Breeding birds of Rače ponds in NE Slovenia and their trends during 13 years

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Abstract

The breeding bird assemblage of the Rače fishpond complex in north-eastern Slovenia is described. There are three ponds (4.5 ha to 20 ha) which are managed for semi-intensive fish-farming. During 13 years (1986–1998), I estimated the number of breeding bird pairs on the bases of found nests and/or observed females with fledglings. Six species of non-Passeriformes, i.e. *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, *Podiceps cristatus*, *Anas platyrhynchos*, *Aythya fuligula*, *Fulica atra* and *Gallinula chloropus*, nested regularly. The total number of breeding pairs (excluding “possible” breeders) varied between 12 in 1994 and 45 in 1998. During the period only two species declined, i.e. *Anas platyrhynchos* and *Aythya fuligula*. The numbers of two species pairs were positively correlated, i.e. *Podiceps cristatus* vs. *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, and *Fulica atra* vs. *Gallinula chloropus*. Although the total density was highest in the smallest pond, the difference among ponds was not significant.

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Introduction

It is already well known that fishponds provide a suitable habitat for many waterbird species and that they are the most important breeding sites in some regions for some species (e.g. Musil et al. 1992, Bukacinska et al. 1996). Moreover, the presence of fishponds in some parts of Europe is one of the most important reasons for the richness and diversity of birds. In many areas fishponds play an important role as a substitute for natural habitats for many waterbirds.

The breeding bird assemblages of fishponds has been investigated in a number of recent studies, mostly in Central Europe (e.g. Hudec 1975, Cempulik 1985, Kot 1986, Musil et al. 1992, Musil & Šalek 1994, Pavelka et al. 1995, Trnka 1995 and references therein). But little quantitative information is available from southern Europe. The assemblages of birds breeding in the fishponds in Slovenia are poorly known, the only study being the one by Vogrin (1996).

In 1986, I began a comprehensive survey of the breeding birds occurring in the Rački ribniki (hereafter Rače ponds). My aims were to follow the population trends over the years, and to analyse the relationships among the breeding species.

Study area

The study was made at the Rače ponds in the Landscape Park Rački ribniki – Požeg, north-eastern Slovenia (approximately 46°27’N, 15°41’E). The Rače ponds (fishpond complex) consist of three ponds (covering from 4.5 ha to 20 ha) which are managed for semi-intensive fish-farming. This is the largest and oldest fishpond complex in Slovenia. The fish ponds were regularly emptied in early spring or in autumn for a few weeks for fish harvest. The belt of vegetation (mainly in the biggest pond), up to 30 m wide, is composed mainly of *Typha angustifolia* and runs mostly along the northern shore. The other dominant plant species are *Nym-
phoides peltata in the largest pond, Polygonum amphibium in the middle pond and Trapa natans in the smallest pond. According to my own estimate, the average depth in the ponds is about 1.1 m. The ponds are eutrophic. In the northern part of the largest pond there is also an island (about 35 x 5 m), covered mainly with Alnus glutinosa, Urtica spp. and Robus spp. The culturing of carp has always been carried out there, and has lately been done with supplementary feeding and manuring. The surrounding landscape consists mainly of mixed forests and meadows with hedges.

Methods
This study presents the results for the 1986–1998 period, except for 1989 when only data for grebes were gathered. The number of pairs of Podiceps cristatus, Tachybaptus ruficollis, Aythya fuligula, Fulica atra and Gallinula chloropus were estimated only on the basis of found nests, and that of all other species on the basis of nests and/or observed females with fledglings. Only nest with eggs, egg shells or young were included in the count (see also e.g. Goc 1986). All nests, survived and robbed, were included.

Searching for nests was carried out two to five times in the breeding season (May–July), see also Vogrin (1999). Attempts were made to find all nests by making a systematic search of the vegetation. Additional censuses were carried out at least twenty times during each breeding season. Only non-Passeriformes were used for this study.

When comparing densities between ponds only densities of the four most common species (Podiceps cristatus, Tachybaptus ruficollis, Fulica atra and Gallinula chloropus) were used. The reasons for this is that other species did not breed in all ponds (Aythya fuligula), their densities were very low, or/and the number of pairs of certain species (e.g. Anas platyrhynchos) was not possible to determine for each pond separately.

Since the frequency distribution of several parameters did not appear to be normally distributed, I used non-parametric tests (Chi-square and Kruskal-Wallis 1-Way Anova tests) and Spearman correlation coefficient. A p-value < 0.05 was considered significant. All statistical tests were performed using a SPPS/PC 6.0 package and according to Sokal & Rohlf (1995).

Results
Six species of non-Passeriformes nested regularly at the Rače ponds. They were Tachybaptus ruficollis, Podiceps cristatus, Anas platyrhynchos, Aythya fuligula, Fulica atra and Gallinula chloropus. Two additional species, i.e. Porzana parva and Charadrius dubius, nested occasionally. The number of breeding pairs (without "possible" breeders) varied between 12 in 1994 and 45 in 1998 (Figure 1). The average densities of the four commonest species in all ponds together are given in Table 1.

Declines were observed in the number of Anas platyrhynchos (r_S = -0.63, P < 0.05, n = 11) and Aythya fuligula (r_S = -0.75, P < 0.005, n = 13); Figure 2. At the start of the study, Aythya fuligula was one of the most numerous breeding species. At that time, up to twelve nests were found. No other species showed any significant trend during the study.

The pooled data for all ponds show a positive relationship between the number of Podiceps cristatus and Tachybaptus ruficollis pairs (r_S = 0.72, P < 0.05, n = 12; Figure 3). I also calculated the relationships for the four most common breeders for each pond separately. In the largest pond I found two positive relationships, namely between Podiceps cristatus and Tachybaptus ruficollis (r_S = 0.61, P < 0.05, n = 10), and between Fulica atra and Gallinula chloropus (r_S = 0.86, P < 0.01, n = 11). In the smallest pond a positive relationship existed between Podiceps cristatus and Gallinula chloropus (r_S = 0.62, P < 0.05, n = 12). For the middle pond no significant relationships were found.

Figure 1. Numbers of pairs of breeding species at the Rače ponds between 1986–1998 (data for 1989 missing).
The densities of *Podiceps cristatus* (Kruskal-Wallis test, Chi-square = 15.69, df = 2, P < 0.001, n = 36) and *Gallinula chloropus* (Kruskal-Wallis test, Chi-square = 6.11, df = 2, P < 0.05, n = 36) was significantly correlated between ponds, whereas the densities of *Tachybaptus ruficollis* (Kruskal-Wallis test, Chi-square = 3.77, df = 2) and *Fulica atra* (Kruskal-Wallis test, Chi-square = 3.72, df = 2) did not differ significantly between the ponds (in both cases: P > 0.05, n = 36).

In the pooled data, the bird densities were highest in the smallest pond; however, the differences among ponds were not significant (Kruskal-Wallis test = 5.3, df = 2, P > 0.05, n = 144).

**Discussion**

It is interesting to compare whether species numbers shift independently of one other, in parallel, or compensatorily. According to Mac Arthur (1972), changes in the number of individuals is determined mostly by inter-specific interactions within the community. One would then anticipate numerous negative correlations among species, principally among the ecologically most similar congeners (Lack 1971). If numbers change in a totally independent manner, no significant correlations should appear, except in a few cases, due to chance (Newton 1998).

In my cases no negative correlations were found. There are two nearly congeneric pairs of species in my data set (*Podiceps cristatus* and *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, and *Fulica atra* and *Gallinula chloropus*), co-occurring in the same pond and with feeding and breeding habits that more or less overlap (e.g. Cramp & Simmons 1977, Cramp & Simmons 1980, Glutz Von Blotzheim et al. 1987), but none of them was negatively correlated. Instead, the changes were mostly independent, or, in the cases of *Podiceps cristatus* vs. *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, and *Fulica atra* vs. *Gallinula chloropus*, even strongly positively correlated. This suggests that these species responded in a similar way to a common environmental factor (Newton 1998). On the other hand, *Podiceps cristatus* and *Gallinula chloropus* are so different morphologically and ecologically that the positive correlation between them probably was due to chance.

The reason for the decline of *Aythya fuligula* has already been discussed (Vogrin 1997). The main reason was high fish stocks and overgrowth of island. The reason for decline of *Anas platyrhynchos* is unknown. Decreasing numbers of these and other species were noted also in many other ponds in Central Europe (see e.g. Musil et al. 1992, Pavelka et al. 1992, Musil et al. 1995). Musil et al. (1992) explained this decline of ducks by a gradual growth of shrubs and trees on islets which formerly had been

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**Table 1. Densities (pairs/10 ha) of the four most common birds at the Rače ponds between 1986–1998 (pooled data for all three ponds).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th><em>Podiceps cristatus</em></th>
<th><em>Tachybaptus ruficollis</em></th>
<th><em>Fulica atra</em></th>
<th><em>Gallinula chloropus</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
optimal breeding habitats for ducks. Nevertheless, 
the declines could also be due to high fish stocks in 
the ponds (see e.g. Pykal & Janda 1994, Pykal 1995), 
and to shortage of food (e.g. Gardarsson & Einars- 
son 1994). Dense fish stock causes high feeding 
pressure on available food (e.g. large zooplankton, 
benthos, littoral fauna), hence lack of feeding sourc- 
es for waterfowl. Moreover, manuring with excre- 
ment of domestic animals which is added to the 
water for the purpose of producing bigger fish af- 
ects the chemical balance of the water. In order to 
reduce undesirable plant species more chemicals 
(e.g. lime) were used.

The number of breeding species in the Rače fish- 
ponds (possible breeders are not taken into account) 
is low compared to that of other ponds and water 
odies in Central Europe. In the lake Ilgi (NE Po- 
land) and in the ponds near Puste Ulany (Slovakia), 
which are comparable in size to the Rače fishponds, 
up to 16 (Mackowicz & Krajewski 1993) and 13 
(Trnka 1995) species, respectively, were breeding. I 
suggest that human impact (e.g. supplementary feed- 
ing of fishes by fishermen from boats, intimidating 
the fish eating birds, e.g. Phalacrocorax carbo and 
Ardea cinerea, and emptying of the ponds in spring), 
and lack of suitable vegetation, e.g. Phragmites 
australis, are responsible for the scarcity of breeding 
pecies in my area.

Podiceps cristatus preferred the largest pond (see 
also Vogrin 1989), where it reached the highest 
density. The reason is probably the rich and dense 
emergent vegetation in that pond, the most impor- 
tant factor (beside food) for nest site selection (e.g. 
Salonen & Penttinen 1988). In contrast to Podiceps 
cristatus, Gallinula chloropus reached the highest 
density in the smallest pond. This finding is in 
agreement with the result of e.g. Cempulik (1993). 
My results seem to show that Podiceps cristatus and 
Gallinula chloropus are specialists whereas Tachy- 
baptus ruficollis and Fulica atra are more flexible 
when selecting their breeding sites.

In the course of the present study some rare 
pecies not yet reported from this region bred. One 
was Porzana parva, which is an extremely rare 
breding species in Slovenia (Geister 1995). It bred 
in 1998 at the Rače pond complex, and this is the 
only known recent nesting site in north-eastern Slov- 
enia. All other possible breeders, i.e. Podiceps nig- 
rillacis, Anas querquedula, A. clypeata, A. crecca 
and Aythya ferina, are also rare breeders in Slovenia 
(Geister 1995).

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carried out by myself with assistance of my wife 
Nuša and my brother Marjan, to whom I am partic- 
ularly grateful. All work was conducted without 
financial support. Additional literature was kindly 
provided by Bard Gunner Stokke (Jakobsli, Nor- 
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Sammanfattning

Häckande fåglar och deras trendar i Race fiskdammar i nordöstra Slovenien under 13 år.


Analysen visade att det inte fanns några negativa samband som kunde tyda på konkurrens. Istället var sambanden positiva eller saknades, vilket närmast tyder på att det var gemensamma omvärldsfaktorer som styrde antalet fåglar. Beträffande nedgången för vigg så berodde den på ökande fiskbestånd och uppväxande vegetation på ön, medan orsaken till nedgången för gräsanden är okänd. Man har observerat liknande nedgångar hos flera arter i andra fiskdammar i Centraleuropa och orsakerna anses kunna vara flera: födokonkurrens från tät fiskbestånd, igenväxning av stränderna, gödsling för att få större fiskar med ändrad vattenkemi som följd samt kemisk bekämpning av oönskad vegetation. Race-dammarna är fågelfattigare än många andra vattenområden i Centraleuropa. Detta beror sannolikt delvis på lokala omständigheter, såsom kraftiga störningar, tömningen av dammarna på våren och avsaknad av lämplig vegetation, särskilt bladvass.

Under inventeringarna hade jag också tillfälle att notera ett antal sällsynta fåglar i dammarna, t.ex. den ovan nämnda häckningen av mindre sumphöna, som är extremt sällsynt i regionen. Andra rariteter, som möjligen men ej bevisligen häckade, var svarthalsad dopping, ärta, skedand, kricka och brunand.