Networks of care

Title **To view the original PDF of this World Birdwatch article,** click here. More than half of Poland?s 140 Important Bird Areas (IBAs) are over 15,000 hectares. The biggest of all, Tuchola Forest, covers 360,000 hectares. Simply monitoring sites of this size is a formidable challenge, but conserving IBAs also involves identifying and responding to threats to them, creating an active and knowledgeable base of support among the people who live in and around them, and building relationships with different levels of government, developers and others whose decisions affect them. These tasks would be beyond the unassisted capability of OTOP (BirdLife in Poland), with its staff of 43 people. So, like BirdLife Partners in many other countries, OTOP is developing a network of IBA Caretakers, or, in Polish, Opiekunowie Ostoi Ptaków. (Opiekun is a widely-used term for a caretaker, and Ostoi Ptaków means IBA). As the name implies, IBA Caretakers are volunteers who give up their time to support conservation of their local IBA. The two-year project began in early 2008. OTOP?s board believed they would never get sufficient volunteer Caretakers for the whole IBA network, and aimed for coverage at just half the sites. The response confounded these modest expectations: they now have Caretakers at 125 IBAs, comprising 121 individuals and four regional ornithological societies. OTOP?s criteria when inviting people to join the network were straightforward: they were looking for the most active birdwatchers and conservationists at each site. Two key groups were identified: ?observers/monitors?, who need ornithological skills, and ?activists?, who don?t. In theory the same person may perform both roles, but in practice OTOP finds this is rarely the case, as they require different personalities and attributes. Because of the way the Caretakers were selected, about 90% are ornithologists or birdwatchers, and most are young men, many of them students or recent graduates. ?Young people form the skeleton of the network, but although they are keen to go to the field to carry out monitoring and surveys, many have been less enthusiastic about contacting local communities and landowners, or doing education work, for example?, says Tomasz Wilk, OTOP?s IBA Caretaker Coordinator. He now wants to attract older people, who are more experienced, more established in their communities, and more confident when dealing with decision-makers. As people with different skills and interests join the network, he also expects that more women will become involved?there are currently only five female Caretakers. Most Caretakers are enthusiastic amateurs, not professionally connected with conservation science. Tomasz is happy about this: scientists may know more about conservation issues and survey techniques, but are often too busy to spend much time working on the ground. ?A mixed strategy is probably the best, though most important is not the profession, but the time and willingness to visit the sites and to act.? Caretakers are told when they join that they will be required to complete an annual monitoring form, and do ?State-Pressure-Response? monitoring at their IBA. Their other key responsibility is to give OTOP early warning of activities or plans which pose a threat to the IBA. Then, if they want to and have time, they are encouraged to engage in education and awareness work with local communities. But many Caretakers feel uncomfortable and ill-equipped to work with communities, challenge developments or intervene at public enquiries. To address this OTOP is just starting the *Ecointerventions* project, to build capacity among Caretakers through training in education, policy and environmental law. Lack of public awareness or understanding of Natura 2000, the EU programme which protects sites of high biodiversity value, has been one of the biggest problems that OTOP? and IBA Caretakers?have had to face. News of the Natura 2000 designation of IBAs tends to ?scare? people, and development problems are blamed on Natura 2000 even when it has had nothing to do with the matter. As a result, awareness-raising among local communities, especially farmers, should have been an important part of the Caretaker project at both local and regional level. Most of Poland?s small farmers are also unaware of the EU?s agri-environment schemes. These provide financial support for traditional ways of farming which maintain productive habitats that are also rich in wildlife such as Corncrake *Crex crex* or Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola*. Through its Caretakers, OTOP is now encouraging farmers to become part of these schemes, ?so that conservation becomes their business, and damage to biodiversity becomes their problem?, says Tomasz. All Caretakers at IBAs with farmland which could benefit have been involved in distributing information leaflets and talking to farmers. However, it has been Tomasz?s experience that if Caretakers are given too much work they are liable to say, ?OK, you do it. I?ll go and watch the birds?. To counter this, Tomasz says that Caretakers need to build a group around them that includes community leaders and opinion formers, if it is to be effective. ?I tell people that the Caretaker is the animator of what?s going on in the community. They aren?t the person who is expected to do everything. If someone comes to them with an environmental problem, they should be ready and equipped to reply saying ?Thanks for telling me, now this is what *you* can do about it.?? One key output of the Caretaker project will be a fully updated publication on the IBAs of Poland ? an important tool in policy

advocacy. OTOP, which already has a strong track record in influencing policy and planning decisions, is using the information collected through the Caretaker network to influence decision making processes even more effectively. For example, OTOP recently asked Caretakers for information on IBAs where meadows have been converted to arable. This was quickly compiled and passed to BirdLife International for inclusion in a regional report. OTOP is helping the government to write management plans for Natura 2000 sites which are also IBAs. Tracking and contributing to this process is far more than OTOP staff are capable of, and so involving the IBA Caretakers will be critical. The Ministry of Environment has requested a list of Caretakers to help with management planning and bird surveys at Special Protection Area (SPAs). Once Caretakers are signed up, it is important to keep them motivated and active. Tomasz has found that the Caretakers he knows personally, or spent time with at the first IBA Caretaker Workshop in July 2008, are much more engaged, and more likely to send back forms and be active. ?IBA Caretaker Coordinators need to spend time getting to know Caretakers personally, ideally meeting them face to face.? Other techniques OTOP is using to making people feel part of a bigger team include regular email contact, education and awareness material designed specifically for Caretakers, and occasional small gifts, such as T-shirts or backpacks, which are unique to the Caretaker network. Every issue of OTOP?s magazine includes an article about an IBA written by a Caretaker, and OTOP produces an annual report about the activities and achievements of the Caretaker network. As one of Poland?s largest membership NGOs, OTOP can be far more influential in standing up to threats to IBAs than any local group could be. But without the early warnings provided by Caretakers, plans for damaging developments could be far advanced before OTOP found out about them. For example, the caretaker at the Rakutowskie Marshes IBA noticed that the water level in the wetland area was decreasing because of the deterioration of some small dams, and that trees were being cut within the IBA. The Caretaker asked OTOP to write to the Regional Conservation Director about these issues. As a result, a meeting of three key stakeholder groups has taken place to agree how to maintain the dams and to plan the timber extraction at a site. A management plan for this site will be prepared in the near future, and OTOP has proposed to the Regional Conservation Director that the Caretakers should be involved in this. ?We wouldn?t have been made aware of the threat to this IBA without having Caretakers in place?, Tomasz says. Asked what he thinks has motivated so many people to give up their spare time to help OTOP conserve birds and their habitats, Tomasz is in no doubt. ?The biggest and most frequent motivation is that people want to be involved in conserving the environment at the place where they live and work, and which they love.?