



Mikhail Kalyakin. Greece, March 2017. Photo by Irina Kalyakina

What is your title and the current working position?

Dr. Mikhail Kalyakin

Director of the Zoological museum of the Lomonosov Moscow State University.

What are your main work duties?

Administration... The staff of the museum includes 100 people, and the activities of the museum are connected with three main aspects: collating and keeping zoological collections, using these collections in scientific and practical studies, and education by distributing biological knowledge for the general public. My role is to coordinate the staff in this work.

When did you start the Russian bird atlas work?

The work on the Atlas of breeding birds of the European Russia started immediately after decision to start the European atlas, adopted in Caceres, Spain, in the end of March 2010. We, the two co-coordinators (me and Olga Voltzit, a scientist from the Zoological museum) used the experience gained from the project "Atlas of birds of the Moscow City" (2006–2012, published in 2014).

The Russian bird atlas has been a great success story! What were your expectations in the beginning?

Our ambition was not that high. We have not got a large community of birdwatchers, but a huge area to cover, and we had no experience in running such huge project both in methodology and fundraising; in the first European bird Atlas (1997) the mapping of birds in European Russia was done just based on input from a few experts. We decided to estimate a minimal level of cover of the territory to aim for: 30%, or 600 squares of 50 by 50 km size. We believed that would be enough for a very general picture, which would encourage our ornithologists and volunteers into more active studies of bird distribution in future.

What are the reasons for the success?

I'm not sure that I can compile a full answer. In any case, there were a lot of elements which have formed a general puzzle steps by step... I will prepare a list of them and I need to outline that all elements were very important. I already told about our experience (and probably some authority) from 1999 onwards, when we started the citizen-science "Birds of Moscow City and the Moscow Region" project. There were no other ornithologists or ornithological societies who had idea to organize such work, so we had no competition in Russia around the question about leadership in the project. My administrative position helped us to have a freedom in our work, and position of Olga allowed her to dedicate a main part of her work time to the project. Several other staff members of the museum also took part in the project from time to time. On the other hand, we should not underestimate the existing level of knowledge about distribution of our birds: ornithology was developed in Russia for c. 200 years already including a high attention to faunistic studies. We have a number of active field-workers and research groups not only in Moscow or S.-Petersburg, experts in local bird communities and a large volume of the literature with data on bird distribution. And we have a considerable network of nature reserves, many with ornithologists amongst the staff. One of the key achievements during first years of the project was an agreement with the chief of our nature protection territories system, Vsevolod Stepanitsky, about the support for their participation from the Ministry of Nature Resources of the Russian Federation (not financial, but administrative). The next very important reason was our own readiness to try to find financial support for fieldwork (covering travel and sometimes food and equipment, if needed). Here I would like to mention the serious financial support from NGO Birds-Russia gained by Eugeny Siroechkovsky and Alexander Mischenko, this support was very important in the first two years of fieldwork (which started in 2011). And, of course, we can say about success of the Russian atlas project only in the context of the success of EBBA2: its Russian part was under constant attention of the EBCC Board and ASC, after that it was a big task of the work of the Atlas team formed by our perfect friends from ICO (Barcelona), CSO (Prague) and personally by its leader, Dr. Verena Keller. Our regular personal contact, our participation in workshops and conferences as well as a very kind methodological and just human support which we have got from our colleagues were also a critically important component of our united success. And we cannot omit the financial support which was organized by our colleagues in form of organization of grant proposals, financial support from several ornithological research organizations as well as a direct financial donations from a group of Catalan ornithologists (Sergi Herrando with colleagues), Swedish ornithologists (Åke Lindström with colleagues), Verena Keller, Niklaus Zbinden, Petr Voříšek and Mark Eaton. The main financial support both for fieldwork and for publication of the book was organized by the Atlas team as a series of grants provided by MAVA Foundation due to the key role of Nathalie Cadot.

And one more most important point is the activity and enthusiasm of the participants in fieldwork, data analysis, authors of species issues and other texts included in the atlas, editors and consultants. And last, but not least (and may be the number one in the full list of reasons of the project's success) is the fantastic work of my co-coordinator, Olga Voltzit. There are not too much places where I can make this point but without her management of data, communication with participants (personal and sometimes very difficult) and with members of the ICO team the project would have been doomed to fail.

What were the biggest ornithological surprises of the atlas?

The question is rather difficult for me... On the one hand, there were several records of very rare "eastern" species as Shikra, Swinhoe's Snipe, Red-tailed Shrike found in "the Far East" of European Russia, or very selected breeding points very far from the main part of the species' range, as Crested Lark on Solovetskie Islands, White Sea. But for me, more interesting is the consequence of the almost full covering of our territory which allows us to see a real modern status of all species. Plus we have possibility to see the range of all our bird species across the whole of Europe, and it is fantastic! It is a series of pictures which we will enjoy and enjoy.

In addition to atlas work, common bird monitoring based on annual counts has started in Russia a couple of years ago and this BCN volume introduces the Russian monitoring program of wintering

landbirds, PARUS. How do you see the current development and the future of monitoring work in Russia?

Monitoring seems to be a logical continuation of the work on the atlas. We have received a modern picture of the distribution and an approximate estimate of the number of birds (“a snapshot”), now we need to monitor the changes. For the period until the next atlas is compiled, it would be logical to conduct regular monitoring of the number of birds (and therefore changes in their distribution). Unfortunately, it is a more difficult question than the question about atlas works... When you ask people to take part in an atlas you can say about the purpose which is not far, not behind the horizon. It is a sort of short concentration on the special topic. In monitoring you personally will see more or less significant result only after a long time period plus this result will be interesting and important only if your efforts are supported by the same activity of many other participants. For us as coordinators it is constant problem: how do we inspire observers to take part in regular work using a standard method? I would like to address this question to our colleagues in European countries, especially from Eastern Europe. During atlas works we used some financial support, not just the enthusiasm of ornithologists and volunteers, and it seems to me that we will need to do the same for a monitoring program for our huge territory. It is also important to point out two aspects of the problem of implementing such monitoring. Firstly, it should be organized almost absolutely independent, regardless of the administration, local or federal (Russia is out of EU, as we know). Secondly, and it is of course connected to the first point, when our European colleagues find declines in bird populations they have mechanisms for informing their state structures about it and for finding ways for positive changes, i.e. in farming practice. If you say “Oh, we also have here some problems” I will answer that this is incomparable with the level of such problems in countries from the former USSR. There are possibilities for influencing land-use practices in EU countries, but in our situation we have not such sorts of feedback... and of course we must remember about the size of our territory. It is almost 40% of the area of Europe, so the only way which we see for establishing and developing a monitoring scheme is through fundraising (fundraising for the long time!) plus working with official structures (the Ministry of Natural Resources) for improving the state’s standard of monitoring of natural resources. It still does not know about such resources as birds, really! And is not interested in them. It is a new challenge, and we are working on it.

Sorry, you asked about PARUS and other monitoring schemes already established in Russia. In fact, we have several such systems oriented on different objects (territories and groups of birds), different longevity, etc. But all these schemes are based on enthusiasm of their leaders, they are not coordinated at local or county level and only some of them have any administrative or financial support.

Sorry for long answer, you see that this question is interesting, difficult, but we hope to solve it.

What is your favourite bird group or species and why?

Oh, one more difficult question. The object of your study usually will be your favourite group, and in my list I have such “small and shy brown birds” as reed-warblers, grasshopper warblers and Timaliid birds as well as bulbuls which were the object of my studies in Vietnam forests during several years. But my ornithological appetites include also birds of the White Sea, birds of Moscow and Moscow Region and forest birds of Vietnam – too much!