

Volunteering the Danish Way

Title

To view the **original PDF of this World Birdwatch article**, [click here](#). Bird conservation in Denmark has a long history and DOF, the Danish BirdLife Partner, is one of the oldest nature conservation societies in Europe. In 2002, inspired by similar examples from the BirdLife Partnership, DOF decided to establish groups of volunteers around each of their 128 IBAs. Their aim was to build a locally-based network of skilled observers to help conserve the sites by delivering monitoring information about them. A second aim was to attract new members to DOF, with special attention to young people and women. The Danish IBA Caretaker Project, funded by the Aage V. Jensen Charity Foundation, was launched in 2003. DOF did not start the network from scratch, but from two existing voluntary networks. The first was DOF's structure of 13 local branches, which later became the primary source of local coordinators for the new network. The second comprised locally active birdwatchers acting as volunteer researchers and monitors in DOF's long established Rare and Threatened Species Project. There are now 908 volunteers involved as local IBA Caretakers, covering most of the Danish IBAs and the 46 most threatened breeding bird species. The volunteers are organised into 192 local groups, about two-thirds of which were established as a direct result of the Caretaker project. The rest already existed in one form or another. The Caretaker project mainly focused on IBAs, but due to the favourable availability of local volunteers, it was possible to extend the coverage to a wider range of sites, such as potential IBAs, and places of local ornithological importance with educational or other value, including DOF's own 20 nature reserves. The majority of group members live near their sites, but some travel as far as 60-100 km. Normally the groups grow around a permanent core of 2-3 individuals and a varying number of irregular members. Volunteers commonly take part in more than one group. Within each group, DOF assigns one person who serves as the main contact for Thomas Vikstrøm, DOF's National IBA Caretakers Coordinator. These contacts are the primary sources of data and local knowledge about their site. There is also a person responsible for the maintenance of the group's web page. Each volunteer is asked to sign an informal Caretaker contract, called 'Mutual Expectations', which defines the roles and responsibilities of both parties. In general, DOF expects Caretakers to become DOF members, to perform the tasks that they have agreed to take on, and to involve others in their activities. DOF offers basic training for its newly-recruited volunteers. As they become further involved, a lot of them are offered additional training; for example, many have taken basic IT training that helps them maintain their IBA websites. When asked how much time volunteers spend in their role as IBA Caretakers, responses varied from a few hours at weekends to 30 hours a week. Volunteers have shown remarkable reliability, even if they have only a small amount of time to contribute. This is perhaps one of the advantages of having older volunteers. So far, DOF recognises that it is failing to attract the young generation. 'It is commonly recognised in Denmark that it is next to impossible to engage young people in conservation?', Thomas Vikstrøm commented. On the plus side, older people are often

experienced birdwatchers, who bring substantial local knowledge and a long history of involvement with the sites, which has often enabled DOF to compile important information going back for as long as the 1960s. Another benefit is the larger amount of free time older participants are able to dedicate, as well as their financial stability. On average, around 20% of the members of the groups are women. Caretakers come from a variety of professional backgrounds. One group of eight includes a graphic designer, a retired trades union employee, a librarian, a construction worker, a former aviation officer, a forester, a chemical engineer and a refrigerator retailer. Each Caretaker group has a clear task and focus. These are normally the trigger bird species for which their IBA has been designated, and each group decides within itself and in consultation with DOF what monitoring strategy to follow, what types of data to collect, and how to report them. The main online tool used to monitor birds is DOFBasen, an online database of bird observations covering the entire country. DOFBasen offers essential services both to DOF, and to any birder with an interest in bird data. During 2009, the system captured a total of 1,181,591 observations made in one year. The Caretaker network is one of the key sources and users of DOFbasen data. Each group has its own website, based on a DOF template, for which the members are entirely responsible. This website is linked to DOFBasen to allow exchange of data. Special site based modules provide a way of organising the data according to the needs of IBA monitoring. DOFbasen's reporting tools also offer instant feedback to the users, who can easily see the contribution their observations are making to the 'big picture' of conserving birds in Denmark and beyond. Data from DOFBasen is used to update the IBA records on BirdLife's World Bird Database, an achievement that is mainly the result of the activities of the IBA Caretakers. And thanks mainly to improved knowledge provided by Caretakers, a number of sites have been identified that apparently fulfil the international IBA criteria, which may be proposed as IBAs in due course. Information from DOFBasen has often been key in forming the basis of designation for sites as Special Protected Areas (SPAs) under the European Union Birds Directive. For example, DOFBasen data on breeding Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* led to the designation of 12 SPAs. One hundred and thirteen of the 128 IBAs in the country have been designated as SPAs, which are integrated into the EU's network of protected areas, Natura 2000. The National Environmental Research Institute, the official body responsible for monitoring SPAs in Denmark, uses data from DOFbasen to fulfil its EU reporting requirements. IBA Caretakers themselves are not responsible for carrying out conservation actions. This is the responsibility of the site manager, such as the local forestry service or farmer, although some Caretaker groups do arrange hay-mowing and similar activities at their sites. However, the information that the Caretakers provide through DOF feeds into the management of the site, and often leads to changes in the way sites are managed. The IBA Caretaker project constitutes about one-third of the budget DOF spends on conservation. In return, the Caretakers are DOF's most important resource and source of local knowledge. They are the eyes, ears and voice of DOF at the local level for each IBA. Thanks to the high quality data they provide, DOF has been able to play an active and effective role in the decision making process concerning the designation and management of the sites. Moreover, they enable DOF to be instantly aware in case of a threat or change arising at a site. So far, the international cooperation activities undertaken by DOF's Caretaker network include visits to Malaysia, Indonesia and Canada, and to and from Kenya. Some of these projects have been related to establishment and support of LCGs and SSGs. The Caretakers themselves have recruited hundreds of new volunteers to the groups. 'The development of the IBA Caretakers network has been a very self-motivating project', says Thomas Vikstrøm. 'It has reached a stage where there is no need to actively recruit people for the network anymore. New participants come along on their own, attracted by its success.' DOF may not be the largest membership-based NGO in the country, but it definitely has the biggest share of active

volunteers. Almost 10% of DOF's 16,000 members regularly volunteer. This enormous contribution of free time, skills and commitment is gratefully acknowledged by the DOF staff and board, and was explicitly listed among the factors for the success of the Caretaker project by DOF's Director, Jan Ejlsted. **Written by Boris Barov**
