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COORDINATED WATERBIRD COUNTS (CWAC)

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Equipment

Recording equipment

The counter must write counts directly into a notebook or dictate numbers into a handheld tape recorder or to another counter.

The notebook should be small enough to fit into a pocket but should be large enough and have firm (hardboard) covers so that it can be written in with ease when held in the hand. It should be well-bound, as it is likely to become wet - cheap notebooks tend to disintegrate when damp. It is useful to write in the names of likely species before the count, leaving plenty of blank space alongside each species name. This saves time and having the names already in the notebook in Roberts order helps find them quickly. If species are written in as they are encountered, they end up in a haphazard order and this makes it difficult to find them as the count progresses.

Be very careful in using abbreviations. For example Curlew and Common Sandpipers could both misleadingly be abbreviated to 'C. Sandpiper', which may lead to problems in interpretation later on. So beware when abbreviating Cape and Crowned Cormorants, Goliath and Grey Herons, Whitewinged and Whiskered Terns, etc. Also be careful when listing the numbers of birds counted. You may end up with something like this: Curlew Sandpiper - 1682945. What you may have actually seen were flocks of 16, 8, 29, 4, and 5. But this may not always be clear afterwards. The simplest solution is merely to put a standard mark between each separate entry, e.g. a dot, so 16.8.29.4.5.

Pencils have the advantage over pens in not running when damp. Pencils/pens should be clipped onto the notebook.

If a tape recorder is used, check the batteries before the count and frequently check that it is working in the field. Remember that under windy conditions the microphone in the tape recorder becomes significantly less effective. When you replay a recording made under such conditions, all you might hear is a loud roaring sound and nothing else!

When speaking into the microphone, it is preferable to record each observation with the species name first and the number of individuals seen second, e.g. "Sacred Ibis 15" and not "15 Sacred Ibis. If you mis-time speaking and pressing the recording button, all you might hear when replaying the recording is "...cred Ibis", whereas if you say the species name first, you will hear "...red Ibis 15", which is adequate. You will also find the suggested order easier when transcribing the data. (Remember to transcribe as soon as possible after the count while your memory is still fresh!)

Always carry spare pencils/pens and even spare notebooks, tape recorders, batteries, cassette tapes, erasers and pencil sharpeners!

A mechanical tally counter can be very useful, particularly when numbers are very big. A tally counter is a small hand-held instrument which records and adds numbers at the press of a button. This facilitates fast counting and if the counter is distracted, the number will not be forgotten.

Clothing

Clothing should be appropriate and dull-coloured; you are there to count the birds not startle them! Many marshy areas have sharp-leaved vegetation which will cut exposed skin. Long trousers are advisable in these habitats or if it is cold. Long trousers become heavy when wet, however, so unless you are going to wade through 'sharp' vegetation, or it is cold, shorts may be a preferable. Always have a dry, warm jacket with you, as you are likely to get wet and this leads to getting cold, which will affect your attitude and your fun.

When choosing footwear, remember that you are almost certain to have to wade through shallow water at some stage. Footwear should either entirely exclude water, or, more realistically, should allow water to drain out, so that you are not 'sloshing' at every step. Old nylon or cloth takkies are ideal in this regard.

Food, water, sunscreen, a wide-brimmed hat, and a field guide may also be appropriate. A small rucksack can be used to carry all these items.

Optical equipment:

Binoculars are essential. High magnification (8X-12X) is important when counting waterbirds. Less powerful binoculars are at a disadvantage over long distances, as in waterbird viewing. If you have high quality binoculars (e.g. Zeiss, Leitz, etc.), then a telescope may not be necessary. But if you have poor to medium quality binoculars, then a scope (x20 - x60 zoom lens is best) is probably essential. A scope alone is seldom appropriate however, because of its narrow field of view. The scope will often be used for the identification of distant birds; the actual counting can then be handled with binoculars. Similarly binoculars and the naked eye can be used for less distant birds.

The scope should preferably be attached to a tripod (a heavy one is less likely to be shaken by the wind) throughout the count and carried around as a unit, i.e. it is not convenient to take it on and off the tripod. A good idea is to attach a strap to the scope/tripod so that it can be carried slung over the shoulder.

A major problem is keeping your binoculars and scope dry. Carry a small cloth to wipe water off the lens and even a plastic bag to put both in when wading through deep water and as protection from rain. Further protection of eyepieces can be achieved by keeping the caps on them when not in use, using the protectors supplied with some makes, and by devising a plastic cover using plastic bags. You can also drop your binoculars down the inside of the front of your shirt/jacket when not in use. Most poor to medium quality binoculars and scopes fog up if they get wet and become virtually useless. The measures suggested should be used to avoid this disaster at all costs. It is worth taking spare binoculars with you just in case.

Other

A small mobile hide may be useful in situations where a large area can be viewed from an exposed vantage point.

Various forms of transport such as boats, 4-wheel drive vehicles, trail and mountain bikes may be appropriate but should always be used with due regard for the environment, the birds and other people. Unnecessary disturbance must be considered unethical.

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