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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Bureau of the Standing Committee

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Complaint on Stand-by: 2021/6

**Conservation de la G elinotte des bois
(*Tetrastes bonasia rhenana*) (France)**

- COMPLAINANT REPORT -

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Complaint n° 2021/6: France: conservation de la Gélinothe des bois (*Tetrastes bonasia rhenana*) Update for the T-PVS Bureau meeting, spring 2024

Dear Madam or Sir,

the year that passed since the last COE session concerning hazel grouse in the Vosges has seen a further deterioration of the situation, and possibly the fate of the last remnants of *rhenana*-hazel grouse is already sealed.

Here we review the developments since our last letter in February 2023.

1. Status of hazel grouse in the Vosges

The last certain hazel grouse in the Vosges were counted 2019-21. This survey, published in detail¹, covered the whole Vosges Mountains. Only males could be confirmed in one district in the southern Vosges, but no females. Thus, since further reproduction requires females, it is possible that by now the only known remnant stock is already functionally extinct.

In a recent unpublished document (PRA Gélinothe des bois-2022-2030)², French bird activists confirmed a precarious status of hazel grouse, but they claimed the bird still occurs in several spots spread across the mountain range. However, the authors of this action plan have no or very little experience with finding or identifying hazel grouse or with objectively assessing the validity of records, which is a fundamental deficiency. In this regard, the data collection methodology of the alleged records of hazel grouse in the Vosges is not explained, although in this species it is essential to apply species-specific field methods.

¹ Pfeffer J.-J., Montadert M., Dronneau C., Handschuh M. (2022) Inéluctable disparition de la Gélinothe des bois

Tetrastes bonasia rhenana dans les Vosges? *Alauda* 90 (4) : 285-298.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/366016680_Ineluctable_disparition_de_la_Gelinotte_des_bois_Tetrastes_bonasia_rhenana_dans_les_Vosges

² Chevallier T, Charbonnier G 2022 Rapport d'activité (2022) Plan Régional d'Action Gélinothe des bois Grand Est Groupe Tétrás Vosges, Collectif gélinotte des bois Grand Est. 18 p.

Likely, chance observations provided by more or less anonymous observers have been used in the action plan rather than systematic surveys by proven species experts. In hazel grouse, species-specific special knowledge and experience is required to find and correctly identify the species and to review and assess alleged records³.

For example, in Rhineland-Palatinate the uncritical use of chance observations by untrained observers has contributed to previously far too high population estimates, e. g. the claim of 200-250 breeding pairs of hazel grouse in the latest official 2014 red list of breeding birds. Similar situations occurred in North Rhine-Westphalia, Hesse and Luxembourg, where at least ten if not some dozen pairs of hazel grouse had been assumed in the red lists to survive in each of these regions. However, when experienced hazel grouse biologists started to assess alleged records of *T. b. rhenana* in Germany against objective criteria in 2017, not one single certain record or any surviving grouse could be found in the named federal states. Instead, many of the alleged records were proven to be false, e. g. objectively proven misidentifications or confusions with similar species in camera trap or other photographs, photographed footprints, collected or photographed feathers or droppings. In consequence, all alleged records of the *rhenana*-hazel grouse in Germany are now being reviewed and assessed according to strict criteria by independent species experts with proven experience with the species. Furthermore, since confirmed records are still missing today, many years later and despite intensive searches, the *rhenana*-hazel grouse will be listed as extinct in upcoming red lists⁴. In Belgium, even today, years after the extinction of hazel grouse, there is still an “echo” of the bird in the form of occasional alleged “records”: Paquet and Ryelandt (2018)⁵ reviewed this phenomenon of “phantom hazel grouse” and termed it “ghost effect”. This effect is not uncommon in hazel grouse, and as well occurred in other areas where other hazel grouse subspecies have gone extinct in the past, e. g. in the Black Forest or the Nürnberger Reichswald in Germany, and in parts of the Czech Republic or Hungary.

GTV and LOANA report 22 alleged contacts of hazel grouse in 2021-2023 without providing further details. The French action plan does not detail the nature of the records used, if sight observations,

³ For example:

Bergmann H.-H., Klaus S., Müller F., Scherzinger W., Swenson J. E., Wiesner J. (1996): Die Haselhühner. 4. Auflage. Westarp, Magdeburg.

Handschuh M. (2017): Status and conservation needs of hazel grouse in the west of Germany. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362667939_Status_and_conservation_needs_of_Hazel_Grouse_ssp_rhenana_in_Germany_02122017_Bad_Durkheim.

Handschuh M. (2018): Possible extinction of the globally threatened Western Hazel Grouse *Tetrastes bonasiarhenana* in Luxemburg. *Regulus Wissenschaftliche Berichte* 33: 1-17. URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357602243_Possible_extinction_of_the_globally_threatened_Western_Hazel_Grouse_Tetrastes_bonasia_rhenana_in_Luxembourg.

Kämpfer-Lauenstein, A. (2018): Stecknadel im Heuhaufen? Wie weise ich Haselhühner *Tetrastes bonasia* nach? *Charadrius* 54 (Heft 2-3): 95-99.

Handschuh M. (2021): Das Westliche Haselhuhn (*Tetrastes bonasia rhenana*) im Naturschutzgroßprojekt „Bänder des Lebens im Hunsrück“. Bericht im Auftrag der Stiftung Natur und Umwelt Rheinland-Pfalz für das Naturschutzgroßprojekt „Bänder des Lebens im Hunsrück“. https://snu.rlp.de/fileadmin/3_Projekte/6_Baender_des_Lebens/PDF/Abschlussbericht_Westl.Haselhuhn_NGPH_2021.pdf.

⁴ For example : Centrale Ornithologique du Luxembourg (2024) : Rote Liste der Vögel Luxemburgs (inpreparation)

⁵ Paquet, J. Y., Ryelandt, P. 2019. Le statut récent de la gélinotte des bois en Belgique : une espèce-fantôme ou un joyau encore à sauver ? pp. 101-114 in Schreiber, A., Montadert, M. (Éds) La sous-espèce *rhenana* de la Gelinotte des Bois. Biologie, statut et perspectives pour un élevage conservatoire. Neustadt (Weinstrasse), Pillichia.

footprints, moulted feathers, faeces or otherwise. We do not claim that all these records are necessarily erroneous. However, based on our long-standing experience of investigating alleged records of *rhenana*-hazel grouse in other countries, we anticipate that several to most alleged records supplied in the French action plan without supporting evidence should be false. In fact, images of alleged tracks of hazel grouse published on the website of Groupe Tétrás Vosges from January 2022 to April 2023 were diagnosed by several hazel grouse experts to stem from woodcock, which is very easily and frequently confused with hazel grouse³. To our knowledge, the data used in the French action plan underwent no review and assessment by species experts using objective criteria. Another deficiency of the French action plan is that data have been lumped over several years; this is problematic in hazel grouse because the species has a fast demography and is known to fluctuate and regularly disappear extremely rapidly – which is why single individuals that may be scattered at isolated sites in the Vosges (outside of the definite known range) have zero chance to survive and will disappear rapidly.

In summary, the French action plan cannot be taken for granted and even more it cannot be used to justify not to rescue and stabilize the last remnants of the *rhenana*-subspecies via additional *ex-situ* measures.

2. Hesitant progress of research

Tetrastes bonasia rhenana is an endemic subspecies currently disappearing in its last remnant worldwide, which is now a minute area in the Vosges. The taxonomic status of this subspecies has been revised and confirmed by several of the most respected bird taxonomists in Central Europe over one century repeatedly (for references see our recent letters of complaint, and Schreiber 2021⁶). It is not only recognized as a substantiated taxon in Central Europe, but also in the Russian literature (where another cluster of grouse taxonomists had worked) and worldwide. Its justification as a valid subspecies has never been doubted by a single taxonomist working on it, and the taxon is part of the official list of the bird fauna in Germany.

Nevertheless, birding activists, who had never worked with hazel grouse or in systematics, opposed the request by German and Luxembourgian conservation authorities to permit a last-ditch rescue of the only known relict *rhenana*-population in the southern Vosges, amongst other with the argument that they themselves were unaware of subspecies in hazel grouse, and need to be convinced by new taxonomic research before “believing” the available, extensive literature (which, as we observed, had not been taken note of). The DREAL consented, that only if additional “genetics” has proven that the “subspecies exists” (the available German genetic study by a renowned institute was ignored), they could allow international rescue as requested by the two named countries, the IUCN, and a consortium of practically all biologists and conservationists from France and Central Europe who had own experience of working with hazel grouse, who had met to foster conservation at the international hazel grouse conference at Bad Dürkheim in 2017. To clarify the “taxonomic controversy”, which in fact was not a controversy among scientists, but only the disregard by loud French activists, a laboratory at the Swiss University of Fribourg was asked for clarification. The lab leader, Dr. G. Jacob, has no record in systematics or evolutionary biology as far as we discern from his previous publications, but he accepted to solve the question and added molecular data based on single faecal samples from the Vosges (from one cock and one hen and two of their offspring) interpreted against the background of several more DNA samples from previously screened grouse from the Jura Mountains and the adjacent Alps. Based on this, for taxonomy entirely insufficient database in terms of sampled individuals, sampled reference populations and sampled genes, Dr. G. Jacob so far produced a suit of three successive, contradictory opinions:

⁶ Schreiber A. (2021) Identification taxonomique de la gélinotte des bois *Tetrastes bonasia* dans le nord-est de la France. Aves 58, 25-49.

https://aves.natagora.be/fileadmin/Aves/Bulletins/Articles/58_1/58-1_25.pdf

1. In a videoconference organized by DREAL for French and German stakeholders, in which several French NGOs and the applicants of the international rescue project for *rhenana*-hazel grouse from Germany took part, Dr. Jacob concluded in a presentation (which he also spread by e-mail to the participants, and which was summarized in a short report for the DREAL), that his data would be able to disprove the international scientific consensus, including DNA papers, of various European subspecies in hazel grouse. He argued that his data showed that *rhenana* was not worth of a rescue project. He admitted during the discussion following his talk that his study was precariously limited in terms of very narrow genetic information screened and the population sample unsatisfactory, but that his study could not be more comprehensive because the DREAL expected a quick reply from him, and this he delivered, time not permitting to deepen the database. This however was entirely unsuitable for serious evolutionary inference, the chosen gene marker being highly variable, so that most tested individuals of grouse had an individual gene of their own, almost like the polymorph fingerprints on the fingertips of human hands, so that *a priori* phylogenetic groupings such as subspecies cannot be recognized from such statistical noise in principle. Coupled with idiosyncratic interpretations which proved that the investigator had not really considered the intricacies of evolutionary biology or taxonomy, his presentation met the immediate opposition from peers.
2. After the negative reaction by peers, Dr. Jacob withdrew his claim in an e-mail distributed to the biologists from abroad, and the few biologists in France who are hazel grouse specialists. We are unaware if he also informed the French authorities and NGOs of his withdrawal, but we have reason to assume that his cancellation has not been communicated clearly enough to them, since the DREAL continued to argue with “genetics” against the morphological originality of *rhenana*-grouse, and against the former DNA study from the Senckenberg Institute in Germany, which had supported *rhenana* based also on mtDNA data (but which was apparently not read by the French).
3. After the COE had asked the French government in early 2023 to publish their molecular evidence in a journal, a draft for a planned publication was distributed by the Fribourg lab to some members of the international panel for the conservation of *rhenana*. This paper expressed no longer that subspecies do not “exist” in European hazel grouse, but that molecular evolution and morphological evolution would run decoupled and independently in the hazel grouse species as such. This would open the choice for two taxonomic classifications, molecular or morphological. For this claim the raw data on which the previous, first opinion had rested, had been replaced by a new mix of data from Fribourg and published gene sequences by former students taken from a gene bank. This manuscript was again refused to the author by peers who noted that although that the new version was less erroneous than the previous opinion delivered to the DREAL, it was still not valid because again the DNA data in this composite second data panel were much too polymorphic for the small number of hazel grouse studied, and thus the study lacked any statistical significance, being just empirical noise. Again, the authors had not used statistics to care for the extreme variability of this gene, but a statistics which necessarily cannot recognize the subspecies.
4. We do not know if the second draft was published, but in late 2023 a very different third manuscript was circulated with the request for pre-publication review. This time yet another conclusion was derived from almost the same raw data, i.e. that mtDNA would be a – principally – unsuitable tool for hazel grouse taxonomy, and that the dataset assembled at Fribourg lacked phylogenetic significance and could not serve to contradict the morphological taxonomy. This third interpretation met the so far most affirmative reaction from peers, now that this third opinion had become exactly the opposite to the initial expertise delivered to DREAL. However, this third paper ended with another unacceptable, erroneous statement, i. e. that hazel grouse taxonomy will not be amenable to a solution for a long time in principle, if only his own mtDNA data set drops out from the evidence on account of its hypervariability. The arguments for this again fundamental claim about an issue which was not the topic the offered empirical data were not explained, beyond the apodictic statement that hazel grouse systematics, as currently accepted in the available international consensus of scientists, would be misleading and not

amenable to a solution. Without any justification, therefore, this paper declared taxonomy as unresolved in this grouse by definition. This arbitrary conclusion not only contradicts the available state of knowledge, which was not referenced in the paper even cursorily, but this fake conclusion may again easily serve as yet another loophole for DREAL to undertake nothing for conservation in the Vosges. Of course, the bulk of existing evidence on hazel grouse taxonomy does not get invalidated by the failure of a lab commissioned by the regional authorities of Grand Est, that had failed to provide statistically significant data. We do not know if this hithertolatest paper draft, circulated in December 2023, has been submitted for publication by now, or if yet another opinion will be created.

Therefore, two years after supporting the DREAL not to enter any serious conservation work for *rhenana*-hazel grouse in the Vosges, the lab at Fribourg seems to have changed opinion to the very opposite, admitting to have communicated a premature error to the DREAL initially. The DREAL needs to be made aware of this change of opinion.

3. Conclusions

The extinction process of *Tetrastes bonasia rhenana* is a tragedy. The loss of one of the few endemic bird taxa we have in Central Europe is being closely observed by many over years, and since five years the last known survivors in the Vosges remain unsupported because the only left range state actively prevented effective conservation measures, and denied the neighbour countries and a big panel of specialized scientists to come to help. As far as our insights go, other than monitoring the population for the action plan, likely even this using unsuitable methods, nothing was done by the relevant authorities in the Vosges to rescue the population, e. g. by improving the habitat. Four factors have led to this tragedy:

First, a basic disregard of the importance of geographical genetic variation in species as a commodity of conservation. Two apparently influential NGOs in the region seem undecided if subspecies are worth conserving at all or are dispensable.

Second, complete refusal of communication with international neighbours and the international scientific community. Even after the COE asked the DREAL to contact the international complainants with an aim to cooperate, no effort was taken by the French administration to seek exchange.

Third, a deep gap within Grand Est between the few experienced hazel grouse biologists with a scientific background, whose advice is neglected by the DREAL, and a rather larger group of bird enthusiasts, conservationists and perhaps biologists who are probably environmental consultants but are not specialists for grouse. The latter fraction, other than the academics and scientists, are organized in NGOs which prove politically influential and are represented in a regional commission advising the regional government. Intriguingly, all French biologists with proven experience in hazel grouse in France (demonstrable by their scientific projects and papers on the species), including single ones who rate among the top species specialists in Europe, unanimously joined the German, Luxembourgish and the international (IUCN) partners, seeking support from international "allies" to argue against their respective own national administration. As such, the conflict is predominantly one between a smaller group of experienced specialists with a scientific background and a large and loud fraction of amateurs and well-organized bird activists, with the seemingly incompetent regional government relying exclusively on the latter and neglecting the former.

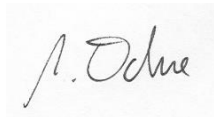
Fourth, a severe lack of competence in conservation genetics and in hazel grouse biology in the Grand Est. To repeat a population monitoring probably using unsuitable field methodology is simply unacceptable, given that this approach has been discarded as being misleading after considerably recent research investments in the immediate neighbour country. The apparent lack of a competent laboratory at hand for solid phylogenetic study of hazel grouse produced the incriminating experience of an unsuccessful molecular genetic expertise.

The “populistic” approach by the regional government, i.e. to trust on the opinion of locally influential majority groups in efficiently organized NGOS rather than on expertise by scientists, may prove successful in the conservation of other birds, but grouse are very difficult candidates for conservation biology, and also grouse genetics is tricky based on the great variability of the species at different geographical levels. Hazel grouse conservation is a challenge even for experienced professionals, but without doubt amateurs and beginners executing “learning by doing” must fail.

It is not easy to propose what to do best in this situation. The last hazel grouse survey in the Vosges confirmed only males, no females. Nevertheless, single females could perhaps have been overlooked. To have overlooked a functional, self-sufficient breeding stock is unlikely, however. Against this background, our initial application, namely to collect eggs from some of the last wild clutches to start a scientifically managed, European breeding project (EEP, under the umbrella of the European Association of Zoological Gardens and Aquaria) seems no longer realistic now, unless a miracle happens. One last chance could be to permit real hazel grouse specialists from France or abroad, rather than untrained persons, to verify if at least some of the alleged records (mentioned in the action plan PRA G linotte) elsewhere in the Vosges mountains are valid. If hazel grouse are found and confirmed anywhere in these mountains, likely single scattered specimens, an immediate decision would need to be taken if such remnants have a chance of mid-term survival where they are, or better should be captured to start the *ex situ*-mission as we had explained in detail before. This, however, also requires specialized expertise too, and cannot be run successfully by unexperienced activists.

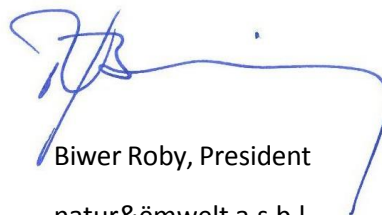
It is clear that the extinction process of *Tetrastes bonasia rhenana*, which was accompanied even under involvement of the highest European level (COE), resulted in local quarrels instead of conservation work, to the consternation of the international community of grouse biologists who watch this tragedy with dismay. The extinction process of *Tetrastes bonasia rhenana* is a prime example of how conservation of critically endangered birds must not be performed. We intend to compile and publish a report to trace this as a warning for future cases.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Michael Ochse, President,

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