

# Evolving skills with Darwin

The Critically Endangered Blue-throated Macaw, confined to northern Bolivia, is one of the species that has benefited from Armonía's work through the Darwin Project (Joe Tobias)



Taking a look at a project funded by the UK's Darwin Initiative, to strengthen the capacity of Partners to work with the CBD, and support their governments in implementing it.



2010's New Year celebrations will be followed by a sober assessment of how well the world's governments have performed in meeting the pledge to significantly reduce the loss of biodiversity. But for many of the world's poorest countries, which also tend to have the richest biodiversity and the highest number of endemic and threatened species, the question is, how will we know?

Any assessment of progress towards the target depends on the quality and timeliness of data submitted by the countries which are Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). For many developing countries, and their BirdLife Partners, the quality and availability of data, and the capacity to analyse and use it at a national level, has been patchy at best.

BirdLife has just completed the second of two projects, funded by the UK's Darwin Initiative, to strengthen the capacity of Partners to work with the CBD, and support their governments in implementing it.

The Parties to the Convention—currently 192 national governments—are required to develop National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs), and submit national reports on the implementation of the Convention. In 2002, the Parties further undertook to achieve a significant reduction of the rate of biodiversity loss at global, regional and national levels by 2010. Progress is measured by the national reports, most importantly the 4th National Report, which was required to be submitted to the CBD Secretariat by March 2009. Many developing countries—including all the countries of South America—failed to meet this deadline, but some are still working towards it.

BirdLife Partners in several developing countries have helped their governments to implement the CBD. BirdLife Partners such as Guyra Paraguay and NatureKenya have regularly attended meetings

of the Convention's governing body, the Conference of the Parties (COPs), as part of their government delegations. The number of Partners attending the COPs has increased over the years, indicating that their capacity to take part in these high-level policy discussions is improving.

In 2006, with funding from the UK Government's Darwin Initiative, BirdLife launched an ambitious project to boost the ability of developing countries to meet their obligations under the CBD. The project aimed to strengthen the scientific capacity of six national conservation NGOs from different global regions:

Armonía (BirdLife in Bolivia), BirdLife Botswana, Society for the Protection of Nature and Natural Resources in Lebanon (SPNL), Bird Conservation Nepal (BCN), Palau Conservation Society (PCS), and the Russian Bird Conservation Union (RBCU).

Selected individuals from each Partner would receive

training in data gathering and analysis during an internship at the BirdLife Secretariat headquarters in Cambridge, UK. Each Partner would undertake a demonstration project relevant to one of the most pressing bird conservation problems in their home countries, and link the results to policy mechanisms to improve the implementation of the CBD.

The Inaugural Darwin Workshop in September 2006, hosted by the project team from the BirdLife Secretariat (the 'UK team') was attended by all the participating country coordinators. It provided an opportunity to meet face-to-face, scope out the activities and select demonstration projects. The six demonstration projects were:

- Initiating conservation action for the most threatened bird species (Armonía / Bolivia)
- Strengthening links between bird projects and national initiatives (BirdLife Botswana)

- Updating an Important Bird Area (IBA) inventory and the action needed (SPNL / Lebanon)
- Monitoring IBAs to stimulate action at sites (BCN / Nepal)
- Developing an IBA inventory and follow-on advocacy strategy (PCS / Palau)
- Using citizen science for capacity building and advocacy (RBCU / Russia)

These projects made an excellent complementary set, dealing with species, sites and human resources, demonstrating a breadth of scientific work.

The UK Team developed six individually tailored training programmes, which varied according to the participant, their experience, and the needs of the demonstration project. The project worked closely with colleagues at RSPB (BirdLife in the UK), sharing expertise and demonstrating UK conservation practice.

With Melvin Gastanaga from Armonía, the UK team worked on a variety of technical issues involving database and spreadsheet work, supporting their work on threatened bird species. For Lukes Isechal from PCS, they arranged training on the use of GIS to map IBA boundaries, identification of marine IBAs, and protocols for setting up a monitoring framework for IBAs.

For Kabelo Senyatso from BirdLife Botswana, the focus was

on developing skills in technical report writing and data analysis and, after reviewing bird census techniques and on-going monitoring schemes in Europe and Africa, developing guidelines for robust bird population monitoring in Africa. Nada Farah from SPNL learned how to enter data on IBAs into BirdLife's new web-based database.

For Dev Ghimire from BCN, the training covered all aspects of IBA conservation, from data collection and analysis, through to national policy and advocacy work.

With Natalia Nikolaeva from RBCU, the UK team tested the Russian implementation of Worldbirds (a worldwide citizen-science database, developed by the RSPB) and explored how data might be developed and analysed to inform conservation practice and policy.

"The internships were highly effective in terms of developing individual skills and specific products", said BirdLife's Director of Science, Information and Policy, Leon Bennun. "However, the intensive individual focus means that this is a relatively expensive approach unless interns can effectively pass on their skills and knowledge to others in their organisations and elsewhere in BirdLife. Most interns have managed to achieve this."

For example, after his internship, Kabelo Senyatso led a project to develop a census

methodology for large grassland birds. Staff from BirdLife Botswana joined him for two weeks at a time and experienced firsthand a range of census methodologies.

Four further sets of training materials were developed as a result of the internships. Melvin Gastanaga wrote a generic species action plan suitable for the Americas region. Kabelo Senyatso devised bird population monitoring guidelines for Africa, and SPNL produced IBA monitoring guidelines in Arabic. An on-line IBA toolkit for all regions was produced by the UK Team and others, with input from Lukes Isechal, Nada Farah and Dev Ghimire.

As a direct result of the project, RBCU established a new dataset on species and sites which now forms the backbone for recording birds through their citizen-science project. PCS established a new dataset covering eight IBAs, while SPNL invested considerable effort in revising data and establishing monitoring baselines for 11 new IBAs, and BCN updated data on 27 IBAs. All are now incorporated into BirdLife's web-based IBA database.

SPNL and PCS both published IBA directories during the course of the project, and Armonía published a *Threatened birds of Bolivia* booklet.

Liaison with CBD National Focal Points was an integral

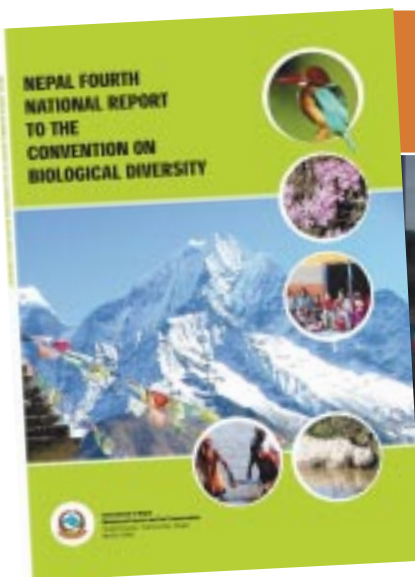
activity throughout. Some Partners already had effective relationships with their focal points and continued to build on these; others developed relationships for the first time, using the project as a catalyst.

After the Inaugural Darwin Workshop, BirdLife Botswana met their focal point to discuss their plans for implementing the Darwin Project, and how they might contribute to the implementation of the CBD more broadly. Subsequently, they were approached to provide technical input to Botswana's 4th National Report (4NR). SPNL built on their regular contact with their focal point and, in May 2009, participated in a workshop organised by the Ministry of the Environment to review the draft 4NR. BCN also supported the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation (the CBD Focal Point for Nepal) in the preparation of the 4NR.

As a result of interactions with the CBD Secretariat, Lijie Cai, the CBD Programme Officer for National Reports, requested all CBD National Focal Points to seek input to 4NRs from their relevant BirdLife Partners, and the BirdLife Secretariat also separately alerted all 112 BirdLife Partners to this opportunity.

There is already plenty of evidence that, thanks to the Darwin project, the Partners' capacity and confidence has been

LEFT Birds and IBAs were highlighted in Nepal's 4th National Report owing to BCN's efforts. CENTRE The inaugural Darwin Project Workshop: UK and host country participants outside the BirdLife Offices in Cambridge, UK (BirdLife) RIGHT The first IBA directory for Palau, published by PCS, was one of the major achievements of the project.







ABOVE Hima Kfarzabad, one of 11 new IBAs, identified by SPNL, during the project (David Thomas)

BELOW Developing the joint Action Plan: Kabelo Senyatso talks through BirdLife Botswana's key milestones (BirdLife)



enhanced, and they are contributing their scientific information more effectively to support CBD implementation in their home countries.

The governments of Botswana, Nepal and Lebanon recognised the high priority of threatened bird species and IBAs in their respective 4NRs. Palau's Minister of Resources and Development explicitly acknowledged the relevance of IBAs to the Micronesia Challenge, a regional initiative with the goal of managing at least 20% of forested land for conservation by 2020.

The Bolivian National Congress recognised the role that Armonía is playing in protecting the nation's birds with an award.

Experience and materials from this project have been shared with other BirdLife Partners through a series of meetings. Seven regional conferences were attended jointly by the UK and host country teams. At these, presentations were given on the Demonstration Projects reaching some 1,000 people, and 100 BirdLife Partner Organisations.

The project was discussed at a further 12 national meetings attended by host country coordinators, and five workshops were organised to present and disseminate the findings. For example, the project was presented at the 'Tools for conservation' symposium in Lima, Peru, organised by Armonía, and attended by over 100 students and two other national conservation NGOs. The event was held at and officially supported by the Ministry of the Environment.

"The Darwin Initiative support allowed us to develop a conservation programme that is very important for poor countries with less conservation knowledge", said Armonía coordinator Bennett Hennessey. "We built on this development with Darwin Initiative support to produce a Species Action Plan manual, and conduct national species conservation workshops in Peru and Bolivia. We invited

keen young conservationists to help guide them with presentations on Species Action Plans and proposal development. Many people are keen to learn, but without any access to a method to conduct conservation."

The project is well embedded in the new BirdLife programme (2009–2012). BCN and PSC will carry on their conservation work at IBAs through projects and as part of BirdLife Regional Programmes. SPNL will use their IBA project as a basis for a national advocacy plan for conserving them. Armonía will pursue their work on threatened species as part of BirdLife's Preventing Extinctions Programme, while BirdLife Botswana will continue to pioneer common bird monitoring as part of an Africa-wide programme, and RBCU is committed to extending the use of Worldbirds as part of a suite of citizen-science initiatives.

"The breadth of the work has been a challenge, and it has been important to keep the momentum going in order to remain on track", said BirdLife's Head of Science, Alison Stattersfield. "So we have kept in regular contact on latest developments largely by email. But there have been many other opportunities for personal interactions including through the internships and at regional meetings.

"The project was designed with impact and legacy very much in mind", she added. "We have selected Partners which we believe have great potential to further develop their scientific capacity, and improve conservation outcomes as a result." BirdLife is applying for follow-up funds from the Darwin Initiative to build on the success of this work.

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By Ali Stattersfield and Nick Langley

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