

RTD22 Working Group on Bird Damage to Agriculture: a review of progress and practices

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1 Issues

Twenty-six people from 14 countries participated in the RTD 22. The convener recorded that he had taken over chairmanship of the Working Group upon request and with the agreement of IOCommittee Permanent Secretary, Dominique Homberger. He noted that the Group was a subsection of the Standing Committee on Applied Ornithology (SCAO), which itself appeared to be inactive. There appeared to be no established structure for the modus operandi of the Group, whose essential purpose was to bring together scientists concerned with the problems posed by birds to agriculture and how they might be variously solved. In discharging its functions, the Group could arrange symposia, RTDs or other activities for future IOCongresses.

Participants gave a brief summaries of their interest in bird pest problems in agriculture. The range of species recorded was remarkable, several unexpected: eared doves (*Zenaida auriculata*) on sorghum and soybeans in Argentina and Brazil; parrots (Psittacidae spp.) on maize in Argentina; great cormorants (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) on aquaculture in Germany; greater flamingos (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) on rice in southern France; various species of geese (Anserinae spp.) on crops and pastures in China, Germany, Japan, Sweden and the UK; sandhill cranes (*Grus canadensis*) on crop seedlings and potatoes in the USA; vultures (Gypinae spp.) possibly transmitting disease to livestock in South Africa; cockatoos (Cacatuinae spp.) and other parrots on cereals in Australia; wood pigeons (*Columba palumbus*) on cereals and braccid crops; mute swans (*Cygnus olor*) on cereals; peregrine falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) predating on domesticated/racing pigeons (*Columba livia*) in the UK; red-billed quelea (*Quelea quelea*) on small-grain cereals in sub-Saharan Africa; and a range of species on cereals in India.

Several speakers raised the issue of repellents. Others described how they had tried, in some cases successfully, to manipulate agricultural habitat to make it less attractive to birds or to create alternative attractions. In several areas, successful conservation had turned previously rare or uncommon species into agricultural nuisances, e.g. sandhill cranes, flamingos, and even, possibly, the peregrine falcon. It was becoming increasingly important to find solutions to such

problems so that the support of farmers for conservation was not undermined. Bird damage to agriculture was often very patchy, making it difficult to assess of damage levels realistically and hard to achieve cost-effective controls.

Another issue concerned the conversion of bird pests from villain to useful resource. Examples given included trapping quelea for food, even as a luxury export item, exploitation of eared doves by touring hunting parties from Texas, and the early season hunting of geese in Canada. It was noted that such exploitation had to be handled sensitively because of potential conflict of interest among farmers and hunting promoters through unequal distribution of benefits. Such activities also required careful regulation to avoid accidental destruction of non-target birds. Where poisons had been used to kill pest birds, as in Australia for cockatoos and Africa for quelea, the side effects were potentially serious; better alternative solutions were needed.

2 Outcomes

There was sufficient overlap among the activities and lines of research being pursued by participants to suggest that some form of permanent communication, in between IOCongresses, would be useful. The Group agreed that the e-mail network list-server initiated at the 1998 IOCongress and subsequently administered by the Avian Demography Unit, University of Cape Town, South Africa, should be expanded to cover all bird pest problems in agriculture. Pending agreement from existing list-server members, all participants who had provided their email addresses to the 2002 RTD would be automatically enrolled in the network. Each person so enrolled would be asked to provide a brief summary of their background and interest in bird problems in agriculture. In about two years' time, the Chair would circularize participants, asking for suggestions for symposia and/or RTDs to examine specific issues at the next IOCongress in Hamburg in 2006.

Several participants mentioned difficulties in finding suitable journals in which to publish papers or reports on bird pest problems in agriculture. Much information had appeared in "grey" literature which was often difficult to access. It was agreed that such reports could be placed on the list server or that references or addresses for the report could be given there.