

STATUTES of the BRBC

Belgian Rare Birds Committee (BRBC)- version 1 January 2018

Belgisch Avifaunistisch Homologatiecomité – Comité Homologation d'Avifaune
Belge



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Colophon:

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1.Introduction

After many years of working as separate units, the two regional Belgian rarities committees, the BAHC (for the Dutch speaking part of the country) and the CH (for the French speaking part of the country) have decided to merge into one single Belgian rarities committee: the Belgian Rare Birds Committee (hereafter: BRBC). This document contains the statutes of the BRBC. The objective of this document is to be transparent about the way of working and the workflow of the BRBC.

The foremost objective of this document is to be a manual for the BRBC-members in the committee. Apart from that it is also an important document for birdwatchers who are interested in rare birds and want to document a sighting.

We aim to evaluate the content of this document on a regular basis. New versions of this document will be published on the BRBC website.

2.Common principles

1) Objectives of the BRBC

The BRBC's goal is collecting, processing and archiving records of rare birds in Belgium. In doing this, the BRBC strives to assess individual records and the general occurrence of rare birds in a way that is scientifically sound, verifiable and trustworthy. The main goal of the BRBC is not solely to verify claims of rare birds by birdwatchers or to produce a long country list or long personal lists of birdwatchers. The goal is to study the occurrence of rare birds as a biological phenomenon to be studied like any other aspect of ornithology. Thus, it has to be treated in the same way: as much as possible from a scientific point of view.

There is a fixed list of species and subspecies that are considered as rare in Belgium. Rare species are species that have been recorded less than 3 times per year over a period of 10 years, with at least in records in 7 of the 10 years. More information on the list of rare species and how it is maintained can be found in part 3,1) of this document.

The BRBC formally subscribes the guidelines for European rarities committees, as endorsed by the Association of European Records and Rarities Committees (AERC), published in this link:
<http://www.aerc.eu/DOCS/guidelines99.pdf>

2) Status of the BRBC

The BRBC is an independent committee that is supported by the Royal Belgian Institute for Natural Sciences, Natuurpunt.Studie and Aves-Natagora.

3) Annual report

The activities of the BRBC will be reported and published in an annual report. This report will contain all the processed records since the previous report. The report will be published in the magazines Aves and Natuur.Oriolus. We aim to publish a report every year.

The authors of the report do not have to be BRBC members, but the names of the authors should always be followed by "and the members of the BRBC".

The BRBC is responsible for the content of the report at all time. The editors of the magazines are responsible for the lay-out and editing of the texts and accompanying photos, graphs and figures.

4) Composition of the BRBC and tasks of its members

The membership of the BRC is a voluntary, non-paid position. The BRBC consists of 8 to 10 voting members. All voting members have the prime task to consider and process records of rare birds.

Besides, there are a number of supportive tasks:

- a) Chairman: responsible for representation of the BRBC, chairing of meetings, setting the agenda for meeting.
- b) Secretary: responsible for the report of BRBC-meeting.
- c) Treasurer: responsible for financial matters of the BRBC.
- d) Archivist: responsible for coordination of the archive.
- e) Annual report officer: responsible for compiling the annual report and for getting the report published.
- f) Webmaster: responsible for maintenance of the website and the database.
- g) Circulation officer: responsible for coordination of the voting procedure and the circulation of the different records.
- h) Provincial recorder: responsible for actively searching for records that have not yet been submitted to the BRC. There is a provincial recorder for every Belgian province, who will look for records in his appointed province.
- i) Publication relations officer: the spokesperson, responsible for press releases, answering to discussions on social media, etc.

These supportive tasks will be divided among the members. One member can hold more than one supportive task. To make sure that there is a continuous system two people can be appointed for the same task. For an overview of the current members and their specific tasks, see appendix 1.

It is possible to appoint the tasks of secretary, webmaster and archivist to one or more external, non-voting members.

External members attend meetings, but they cannot vote on records of rare birds.

The aim is to compose the committee in such a way that a broad range of people from the birding scene are represented. It is aimed to have representatives from the twitcher scene, ringers, people with international contacts, scientists, sound specialist, people with specific knowledge of certain species groups (such as seabirds), etc...

5) Appointing BRBC members

The BRBC members can suggest names of potential new members to the committee when there is a vacant position. Persons with interest in joining the BRBC can submit their candidacy at any time. New memberships will be considered when there is a vacancy or when there will be a vacancy in the foreseeable future. In case there are no vacancies, potential new members will be put on a waiting list.

The members are appointed for a 4 year term. There is a maximum of two successive 4 year terms. If a member wants to stay after his/her first term and the other members agree, the member can take up a second term of 4 years. After the second term, a member has to leave the committee for at least 1 year.

For admittance to the BRBC, all present voting members have to agree. The BRBC appoints new members in the last meeting of the year. If there are more candidates for one position, then the BRBC-members have to vote. The candidate with the most votes becomes the new member. If the vote is a tie, then it is decided by a drawing of lots.

Members have to assess all submitted records to the committee. If they don't have time, because of some unforeseen circumstance, to assess a circulation of records, they have to report this to the chairman. In case somebody doesn't assess records or doesn't show up for 3 meetings or circulations, then the chairman can drop the member of the committee and start-up the procedure to assign a new member.

6) Profile of a BRBC member

A BRBC member needs to have the following qualities:

- a) An experienced birdwatcher.
- b) Being highly motivated to join the BRBC in its task of assessing the specific records and the general occurrence of rare (sub)species in Belgium.
- c) Endorsing the statutes of the BRBC.
- d) Being keen on (rare) bird identification.
- e) Being able to read a submitted record critically and objectively and to add relevant comments.
- f) Being able to communicate clearly to the other members.
- g) Having a thorough knowledge of West Palearctic bird species.
- h) Having a broad knowledge of the relevant literature about identification and occurrences of (rare) birds.
- i) Having easy access to a broad range of literature.
- j) If possible, being the author of articles about bird identification or occurrences of (rare) birds.
- k) Being highly motivated to look actively for not submitted records.

7) BRBC meetings

The aim is to meet 2 – 4 times per year. Every member of the BRBC strives to be present at these meetings.

The chairman and secretary put together an agenda after consulting the other members first for additional agenda points. The secretary sends the new agenda at least one week before the meeting to all the members. During the meeting, the secretary makes a detailed report of the meeting and sends it to all members at least 10 days after the meeting. It is aimed to publish a short version of the meeting minutes on the website.

A date for the next meeting should preferably be set at the end of a meeting.

8) Communication

External communication from the BRBC meant for publications or for usage on public fora should always go through the publication relations officer. Before communicating about a certain topic, the publication relations officer should discuss the content of the communication with the rest of the committee or at least with the chairman. This is not the case when the communication involves topics about which the BRBC has already taken a clear position or topics that are non-debatable (like communication about the status of species in Belgium).

This does mean that individual members of the BRBC cannot have a personal opinion on a certain topic or cannot express this opinion in public. It does mean, however, that they must refrain from expressing this opinion publicly without clearly stating that this is their own, personal opinion and not the opinion of the BRBC. This is very important in view of the public credibility of the BRBC.

3. BRBC workflow

1) Species to be assessed

The BRBC assesses records of bird species and subspecies (taxa), that occur in Belgium less than 3 times per year over a period of 10 years, with accepted records in at least 7 of the 10 years. The BRBC also assesses all species and subspecies that are not yet on the Belgian list, but that are likely to be genuine vagrants. The list of species and subspecies that have to be assessed can be consulted on the BRBC-website.

The number of accepted records for every species is kept up to date by the BRBC. The number of accepted records is used to assess potential modifications of the list of (sub)species that have to be considered. It is easier to drop a species from the list, then to add one. The reason for this is that there is no clear, official and general overview of the common species and their numerical occurrences. In order to get a idea of this, the BRBC keeps track of records in the national database of www.waarnemingen.be/www.observations.be and keeps an eye out for any publications, as potential sources of information for modifications that may be necessary to the list.

Invasions or influxes are not included in the calculation of the mean number of records of a species for 10 year period, because they can bias the occurrence pattern. At all times the BRBC can make exceptions on this general rule, especially for scarce birds that are difficult to identify.

This list of species to be assessed can be modified in 3 different ways:

- a) In case of an increase of accepted records of a certain species above the threshold of an average of 3 accepted records per year over a 10 year period, the BRBC can decide to no longer assess records of that species in future.
- b) In case of an obvious decrease of records of a certain species, below the threshold of an average of 3 records per year over a 10 year period, the BRBC can decide to add that species to the list of species to assess in the future. This decision will be less straightforward than the previous decision to drop a species, as there will be no overview available of accepted records of such a species. There is no national project available in Belgium in which the occurrence of scarce species is assessed scientifically. The first step towards potentially adding a species to the list will be more or less subjective. An assessment will then be made of the available data on this species, with the national database of www.waarnemingen.be/www.observations.be likely being the main source of information.
- c) Although the previous 2 ways of modification are the rule, the BRBC can divert from this in exceptional cases, if well motivated.

Every year, the BRBC will evaluate the list of species that have to be assessed and if necessary it will be adapted. Modifications to the list will be published in the next annual report in Aves or Natuur.Oriolus.

2) Subspecies to be assessed

The BRBC assesses only subspecies that are recognized by the AERC TAC (Taxonomic Advisory Committee of the Association of European Records and Rarities Committees) and that have the ability to reach Belgium on their own strength.

For all subspecies that are identifiable in the field, the BRBC will assess the records. For subspecies that are not identifiable in the field, we will only look at records of ringed birds or in some cases when there is a sound recording.

3) Requirements for documentation

To accept a record of a rare bird, the record has to meet several criteria:

- a) The location has to be known at least at the provincial level.

- b) The date has to be known at least to year and month.
- c) A record needs to be documented by clear documentation: for example pictures, video footage, sound-recording, field sketches, a good written description and/or a specimen.

The BRBC can accept a record based on a written description only if the following criteria are met:

- a) The description fits the specific species.
- b) The description rules out similar species.
- c) The observation circumstances of the observation warrant the points a) and b).

For certain species the BRBC can set specific demands for documentation. For example: species that are hard to identify or species with unknown or little known identification characters. The BRBC will publish these demands in the form of guidelines on its website.

A record for which the documentation only consists of a sound recording of a bird flying overhead does not solely qualify for acceptance. In this case, there has to be an additional written description or a picture that supports the sound recording in such a way that it can be the sound recording that can be the decisive piece of evidence for that record.

Cases of birds found dead are acceptable, if there are no indications that the bird did not die on or close to the finding place. This demand is mainly for cases in or close to harbors, rivers, airports or at the coast, because there is a higher risk of arrival of corpses then in other places. Apart from this, findings of death birds are only acceptable if the following criteria are met:

- a) There are pictures available.
- b) There are no indications that the bird did not wash ashore on the location.
- c) There are no indications of a stay of the bird on a ship.
- d) In case of a dead bird on a ship: there are no indications that the bird died outside of the territorial waters of Belgium.
- e) The corpse is in such a state that the previous 3 points can be assessed properly.
- f) Preferably, the dead specimen is collected and deposited at the RBINS.

4) Assessment of records: general procedure

For the assessment of a record, a number of different steps can be distinguished, from the moment an observer sends in a record of a rare bird until the record gets published in the annual report of the BRBC.

a) Step 1

Step 1 is that the record is submitted to the BRBC. There two possibilities for this.

- 1) An observer sends in a rare bird record, preferably through a online form designed by the BRC on its website. There are different forms for a field observation and for a record of a ringed bird. This form, supplemented with all the available documentation of the record, can be send to the BRBC at info@belgianRBC.be.
- 2) Another possibility is that the provincial recorder collects pictures and/or descriptions of a rare bird record on the internet, even before a record is submitted by the observer himself. Such a case is already in the database and already gets an archive number. The roulation commissioner waits until the observers of such cases have submitted the record themselves. At this moment, it is in the database as "not yet submitted". If the observers have not submitted the record within 4 months, then this records comes in the roulation with the documentation gathered by the provincial recorder .

b) Step 2

The circulation manager receives the documentation and applies the next steps:

- 1) Records are put in the database of the BRBC.
- 2) Every record is given a unique archive number.
- 3) Every 15-20 records or at least every 2 months, the records are brought into circulation for consideration by the voting members.

c) Step 3

In the first round of the circulation all voting members assess if the record is acceptable or not for themselves, or whether they would like to discuss the record during a meeting. In case members want to discuss a record, they have to state why. In difficult cases members are asked to comment on their findings about the specific record, both when they are in favor or against it.

For every first round of a circulation the members get a month to make their assessments. After all members have assessed the records, the circulation manager brings the assessments together.

d) Step 4

The circulation manager looks into the outcome of the assessment of every submitted record. From then on there are 3 possibilities:

- 1) All members accept the record unanimously: the record is then accepted and added to the database of the BRBC. It will also be published in the next annual report of the BRBC.
- 2) All members reject the record unanimously: that record is then rejected by the BRBC and added to the database of the BRBC. The record will be published in the next annual report.
- 3) There is no consensus in the votes: this means the record is not unanimously accepted or rejected. The record then gets a second round of circulation. The members get all the documentation again, added with the comments of the other members during the first round. If after this round there is still no consensus, the record will be discussed during the next meeting, and eventually there will be a final vote during the meeting.

e) Step 5

Finally, a record will be accepted after the second round if during the vote at the meeting there is a maximum of one vote against. This means that if there are at least 2 members voting against a specific record during the meeting, the record is rejected (see also 3.8). Abstinance of voting does not count. However, if a majority of members holds back from voting, the record will be put on hold until there is new evidence or knowledge available.

In case the voting considers only the status of the species (wild or not wild), then a normal majority is necessary to accept the status of a record. In case of a tie, the status of a record is not accepted.

Finally the submitter of a record will be informed of the outcome of the vote. In case of rejection, the submitter will receive a short explanation why the record was not accepted. The submitter can ask the BRBC for a more extensive motivation. Informing the submitter will not be done for records that have not been submitted by an observer, but that have been gathered by the BRBC from internet sources (possibility 2 in step 1).

When new documentation about an already assessed record becomes available to the committee, the BRBC can decide to review their assessment of that certain record. It is also possible that all records of a specific species have to be re-assessed, because new knowledge becomes available. Before starting the re-assessment, all members of the BRBC have to agree to do so. When there is a normal majority, the circulation manager can bring all these records back in circulation.

f) Step 6

All assessed records will be published in the next annual report of the BRBC and added to the BRBC database.

5) Assessment of records: special procedure

In exceptional cases, it is possible to divert from this normal, stepwise assessment of records.

Firstly, this can be the case when a large number of records of a given species are to be assessed, due to an exceptional influx. In such cases, it can be difficult to assess all the records separately by all voting members. There is also a conceivable chance that a considerable number of observers will not personally submit their records in such a case. Finally, it may also be necessary to put considerable effort in sorting out how many individual birds were involved, by ruling out potential double counts.

The special assessment procedure can also be used when dealing with a number of records of a (sub)species where identification is very difficult and the subject of debate in the literature. The identification of Siberian Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita tristis* is a very good example of this.

Another situation for the special procedure can be when reviewing a number of older records of a species, for example in the light of a new identification criterion which makes it necessary to assess all the older records or when a species is split in several species.

In such a case, the BRBC may decide to set up a task force to deal with a given set records in a special procedure. This task force consists of one or more voting members, which can be aided by non-voting members or even by experts from outside the BRBC. The lead of the task force should nevertheless lie with a voting member. This task force is given the task of treating all the records and to present the result to the entire BRBC at a later meeting. The BRBC can then decide to accept the assessment of the task force, without every single record being considered by every voting member. It should be noted that this way of assessing should be kept to the minimum.

6) Assessment requirements

Voting members are supposed to take the assessments of records seriously. When assessing a record it is assumed that comments are given only on facts that are in the description (for example things that are in contradiction with published literature), and that descriptions and/or comments are read completely. It is for instance not done to write that bird x was probably an atypical Buzzard *Buteo buteo*, even if the descriptions mentions that the bird was at least 3 times as big as a Carrion Crow *Corvus corone*.

It is desirable that comments come straight from the description supported with relevant facts. A record can not be accepted solely because it is from a known and knowledgeable observer, even though the description is a bit shaky in some ways. Neither is it acceptable to reject a record solely with the comment: "I don't believe this or that...". If a member claims not to believe a record, then there should be a clear reasoning to support this disbelief. These kinds of arguments can of course be an argument to look at a certain record more critically.

Records that qualify for acceptance have to contain enough information to clinch the identification. This means that submitters of records have to add a minimum of information to allow the BRC members to make a proper assessment.

The final assessment of the BRBC is primarily aimed at the identification. Apart from that, the BRBC tries, if possible, to say something on the sex, age, plumage and if applicable the subspecies or geographical origin of the bird. These things are part of the formal assessment and are published with the record in the annual report of the BRBC.

Records of current BRBC members are not handled in a different way than those of non-members. Especially from committee members, it should be expected that they are neutral and objective towards all records and that they can eliminate any potential self-interest.

Finally: it is important to keep in mind that the assessment of the BRBC is based on the available description and documentation submitted to the committee! The BRBC accepts a record only if the submitted documentation has enough information to guaranty that it is in fact the claimed species. When a submitted record is rejected, this means that the documentation was not enough to guaranty its identification. In other words: the rejection of a record does not primarily mean that the BRBC claims that the record did not involve the rare species in question; it means that the description cannot be considered 100% satisfactory for acceptance.

7) External expertise

If during the circulation it turns out that the members of the BRBC do not have enough knowledge about a certain topic to assess a record properly, it is recommend that they try to get external expertise from outside the committee. In this case, one member is appointed as being responsible for contacting external experts, bringing the information from these experts together and presenting it to the rest of BRBC. The information of an external expert is considered as advice and is not compulsory for the final assessment of the committee.

8) Wild versus captive origin

If the BRBC accepts an identification, then the committee will discuss whether or not the bird is a genuine vagrant or an escaped or imported bird. For most species, this is so obvious that there will be no discussion necessary. If there is evidence or there are reasons to suspect a non-wild origin, then this record is accepted in the E category. The suspicion of a non-wild origin can be based on one of the following criteria:

- a) The bird shows an abnormal behavior for the species.
- b) The bird shows suspicious abrasion of the plumage, aberrant moult or strange deformities on its legs and/or bill, for example very long nails.
- c) The bird is in an atypical habitat or in a strange location for the species.
- d) The bird has a suspicious ring or other mark, that raises the suspicion of an captive origin.
- e) The record is at an atypical time of the year for the species.

For certain species, for whom the wild origin is a serious source of debate, the BRC can set specific demands for documentation. The BRBC will publish these demands in the form of guidelines on its website.

The status of a species is determined by the ability of the species to reach our latitudes. This is determined by the occurrence of the species in our neighboring countries and the similarity of occurrences and the ability of dispersal of species without a dubious status in Belgium or Europe. If dealing with ship-assisted birds, then the BRC follows the guidelines of the AERC (Association of European Records and Rarities Committees):

- a) Only species that are assumed to be capable to reach Belgium on their own, can be accepted in category A (otherwise category E).
- b) Individuals of which is known that they were held captive or that they received food or water cannot be accepted in category A.
- c) The sole presence on a ship is not enough to not accept a record in category A.

9) New taxon for Belgium

If a new (sub)species for the Belgian list is submitted, the BRBC will first reach a decision on the identification of the species. Then they decide on the chance of a natural occurrence (see part 7).

In case of a perceived wild origin, the case of a new taxon will be handled on the next meeting of the BRBC, and after a definite acceptance of the record, the taxon will be added to the Belgian list. If the BRBC decides that the taxon is of non-wild origin, the future records of the taxon are no longer considered by the BRBC, but they are archived in the E-category.

A new taxon can only be accepted to the Belgian list if there is no negative vote in the last voting round. That means that for a new taxon the criteria for acceptance are even stricter than for other records, for which it is possible to be accepted with one negative vote (see point 3.3, phase 5)

It is aimed to write a separate article on a new taxon for Belgium that is published in Aves and/or Natuur.Oriolus. The discoverer of the taxon is to be involved in the writing of the article, if willing to do so.

10) Categories

The AERC distinguishes between 5 categories of birds species, followed here in by the BRBC.

Category A holds all the records of species of which has been recorded in an apparently wild state at least once since 01/01/1950. This category includes all breeding birds, regular and irregular migratory species, summer guests, winter guests and rarities.

A summary of the Belgian A-list , which on 1 January 2012 counted 437 species, is on the website of the BRBC.

Category B holds all the records of species which has been recorded in an apparently wild state only between 1800 and 1950. For Belgium the following (sub)species are on the B-list:

- | | | |
|--|----------------------------|---------------------|
| • Ruddy Shelduck | • Slender-billed Curlew | • Blue Rock-Thrush |
| • Capercaillie | • Black-bellied Sandgrouse | • Siberian Thrush |
| • Grey Partridge (<i>sphagnetorum</i>) | • Northern Hawk-owl | • Swainson's Thrush |
| • Cream-colored Courser | • White-backed Woodpecker | |

Category C holds all released or escaped species which has established a self-supporting breeding population in Belgium; also birds coming from a category C population in another country (with the species not breeding in Belgium) are in this category.

- | | | |
|--------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| • Black Swan | • Wood Duck | • Rock Dove |
| • Bar-headed Goose | • Mandarin Duck | • Alexandrine Parakeet |
| • Canada Goose | • Ruddy Duck | • Rose-ringed Parakeet |
| • Upland Goose | • Red Grouse | • Monk Parakeet |
| • Egyptian Goose | • Common Pheasant | |
| • Ruddy Shelduck | • Reeve's Pheasant | |

Category D holds species or sometimes certain records of a species that are very difficult to assign to any of the other categories. Category D is a waiting category, where a species or a certain record of a species can be placed as long as there is no decisive argument to put it in one of the other categories. The BRBC tries his utmost best to keep the D-list as empty as possible.

Category E holds all species that have certainly or assumedly escaped from captivity or are ship-assisted with human help. A summary of categories A, D and E is found on the BRBC website.

11) Risk for errors

With the acceptance or the non-acceptance of records there are two possibilities for errors:

- A record is not accepted for whatever reason. It is not unthinkable that in fact the record in reality concerned this species.
- A record is accepted. It is not unthinkable that in fact the record in reality did not concern this species.

To prevent errors of the second kind, the BRBC has to be very strict in its assessment. As a result the number of errors of the first kind will automatically increase. With a more mild or lenient BRBC errors of the second

kind will automatically increase. Since its foundation the BRBC has opted to prevent as many errors of the second kind as possible. The consequence of this method is that it is possible that genuine records are not accepted.

12) Public access of the BRBC-archive

The BRBC keeps a public database where all records of rare (sub)species that have been assessed are to be found. The database shows the minimal information for every record, but not the entire file of every record. All data in the BRBC-archive are accessible for everyone who wants to do research on rare birds in Belgium. This can be the case for individual observers or for authors of articles, books or other media. Requests have to be addressed to the secretary. For unusual requests (large quantities of information, unclear motives) the secretary has to consult the chairman, before sending the data. If necessary the chairman can consult the members of the BRBC.

4. Appendix

Summary of BRBC-members, addresses, duties and terms

General address

BRBC
P.a. Tom Goossens
Visbeekbaan 84
B-2275 Lille
info@belgianRBC.be

Regular committee members

Name	Contact details	Tasks	Term
Stijn Baeten	Stijn.baeten@uantwerpen.be		10/2021
Miguel Demeulemeester	Wheatear32@hotmail.com	Chairman, Provincial recorder: West- and Oost-Vlaanderen	01/2023 Second term
Joris Elst	joris@elst.be	Circulation officer	01/2019
Kenny Hessel	Kenny.hessel@inbo.be	PR-Officer	01/2022
Tom Goossens	tomgoossens@telenet.be	Secretary, provincial recorder: Antwerpen	01/2019
Raphaël Lebrun	Lebrun.rafael@gmail.com	Webmaster, Circulation officer	01/2020
Alain De Broyer		Provincial recorder: Liege & Luxembourg	07/2022
Robin Gailly		Provincial recorder: Hainaut	07/2021
Laurent Raty	l.raty@skynet.be	Provincial recorder Brabant Wallon & Bruxelles	01/2023 Second term
Frédéric Vanhove	fredericvanhove@yahoo.fr	PR-officer, Provincial recorder: Namur	01/2020

Non-voting members

Name	Contact details	Tasks
Wouter Faveyts	Wouter.faveyts@telenet.be	Report co author