

EUROPEAN MONITORING NEWS

Introducing the EBCC board: Mark Eaton

Aleksi Lehikoinen



What is your title and the current working position?

I am a freelance ornithological consultant, but most of my work time is occupied as Secretary of the UK's Rare Breeding Birds Panel (RBBP).

Could you tell more about the work of the British Rare Breeding Bird Panel. How it is structured, how it contributes to bird monitoring and where the data is used?

The RBBP was founded in 1973 as an independent organisation for monitoring the UK's rarest breeding birds. It's funded by the RSPB and the UK government, with additional support from the British Trust for Ornithology, which supports the work of a professional Secretary whose work is steered by a Panel of experts. The Panel collates data from a wide range of sources — site monitoring, ringing, nest recording, species surveys and, most importantly, from the records of birdwatchers — about 85–90% of the data we receive comes from volunteers. We maintain an archive of 200,000 records covering 183 species (so far) which we make available for research and conservation purposes, generate population estimates and trends, and publish annual reports — see www.rbbp.org.uk for more information.

What is your current role in the EBCC?

I've been on the board of the EBCC since 2010 — initially as observer for the RSPB, then eventually as Chair. I stood down as Chair in April, but have remained on the board, and I have a new role — I'll be taking over from Aleksi as Editor of BCN.

Your PhD thesis was dealing with habitat use and potential human influence on turnstones and purple sandpipers. Can you please tell more about your thesis and your later research themes?

It was a long time ago! The thesis was related to changes in the disposal of sewage and how this might affect wader populations, but I was more interested in looking at feeding behaviour and interactions between individual birds, particularly how dominance hierarchies influenced the foraging strategies of individuals. More mature, and male, Turnstones were able to occupy the best intertidal feeding locations meaning that subordinate (younger, female) have to feed for longer over high tide, when the predation risk was higher. Purple Sandpipers from Scandinavia arrived in my study area in early autumn and settled into sites, but when birds from Greenland and Canada — which are larger — arrived two-three months later they would displace the Scandinavian birds to sites with lower food densities. I think I remember that right!

In which monitoring programs have you participated in the field and in which scheme(s) do you participate on annual basis?

I've worked on a lot of surveys of rare and localised species, mostly in my former role as Principal Conservation Scientist in Monitoring at the RSPB Centre for Conservation Science. Most of this was as a supervisor so done from the comfort of my office, but I always tried to get out to train and visit fieldworkers and do some surveying myself — on a wide range of species such as Common Scoter, Capercaillie, Black Grouse, Red- and Black-throated Divers, Whimbrel, Dotterel, Golden Eagle, Hen and Marsh Harrier, Merlin, Woodlark and Cirl Bunting. Nowadays I volunteer for the BTO, surveying a couple of sites for the Wetland Bird Survey every month, and doing Breeding Bird Survey and Waterways Breeding Bird Survey plots every spring. My BBS square is in the hills straddling the English and Scottish border, and often only has four species in it! I also spend a lot of time looking for nocturnal birds — Nightjars and Long-eared Owls are a particular interest of mine.

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

My favourite birding locations are on the coast of Northumberland, near my home in Northeast England — it's a great place for finding rare migrants and watching seabird passage, and I spend a lot of time out with my two dogs looking for interesting birds — I found a Radde's Warbler earlier this week. This is the area I did my PhD fieldwork in, and Purple Sandpipers are still a great favourite of mine, although numbers have declined since my studies in the 1990s, probably due to climate change-related range shifts.