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Several of the BirdLife International Partners in the range states to the original wild Fennoscandian Lesser White-fronted Goose (*Anser erythropus*) population and beyond strongly oppose the possible consideration of the Swedish reintroduced population of Lesser White-fronted Geese for red-listing within the EU, and urge that the Swedish reintroduced population should not be included on the EU Red List. An inclusion of the Swedish reintroduced population onto the EU Red List would in practice impose a considerable additional strain on the original wild Fennoscandian LWfG population, which is currently critically endangered. BirdLife International has been contracted by the European Commission to evaluate the status of European breeding bird populations, and we urge BirdLife International to only assess the original wild Fennoscandian population (as clearly defined in the current AEWA International Single Species Action Plan for the Conservation of the Lesser White-fronted Goose) to the EU Red List. The same position will apply when the European Red List of species will be considered.

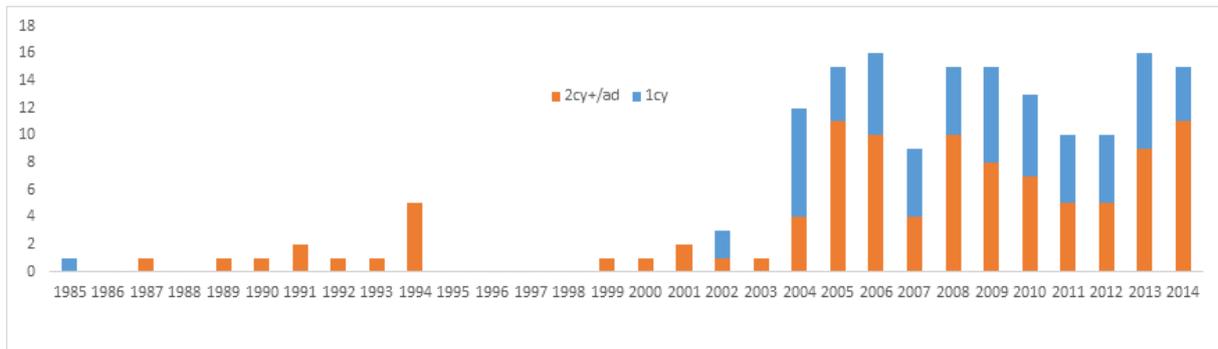
The IUCN has set criteria defining which species populations should be included and/or excluded from red-listing. In the case of the Swedish Lesser White-fronted Goose population there is strong scientific peer-reviewed evidence that the Swedish Lesser White-fronted Goose population should be defined as a hybrid population, as it originates from geese of hybrid ancestry and still continues to hybridize with Barnacle Geese. At least 36% of the captive stock that was used in the original releases had DNA from Greater White-fronted Geese (*Anser albifrons*). During the last 10 years the direct hybridization with Barnacle Geese (*Branta leucopsis*) has resulted in an average of 13% hybrids when added with the “pure” looking restocked population estimate, based on winter counts in the Netherlands. According to the “Guidelines for Using the IUCN Red List Categories and Criteria Version 11” from February 2014<sup>1</sup> hybrids may not be considered for red-listing and therefore there is a clear justification for omitting the Swedish reintroduced population from the evaluation.

On the basis of this, our recommendation is that the BirdLife International Secretariat should only consider the original wild Fennoscandian Lesser White-fronted Goose population for both the EU and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://cmsdocs.s3.amazonaws.com/RedListGuidelines.pdf> page 6

the European Red lists and that any information added concerning the reintroduced Swedish breeding population is provided as an additional remark. In this additional information the BirdLife Secretariat could refer to the status of the Swedish population as defined in the AEWA International Single Species Action Plan - where it is not acknowledged as an original wild population or an international conservation priority - and also briefly refer to the hybridization issue as the technical reason for excluding the population from the EU and European Red Lists.



Minimum number of hybrids (*A. erythropus* x *B. leucopsis*) observed in Sweden 1985-2014, and age of such hybrids (2cy+/ad = second calendar year or older, 1cy=birds in first calendar year) Data from various sources collated and presented in Øien et al. 2015 (NOF-BirdLife Norway report under preparation).

Despite claims that the hybridization issue within the Swedish reintroduced Lesser White-fronted Goose population has been resolved by the release of pure birds from new captive stock to dilute alien genes, no peer-reviewed scientific evidence exists to confirm this. No tests or screening have been undertaken to determine the genetic status of the population today, so there is also no baseline against which any future dilution of alien genes could be proven. This will take years to accomplish and it is very uncertain that it will work. A large number of the pure captive-bred birds released to date have actually died or scattered in various directions and have therefore most probably not significantly influenced the genetics of the Swedish Lesser White-fronted Goose population. In addition, the supposed dilution does not take care of the second layer of hybridization that is still taking place within the Swedish population between Lesser White-fronted Geese and Barnacle Geese. There are observations confirming that at least some of these hybrids are fertile and breeding and that they have produced second-generation hybrid young.

In addition, we have listed some bullet points below highlighting further areas of concern with regard to the Swedish Lesser White-fronted Goose population and its possible expansion which could lead to a mixing of the Swedish and original wild Fennoscandian populations in the near future. These are directly related to the possible red-listing of the Swedish population, as this would serve to legitimize the population as a conservation priority within Europe and thus possibly provide the project with access to additional international funding.

We are all in agreement on these bullet points, and we consider that Sweden is not doing enough to prevent the potential detrimental affect their Lesser White-fronted Goose population could have on the original wild Fennoscandian population, the ongoing conservation work for that population as well as its main sites and habitats in our countries:

- As the Fennoscandian original wild population is presently slightly increasing, there is a higher risk of the undesired result that the two populations meet and that the important traits including the unique and natural migratory could be lost. The Swedish population follows a human-modified migratory route to wintering areas not previously used by the species (to areas where the species has at most been recorded as an occasional vagrant). This has been a concern since the start of the project in the late 1970's and interventions came from many

countries. Sweden originally responded that the goal was to create a small population in a limited area, and that there was no risk of mixing of the two populations since they were confident that the wild population was extinct in the release area. Today, however, Sweden is strongly in favor of the two populations mixing in the wild apparently with no regard for the possible threats this poses to the original wild Fennoscandian population. This stands in direct conflict with the wishes of the range states of the original wild Fennoscandian population;

- The Swedish population deviates from the critically threatened original wild Fennoscandian population not only in with regard to the genetics, but also in ecological and behavioural traits. We are concerned about the problems in mating preferences (hybridization with Barnacle Geese), reduced shyness and preferences for urban habitats. Particularly we worry about the low viability of the population. The reintroduced Swedish Lesser White-fronted Goose population experiences both a low reproduction rate and a high adult mortality (vulnerability to predation of adults by eagles);
- There has been an escalated release activity by the Swedish Lesser White-fronted Goose introduction project during recent years, and on average more than 30 (and more than 50 in the last two years – 2013 and 2014) individuals have been released annually into the wild without any internationally agreed plan or by any approved method. This is contrary to the decisions in the AEWA International Single Species Action Plan for the species and also in contradiction to international guidance on how translocation projects should be implemented. These released birds have subsequently spread to many neighboring countries (at least Norway, Finland, UK, Lithuania, Belgium);
- The continued disagreement on the international priorities for Lesser White-fronted Goose conservation on the part of Sweden has in itself had a very negative impact on international conservation work for the original wild populations of Lesser White-fronted Geese by draining resources and focus from the conservation efforts for these populations. It is very important that BirdLife International will maintain a critical position to the red-listing of the Swedish population as well as to the continued allocation and possible expansion of conservation efforts to this population;
- The possible red-listing of the Swedish population – and thereby international recognition of their population - would also increase the probability of the implementation of the project “Action Zwerggans” in Sweden, which would plan to introduce yet another artificial migration route and wintering area in Germany by the use of ultra-light planes. This action was included as part of the EU LIFE-application drafted by Sweden in 2014, which may be submitted to the Commission in 2015. The direct consequence will be the recognition of the SE population, leading them to better access to funds etc.

To conclude, it is important to note that the original wild Fennoscandian Lesser White-fronted Goose population cannot be considered extinct as a breeding population within the EU, as between 0-5 pairs are still thought to breed in Finland (the exact number may be fluctuating between years and is very uncertain). It is also important to note that there are several additional EU and European countries important for the original wild Fennoscandian Lesser White-fronted Goose population outside the breeding season. The decision taken by the BirdLife International Secretariat will potentially not only determine the future of the Fennoscandian Lesser White-fronted Goose within the Nordic countries, but within the other EU and European range states as well.



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