



Nefndasvið Alþingis  
Umhverfis- og samgöngunefnd  
Austurstræti 8-10  
150 Reykjavík  
Iceland

16<sup>th</sup> March 2021

Dear Minister Guðbrandsson & Members of the Environment and Communications Committee

**Re: Parliamentary resolution on hunting permits for swans, greylag geese, pink-footed geese and barnacle geese outside normal hunting periods (Proposal 279)**

It has recently come to the attention of the IUCN-SSC Swan Specialist Group that the Icelandic Government is considering a proposal to permit the hunting of Whooper Swans on cornfields during the summer months from 1<sup>st</sup> May to 1<sup>st</sup> October, which includes the swans' breeding and brood-rearing season, on the basis that this would reduce economic loss to farmers of swans grazing on these sites.

This proposal is of great concern because the Icelandic Whooper Swan, which migrates to winter primarily in Britain and Ireland, is recognised as a distinct population and the level of interchange with the Northwest Mainland European Whooper Swan population is very limited. As such, introducing hunting of swans in Iceland during the summer, over a period that includes not only the breeding season but also the swans' flightless period during their annual moult, risks having a rapid and deleterious impact on a population which breeds almost entirely in Iceland.

You are I'm sure aware that the Whooper Swan is currently protected throughout its range across Eurasia, extending to areas where the species is much more numerous than it is in Iceland (Rees et al. 2019). For instance, the most recently published population estimates from 2015 put the Icelandic population at c. 34,000 birds (Hall et al. 2016), compared with 138,500 in the Northwest Mainland European population (Laubek et al. 2019). Moreover, whilst the Swan SG appreciates that grazing by swans can potentially cause financial loss to farmers, there is a requirement under the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA; of which Iceland is a signatory), that financial loss resulting from foraging by the species be determined and confirmed, and also that other non-lethal measures should be put in place to deter birds from feeding on the crops, before lethal methods can be endorsed.

Whilst we do not yet know the details of the proposal, the indication that the hunting permits for swans will extend for up to 2 months beyond those for goose species (*i.e.* from 15 June, which is the proposed last date for Greylag, Barnacle and Pink-footed Geese, to 1 October which is the proposed last date for Whooper Swans) is of particular concern because the focus would be solely on the swans at a time when they are particularly vulnerable. They're unable to fly during moult (from late

July to late August), and many cygnets do not become fledged until September. Moreover, in September the birds should be undisturbed, because they need to put on the body reserves required to complete an exceptionally challenging long-distance migration for such a large bird – the 800 km overseas flight from southern Iceland to northwest Scotland – which is considered to be at the edge of their physical capabilities (Pennycuik et al. 1996, 1999). Additionally, being a large bird puts the Whooper Swan at increased risk of crippling by shotgun pellets, which can become embedded in their bodies without causing an outright kill. The swans are already shot at illegally, with cases reported throughout the range (Rees et al. 2002), and X-rays taken of live-caught birds found that 13–15% of birds checked have pellets in their tissues (Newth et al. 2016). Allocating hunting permits for a species that has up to now been protected therefore would clearly increase crippling effects.

The Swan Specialist Group fully understands that grazing by the swans can cause problems to farmers, and is sympathetic to these issues, but suggests that other ways of reducing conflict are explored and emphasises that the ecology of the species should also be taken into account. For several goose species, a European Goose Management Platform (EGMP) has been developed to address issues arising from geese grazing on arable land, and this may also be considered for the Icelandic Whooper Swan population, to involve the range countries of Iceland, the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

Overall, the Swan Specialist Group urges the Icelandic Government not to proceed with the proposal to permit hunting of Whooper Swans, particularly at such sensitive times of year, but in any event to seek other non-lethal measures for reducing crop damage and/or economic loss to farmers. I would be willing to discuss options further if that would assist.

Yours sincerely



Dr Eileen Rees  
Chair: IUCN-SSC Swan Specialist Group  
Email: [ReesEileenC@gmail.com](mailto:ReesEileenC@gmail.com)

## References

Hall C., Crowe, O., McElwaine, G., Einarsson, Ó., Calbrade, N. & Rees, E. 2016. Population size and breeding success of the Icelandic Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*: results of the 2015 international census. *Wildfowl* 66: 75–97.

Laubek, B., Clausen, P., Nilsson, L., Wahl, J., Wieloch, M., Meissner, W., Shimmings, P., Larsen, B-H., Hornman, M., Langendoen, T., Lehikoinen, A., Luigujõe, L., Stipniece, A., Švažas, S., Sniaukstra, L., Keller, V., Gaudard, C., Devos, K., Musilova, Z., Teufelbauer, N., Rees, E.C. & Fox, A.D. 2019. Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* January population censuses for Northwest Mainland Europe, 1995–2015. *Wildfowl* (Special Issue No. 5): 103–122.

Newth, J.L., Brown, M.J. & Rees, E.C. 2011. Incidence of shotgun pellets in Bewick's Swans *Cygnus columbianus bewickii* and Whooper Swans *Cygnus cygnus* wintering in the UK. *Biological Conservation* 144: 1630–1637

Pennycuik, C.J., Einarsson, Ó, Bradbury, T.A.M. & Owen, M. (1996) Migrating Whooper Swans (*Cygnus cygnus*): satellite tracks and flight performance calculations. *Journal of Avian Biology*, 27: 118–134.

Pennycuik, C.J., Bradbury, T.A.M., Einarsson, Ó. & Owen, M. (1999) Response to weather and light conditions of migrating Whooper Swans *Cygnus cygnus* and flying height profiles, observed with the Argos satellite system. *Ibis*, 141: 434–443.

Rees, E.C., Colhoun, K., Einarsson, Ó., McElwaine, G., Petersen A. & Thorstensen, S. 2002. Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*. Pages 154–157 in *The Migration Atlas: Movements of the Birds of Britain and Ireland* (Wernham, C.V., Toms, M.P., Marchant, J.H., Clark, J.A., Siriwardena, G.M. & Baillie, S.R., eds.). T. & A.D. Poyser, London, UK.

Rees, E.C. Cao, L., Clausen, P., Coleman, J., Cornely, J., Einarsson, O., Ely, C., Kingsford, R., Ma, M., Mitchell, C.D., Nagy, S., Shimada, T., Snyder, J., Solovyeva, D., Tijsen, W., Vilina, Y., Włodarczyk, R. & Brides, K. 2019. Conservation status of the world's swan populations, *Cygnus* sp. and *Coscoroba* sp.: a review of current trends and gaps in knowledge. *Wildfowl* (Special Issue No. 5): 35–72.