EUROPEAN MONITORING NEWS

Introducing the EBCC board members

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Bird Census News has started a new article format, where it introduces current board of the European Bird Census Council (EBCC) inclucing observers. The articles cover interviews with the current board and the second issue is dedicated to two people: Sergi Herrando and Alena Klvaňová.

Sergi Herrando. Bird Monitoring at the southern part of the Catalan Coastal Mountain Range, April 2021.
Photo by Lluís Brotons

What is your title and the current working position?

I am the scientific director of the Catalan Ornithological Institute (ICO) and a researcher at CREAF, an ecological research centre based in Barcelona.

What is your role in the national bird monitoring and in the EBCC?

I am scientific coordinator of the Catalan Common Bird Survey (subnational bird monitoring project in Catalonia, Spain). I also coordinate the Catalan Breeding Bird Atlas 3. Data from these two projects contribute at their best to PECBMS and EBBA2, respectively.
Together with my colleagues Verena Keller (Swiss Ornithological Institute) and Petr Voríšek (Czech Society for Ornithology), I have been working for nearly 10 years as coordinator of the European Breeding Bird Atlas 2.

You were working at the same time with the EBBA2 and Catalan Bird Atlas. Was this challenging and did you find any synergies?

I have been working in four atlas projects in Catalonia over the last 20 years (including a winter atlas and an atlas specific for Barcelona). All of them have taken ideas from atlases carried out by other partners at the EBCC. All this experience was surely valuable when I was asked to build methodological proposals on how to conduct EBBA2. However, it was much more important to learn from the many particularities found across the whole of Europe to implement standards which could be valid for 50 countries. Contributing to this collective effort has been one of the most challenging works in my life. The Catalan Breeding Bird Atlas 3 was born in 2015 with the intention to update the former Catalan breeding bird atlas and contribute to the Spanish and European Atlases. I should admit that working at the same time with the Catalan and European atlases revealed to be very difficult for the team of "atlas guys" working at ICO. Actually, at some point we decided to postpone the analyses and publication of the Catalan Atlas (which is still in process) to concentrate all our capacities in ending EBBA2 by December 2020, as planned within the EBCC community. First Europe and then our small piece of land.

What were the most interesting surprises of these two atlases?

This is not an easy question but for me the most interesting scientific outcome of EBBA2 came from the comparison with EBBA1. There were doubts at the beginning of the project about the reliability of the eventually named change maps, but we got them! There have been so many changes in European breeding birds since the 1980s! Some changes are apparently tracking usually mentioned driving forces such as climate warming or farmland intensification, but not always. I was surprised that for many species losses and gains have been located in different parts of Europe, e.g. the European Roller losing ground in the north-east and along the Atlantic coast and with gains in the Mediterranean coasts. I was also surprised by some general patterns that were different from my own expectation, such as the expansion of the Common Stonechat in central Europe.
The Catalan Breeding Bird Atlas 3 will be clearly focussed on changes in distribution and population. I cannot tell you much yet but here are a couple of complementary examples of what I said before regarding the whole of Europe: The European Roller has expanded its range in Catalonia since the 1980s, while the Common Stonechat is losing ground in the southern and lowlands parts of Catalonia and keeping ground in the northern mountain areas, above 1000 m asl.

You have been also working in the Spatial Modelling Group of EBCC, SMOG, what has been the role of SMOG in these atlas projects.

The Spatial Modelling Group of EBCC had a very important role in the European Atlas. This group is composed of brilliant modellers coming from different countries and backgrounds and organising together the best modelling approach for the EBBA2 10-km modelled maps was a very nice exercise. My role there as a coordinator was mainly to try to put the overall context of the atlas project into this specific and important task.

Do you have a favourite bird or birding habitat/location?

I do not have a favourite birding location. Actually I like watching birds everywhere, it depends more on my situation than on the place itself. I can be happy both with a rarity in a superb landscape and with a common species at the other side of my window. Birds can always tell us something. My favourite species is the Sardinian Warbler. I am fascinated by its ability to thrive in many Mediterranean warm habitats.

Alena Klvaňová. Although Alena works mainly on the computer, she prefers time spent in the field, counting or watching birds. This picture has been taken at Litovický pond near Prague, breeding site of the Black-necked grebe, which is a rare species in Czechia.

What are your title and the current working position?

Head of the department of International Monitoring and Research, Czech Society for Ornithology, and PECBMS project manager.

What is your role in the national bird monitoring and the EBCC?

Regarding the Czech national bird monitoring scheme, I am a volunteer fieldworker since 2008, and I have been involved in atlasing since 2001. My role is more focussed on international monitoring. In 2005, I started to work as the PECBMS technical assistant. Now I am the EBCC observer on behalf of the scheme. I am also involved in EBCC promotion, managing the website, FB profile, and newsletter. And I cannot forget the unique experience of being the artwork coordinator for EBBA2.

Pan-European Common Bird Monitoring, PECMBS, is one of the three main projects of the EBCC. Could you please explain what kind of development there has been in this project in recent times?

We have concentrated on the technological development and improvement of data flow and analyses recently. In cooperation with our colleagues from the Catalan Institute for Ornithology (ICO) and Statistics Netherlands, we have been developing new programs in R to compute species indices and the online tool. The latter is a brand new tool that makes the life of the coordinators easier. It facilitates data delivery and automatically checks data quality. We also plan other online tools for the site-level data upload, and for maintenance of the requests for data by researchers. Last year, we conducted a deep data revision to start using the new programs with a wholly revised dataset. I am delighted that

we finally published the first PECBMS data paper describing the dataset, methods, and data use in detail, alongside making the national and supranational species indices publicly available in the Zenodo repository. We hope the open dataset will encourage further research with the data and its use in conservation. Since one of our priorities is to keep all the network members in touch, the Covid pandemia also had a positive effect — it speeded up our explorations of new communication channels. In March, we established a forum in Slack to share experience among the network and organised a webinar for the national coordinators. We also offer online video tutorials to learn how to work with the new programs. We are constantly looking for ways to support bird monitoring in the eastern parts of Europe, from which we lack the data. Thanks to new ideas such as the International Census Plots project or EBCC fund, I believe the target is nearer. I want to stress that the scheme's success is only possible owing to the excellent international network of coworkers and the core team's efforts — everybody is doing his or her best. It is a pleasure and honour for me to work for birds with the "PECBMS family".

Population trends of species can vary within Europe, and thus Pan-European trends are important to see the overall picture. Can you tell us a couple of examples of the interesting changes in species population trends?

From the very first indicators released by the PECBMS in 2003, the decline of the farmland birds was markedly apparent. Since then, we keep alarming the audience about the numbers of birds we lose every year. And I must confess that it is sometimes frustrating to publish the trends that are getting worse and worse. One might think that no one listens. Nothing happens. But when I met the policy people from the EC and started to discuss the problems with them, I realised there are interested and supportive people trying to implement the monitoring outputs for meeting climate and biodiversity objectives on the EU level. I very much hope that we won't miss the aims of the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 as we missed those in 2010 or 2020 and that PECBMS, including all the volunteers counting birds in the field, can contribute to meeting the targets by delivering up to date monitoring data.

There have been hardly any positive changes in farmland birds at the European level so far. On the other hand, we welcome the increasing numbers of raptor species, such as the Common Buzzard and Western Marsh-harrier, benefitting from the conservation efforts aiming to stop persecution. We also see increasing numbers of Common Cranes which probably reflect the protection of their roosting and breeding sites. We can also track some recent population changes in the dataset that are likely to be affected by climate change. An increasing trend in the European Bee-eater as it is expanding northwards or decreasing Brambling losing their range may serve as examples.

You have also been managing the web pages of the EBCC. Could you tell the readers what kind of information one can find from the web pages?

I am pleased that we managed to release the new EBCC website in 2019, which I hope is more user-friendly and attractive than the old one. Today, it serves as the source of the general information on EBCC and a crossroad to the three main projects. You find the list of board members, national delegates or partners here, the overview of all EBCC conferences organised so far, including the proceedings, as well as the tips for reading on bird monitoring. You also may download all the issues of Bird Census News there. Besides the news published regularly, I regard the overview of bird monitoring and atlas work as one of the most valuable parts for the reader.

Do you have a favourite bird or birding habitat/location?

I love nature as a whole. It isn't easy to choose only one species from all the fantastic creatures around us. I studied mobbing, and sexual selection in House Sparrows at the university and this species is my favourite since then. I admire the sparrows' boldness, invention and "good temper" they keep despite severe circumstances. Among others, I like the Bullfinches, Long-tailed Tits, Robins or Linnets — the common species that visit our garden regularly. Regarding the birding habitats, I enjoyed rainforests in Madagascar vibrating with wildlife, hot and aromatic Mediterranean shrubland, as well as the severe and cold Scandinavian mountains. But to name only one place, it would be the landscape of my ancestors with ponds and pinewoods in southern Bohemia.