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SELECTED BREEDING BIRDS IN THE AUKSTUMALA BOG

Project LIFE12NAT/LT/000965 LIFE AUKSTUMALA Restoration of
Aukstumala Raised Bog in Nemunas Delta Regional Park
Action D1

Monitoring report

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Introduction

May 14-18th 2017 a breeding birds' survey of the Aukstumala raised bog was conducted, with emphasis on Golden Plover and Wood Sandpiper. The investigation follows previous ones by Hansen (2014) and Kjeldsen (2016). The two focal species mentioned are considered amongst the best avian indicators of the restoration project carried out with the aims of improving the raised bog ecosystem by creating wetter conditions.

This survey took place somewhat earlier in the season than the previous year (June 6th-8th) and a little earlier than the one in 2014 (May 20th-22nd), which could partly explain some of the differing results between the investigations.

This year a total of five field days were used during the investigation, giving the possibility to check some of the most important areas twice (whilst the 2014 and 2016 visits were of three field days each).

Like in 2016, weather conditions during the investigation were close to optimal with general sunny and calm conditions (but not too hot), only one of the days (May 15th) there were some light rain lasting about an hour, which most probably did not affect the outcome of the survey; this was the only precipitation during the three days.

Methods

The conservation area (20 km²) was divided in three parts, a western, a central and an eastern part. The western part (the smallest) had one very thorough visit on 16th of May, while the central part was surveyed May 14th and 17th, and the eastern part on the 15th and 18th. Each visit lasted from shortly before sunrise (up to half an hour) to around noon. The route walked in each part aimed at covering the maximum area possible, giving greatest effort at zones of presumed preference for the target species; open treeless spaces for Golden Plover and wet areas with ponds for Wood Sandpiper. Routes are shown on Fig. 1. In the areas that were visited twice, the general route was reversed on the second visit in order to distribute early hour effort evenly over each part.

Registrations of breeding birds were made both by visual and aural sense; often birds were heard before they were seen. Each pair or individual with breeding behavior was mapped on a print of satellite imagery from Google Maps on A3 paper format, supported by a handheld Garmin GPS, allowing very precise positions to be made. In the case of Golden Plover, however, the exact position of the territory was often hard to establish, since some breeding pairs warned over large areas.

Apart from the two target species, other breeding birds of apparent interest were mapped – Common Crane, Common Snipe, and Great Grey Shrike.

Results

Teal *Anas crecca*

Two pairs and six males were found in ponds spread over the bog (males possibly representing pairs, as females might be hidden, sitting on nests). In June 2016 no Teals were recorded, but in May 2014 two pairs were found in the western part and “more than 15” in the eastern part (Hansen 2014).

Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*

Five pairs were located in the bog, two in the eastern part, two in the central part and one in the western part. This number is equal to the 2016 result, and the three easternmost territories were very close to those from last year. During the 2014 investigation four pairs were found.

In general, Golden Plovers were found in open terrain with scattered small trees and bushes, although one of the pairs in the eastern part held a territory quite close to higher trees (they were warning over the observer on both sides of the tree row).

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*

Parts of the bog with many small ponds seem (for the human eye) like ideal habitat for Wood Sandpiper. However, the species was found only in four locations, two in the eastern part, one in the central and one in the western part. Only in two cases the records clearly were of birds with breeding intentions; in the east, the northernmost observation was of a pair of birds in display flight over their territory, and in the west there was a single bird which stayed at the same pond for a prolonged period, showing nervous behavior (the partner possibly incubating on a hidden nest). The other two records were single birds that took off from small ponds and flew away. At best these should be considered representing possible breeding pairs. However, during incubation this species has a discreet behavior, so these records could well be breeding birds.

During the 2016 survey, later in the season, no Wood Sandpipers were found, in contrast to three pairs in 2014. It cannot be excluded that a few pairs may have intended breeding in 2016, but failed.

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*

No Godwits were seen during this year's investigation, while one adult male in territory display flight was observed in 2016, with five more birds (two males and three females) nearby, giving alarm calls, but probably no longer engaged in breeding attempts. During the 2014 investigation the species was probably not seen, since Hansen (2014) did not mention it. Although one male seemed territorial in 2016, it is possible that that year's records represent failed breeders from other localities, since the species has not been recorded during any of the May visits.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

One single male displaying over its territory was recorded in the eastern part of the bog, in an area where bog restoration (felling of trees and closing of ditches) was currently going on. In the 2016 survey 10 territories were found, while Common Snipe was not mentioned by Hansen in 2014. This probably indicates that this year's visit (and 2014) was seasonally too early, since there was more activity in June last year, although territory display in Denmark at a similar latitude takes place already in April (and some years in March).

Common Crane *Grus grus*

Three breeding pairs were located in the bog, one in each part. They were heard every morning, and seen when approached during walking through each part. The eastern and central pairs were confirmed during the second visit in each part. This result compares to two pairs in 2016, when they were found in open parts of the bog, while this year's territories were located in habitats with many trees, bushes and ponds.

Also in 2014 three pairs of Cranes were encountered in the bog.

Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubator*

Two pairs with breeding behavior were found, compared to four in 2016 and one pair in 2014.

Other species

Many pairs and males of Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* were found at the bog (spread all over), and one nest found. Also, one pair of Gadwall *Anas strepera* was seen (eastern part). A few pairs of Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* and Redshank *Tringa totanus* were recorded, mainly in the central part north of the observation tower.

Discussion

In 2014 Hansen found small populations of Golden Plover and Wood Sandpiper at Aukstumala (four and three pairs). In 2016 and 2017 after restoration activities like closing of ditches and felling of trees (the latter only in 2017) population levels for these two species had not changed significantly, but nevertheless showed a slight increase.

The restoration initiatives for raising water level and creating more open habitat by felling of trees might have been in operation for too short time to show a marked effect on the populations of breeding bog and heathland specialist birds. In fact, felling activities were ongoing during my visit. It could be considered problematic to conduct this type of work during the breeding season due to disturbance.

The very low densities of waders and other birds maybe imply that predation is a limiting factor for breeding birds on the bog. During the five days visit this year, potential predators that were observed were two Red Foxes, and daily 4-10 White-tailed Sea Eagles, 3-5 Ravens and single Marsh Harriers and Common Buzzards.

Hansen (2014) mentioned the possible presence of Black Grouse on the moor, without finding any evidence. Also in 2016 and 2017 there were no direct observations of that species, but I found feces of what appeared to be this species in 2016 (not in 2017). Although visits were conducted from up to half an hour before sunrise no displaying grouse were heard.