFE-Nature project team remain in post and the UK Government remains committed to full eradication. Monitoring of numbers and locations continues via internet searches and through local contacts and landowners. Control of Ruddy Ducks takes place wherever there is considered to be a risk of breeding with adult females being the top priority.

### **4. Possible next steps**

Participants agreed that existing efforts should continue in Spain, France, Belgium and the UK, and that control measures in the Netherlands should be extended to all provinces with Ruddy Ducks. The UK reiterated its willingness to support continued control efforts elsewhere in Europe, most notably in the Netherlands, through the provision of technical and practical support.

### **5. Any other issues**

During the WWT presentation and other discussions the following questions were raised:

#### **Are control efforts in the UK, France, Belgium and the Netherlands sufficient?**

The participants felt that efforts in the UK, France and Belgium were sufficient to see continuing reductions in the population in these countries with eradication resulting in the medium-term. In the Netherlands, it was felt that more effective action had to be taken to reduce numbers as quickly as possible, including extending effective control measures to all provinces with Ruddy Ducks. It was felt that a number of the barriers to control (such as control being a low priority among site managers, the presence of birds on large waters or in urban areas, and overcoming anti-hunting sentiment or doubts about the necessity of Ruddy Duck eradication) which had been given in the Dutch presentation had been successfully overcome in other countries, and support in doing this was offered to the Netherlands.

#### **What is the most cost-effective approach?**

From a public relations point of view it was felt by some participants that the UK should actively seek out and remove all the remaining Ruddy Ducks in order to complete the eradication as quickly as possible. However it was pointed out the practicality and cost of doing this (given that the location of the remaining birds is often unknown and that they seem to move site frequently) might mean that valuable resources were wasted on a high-risk strategy.

#### **Where are the significant gaps in data?**

Concern was expressed about the lack of data from certain key countries, most notably Germany, Ireland and Morocco, but also countries where Ruddy Ducks were reported when numbers were much higher than currently but from where recent data is lacking. This applied particularly to countries with White-headed Duck populations such as Egypt. It was agreed that the group would make additional efforts to forge contacts with the countries mentioned with a view to extracting information on the current situation regarding Ruddy Ducks in these states.

One area of general concern was the issue of captive birds and how legislation prohibiting the keeping, breeding and trade of Ruddy Ducks could be enforced. All the countries represented recognise that this is an issue of concern but there was no general consensus on how to proceed given the different cultures and legal systems in each country.