

EUROPEAN MONITORING NEWS

Introducing the EBCC board: Jean-Yves Paquet

Aleksi Lehikoinen



What is your title and the current working position?

I'm Head of the Department of Studies of Natagora, one of the main nature conservation associations in Belgium, and one of the two BirdLife partners in my country, together with Natuurpunt, our sister organisation in Flanders. Natagora combines conservation actions, nature education and conservation biology activities. We mostly focus on bats, amphibians, reptiles and, of course, on bird study and protection. Natagora is indeed the result of the union of several naturalist associations including Aves, committed to bird study and protection in Belgium since 1953, and Aves is still the name of our ornithological journal. I'm very proud to work with a team of about 15 experts in biodiversity monitoring, working in good collaboration with thousands of volunteering naturalists.

Can you tell more about how you are using citizen science data in your work?

Citizen science is at the heart of our everyday job, rooted in the passionate work of hundreds of naturalists, some of whom created our association more than 60 years ago. All birdwatchers, experienced or not, can contribute in many ways to a knowledge network that encompasses a bird recording portal, dedicated monitoring schemes and also specific projects, i.e. monitoring of the effect of agro-environment schemes on birds. Our idea is also to develop tools that are both useful for science and conservation, and enjoyable and useful for the users themselves, hence our investment in Observation.org data portal (Observations.be in Belgium). We believe it is very important that the users get easy access to

nice visualisation tools (maps, graphs, lists,...) of their own records, and an easy visualisation of other observations. This portal was seen by some as a “rarity-focus birder tool” in the beginning, but it turns out to be an essential tool for the knowledge of nature in Belgium and abroad, as it not only focuses on birds but also any other living organisms. Many institutions are now requesting Observations.be data and using them for applied or more fundamental research. However, the core of our citizen data is still based on more standardised counts, common terrestrial bird monitoring, wintering waterbird counts but also surveys of colonial and rare breeding birds. Twenty years after the last one, we just started a new bird atlas project, both in the breeding season and, for the first time, in the winter. For all these projects, collaboration with the EBCC family is very important, and we are very happy to contribute to PECBMS, EBBA2 and EuroBirdPortal. We think observer involvement is increased by showing that their data are fed into these international projects. We were particularly happy a few years ago to welcome Petr Voříšek (at that time PECBMS coordinator) and Verena Keller (EBBA2 leading author) at our national bird conferences.

One of our goals is also to help ornithologists that are focusing on species-specific studies, or any ecological studies about birds and habitat, to publish their work. My colleagues and I devote some time to either help them with data curation, statistical analysis or even the writing process. The wealth of field data meticulously collected by specialised ornithologists in their free time is simply amazing. These data could really bring important insight into some ecological questions, but they are sometimes sleeping for ever in their notebooks, simply because “field people” don’t have time or expertise to bring them to light. Citizen science data are therefore not limited to big data.

Personally, I also like field trips with birdwatchers who are still developing their skills (Natagora developed a comprehensive set of long-term training programmes for birdwatchers). I’m always amazed by their eagerness to learn and to better record birds they watch for their pleasure in their free time.

Did your PhD thesis concern birds? If yes, could you tell a bit more about it?

Not at all! I did a PhD in molecular microbiology. I have always been fascinated by the interactions between all living organisms, being birds or bacteria. I learned a lot during these years, and enjoyed it very much, but with time you realise that you can’t live all your passions with only 24 hours a day. So I jumped on an opportunity to redirect my career by working on forest biodiversity and eventually bird ecology. As an undergraduate, I also had the chance to go for a five-month training in the Ebro Delta, where I participated in a study on wintering Marsh Harrier. During this stay, I met some of the people that are now working at the Institut Català d’Ornitologia, deeply involved in the EBCC projects.

What is your current role in the EBCC?

As “Communication Officer” in the EBCC board, I’m trying to help other people, especially Aleksí to run Bird Census News and contribute to the EBCC Twitter account (https://twitter.com/_EBCC). I also had the chance to chair the Scientific Programme Committee for our conference in Lucerne in spring 2022. I’m also involved in the EuroBirdPortal steering committee.

In which monitoring programmes have you participated in the field?

I have covered common bird monitoring plots in Belgium since 1990, and wintering waterbird plots for many years too. I also particularly enjoy breeding passerine monitoring, especially farmland or open-habitat species. One of my favourite field actions is to participate in the breeding bird atlas. It gives you the opportunity to explore new locations, and sometimes to discover unnoticed little jewels of nature, that you would never have visited without the “excuses” of searching for breeding birds. A great moment of fun was to contribute to EBBA2 in some remote corner of Europe with a group of travelling birdwatching friends.

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

It’s difficult for me to choose one “favourite” bird or birding location, there are so many in Belgium and abroad. I started watching birds many years ago in a relatively well-preserved extensive farmland

habitat in the south of Belgium, a large landscape of meadows, hedges and small rivers. There are very few roads crossing it, a very rare situation in Belgium! For me there is nothing more relaxing than to wander from one meadow to another, looking for new Red-backed Shrike territories and discovering Black Storks feeding on the small river.