



Black-tailed Godwit Facts

- Black-tailed godwits are red-listed in the UK and on the IUCN's 'Near Threatened' list
- Summer plumage is bright orange brown chest and in winter grey brown with distinctive black and white wing bar throughout the year
- After wintering apart pairs reunite on their breeding grounds. If the partner doesn't arrive within a few days they get 'divorced'
- Old names include blackwit, yarwhelp and Jadreka snipe



EDDIE VAN MARUM |

Guarding the Godwits

How predator protection is hampering Eddie van Marum's efforts to save Holland's national bird from extinction

Project Profile

Location: [county/region?], Groningen Province, Netherlands

Type of landscape: water meadows

Acreage:

Funding: Groningen Province, Collectief Groningen West, Stichting het Groninger Landschap and SBNL Natuurfonds

Conservation measures: grazing and mowing regime management, ditch restoration, scrape creation, rewetting, predation management



“Predation must be addressed when it is a problem”



Did you know?

- The Wadden Sea encompasses shallow seas, tidal mudflats and wetlands stretching from North West Netherlands to Germany and Denmark and covering an area of 3,900 square miles
- Hundreds of thousands of waders, ducks, and geese use the area as a migration stopover or wintering site
- In 2009, the Dutch and German parts of the Wadden Sea were inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List and the Danish part was added in June 2014
- Its numerous dykes and causeways makes it among the most human-altered habitats on the planet
- Notable inhabitants include white tailed eagle, Eurasian spoonbill and European sea sturgeon

Wader chicks like this redshank are highly vulnerable to predation.
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Eddie van Marum has been working on farmland conservation projects for more than 30 years in his native Groningen, the northern most province of The Netherlands. He specialises in linking scientific research teams with the local farming community. He explained: *“Without a local connection, scientists often find it difficult to gain access to the land. I'm able to explain when the research is in the landowners' interest and they trust me. It's vital to have community involvement.”*

Eddie was recently involved in a two-year study of wader predation on water meadows 5km to 10km from the Wadden Sea, which is an UNESCO World Heritage site designated for its unique habitat and birds including Holland's favourite the black-tailed godwit. Run by ecologists Bob Jonge Poerink and Jelle Loonstra from Ecosensys and Jasja Dekker from Jasja Dekker Dierrecologie, the project is joint funded by Groningen Province and conservation organisations Collectief Groningen West, Stichting het Groninger Landschap and SBNL Natuurfonds.

Despite farmers being paid to improve habitat, waders including black-tailed godwit, redshank, lapwing, oystercatcher, avocet and little ringed plover have suffered dramatic declines in the past 20 years. During that period the number of generalist predators has rapidly increased. Eddie said: *“When I was young there were no foxes in this area, they arrived about 30 years ago. In the past 10 years, stone martens have crossed the border from Germany and are now present in very high numbers. They are native to Holland, so I have no problem with them returning, but the rate at which they have expanded is alarming.”*



Eddie van Marum with a godwit chick

Provided it is targeted and done according to best practice, Eddie is in favour of controlling predators such as the stone marten to protect wading birds and other wildlife. He said: *“Predators play an important part in the ecosystem, so a 'kill-it-all' approach is not right. Some farmers are making ecological deserts out of their meadows and refuse to do anything to improve habitat because they think wader decline is due solely to predation, which is wrong. At the same time, predation must be addressed when it is clearly a problem.”*

As well as being the Dutch national bird, black-tailed godwits are on the IUCN 'Near Threatened' list and Eddie

is part of the team studying to what degree stone martens are limiting the birds' productivity. GPS tags were attached to the predators and cameras placed on nest sites to assess their impact. After hatching, black tailed godwit chicks were fitted with transmitters to keep track of their movements and to discover what was preying on them. The report, published in November 2020, showed that due to disturbance by predators, primarily stone marten, none of the wader species were getting enough time on the nest to hatch chicks and many simply abandoned the area before the nesting period. It further revealed that godwit young in particular had very low survival rates, from the 50 chicks fitted with transmitters only one survived.

Eddie said: *“Stone martens either eat the birds' eggs or collect them to consume later. A single marten is capable of clearing every nest in its territory including those of black tailed godwit, lapwing, redshank, oystercatcher, mallard, shoveller, gadwall and coot. Even on well managed habitat, I've seen pairs of breeding waders drop from up to 30 to almost zero due to stone marten disturbance.”*

Despite the scientific evidence that predation is one of the main reasons for the continued decline of waders in the region, very little can be done about it. In Holland, large expansions in the stone marten, fox and crow populations coincided with greater legal restrictions on predator management on a national and regional level. Mustelids were protected including stone martens (1949), weasels (1977), polecats (1991) and stoats (1991). Foxes were protected under the Flora and Fauna Act in 2001. In 2006 this was reversed but trapping remains illegal leaving shooting as the only option for fox control. Use of Larsen traps for control of crows and magpies under

Wildlife Highlights



OYSTERCATCHER



CURLEW



REDSHANK



LAPWING



LITTLE RINGED PLOVER



AVOCET

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a general licence was ended in 2007 and it is now almost impossible to obtain a special licence to use one. Eddie said: "You cannot control crows sufficiently by shooting alone and Larsen traps are highly effective at catching egg finding specialists among corvid species, but whenever a licence is granted, animal rights organisations manage to fight it in court and generally win. Although on paper everything seems to be possible, national legislation in the form of the licencing system still works like a brake on conservation. The main reason for wader decline has been the intensification of agriculture, but there is no doubt that the second cause is regulation affecting predator control."

Eddie believes many of the restrictions are counterproductive, increasing the risk of predators suffering. "Most people still think that snaring strangles a fox but that's

not the case. Modern snares have stops which means it's like keeping a dog on a leash and non-target species can be released. It is a humane way to trap a fox with less risk of wounding than shooting at night. Nevertheless night shooting remains one of the essential tools in the conservation kit."

Eddie is convinced that predation is now the limiting factor partly because so much good work has been done to improve habitat on the water meadows in recent years through national Government and EU funded agri-environment schemes. Land use in the project area is predominantly intensive dairy on small farms between 40-100 hectares, so management of cattle grazing and mowing is key. If waders are present, parcels of land are taken out of production in the spring and inspections are made to decide when it's safe for livestock to return. Fields have been rewetted with scrapes and ditches and water levels raised to mitigate centuries of drainage. Thanks to the farmer-led Collectief Groningen West, there are more and more such measures. Compensation for income forgone and a flexible approach to schemes is essential. Eddie said: "Farmers are running businesses. They are happy to help with wader conservation, but they need to be compensated and have the freedom to bend the rules, if necessary. One farmer took huge trouble to rewet his land as part of a scheme and had 17 breeding lapwing. If he'd raised the water to the stipulated height, all the nests would have been lost, so he ignored the letter of the agreement and had to forfeit the payment. It was ridiculous."

Motivation for the farming community is essential for

"If we decide to save our beautiful birds half measures are no good"

conservation success and Eddie is concerned that farmers will be put off habitat improvement, if it fails to reverse declines due to high predation levels. As a result of his and others' research, he is encouraged that the regional Government recently permitted a study involving trapping and killing stone martens and it is looking at increased control of feral cats and foxes. But it's difficult to undo protective legislation once in place and Eddie has a stark warning for policy makers in the UK. "Every penny of public money put into the conservation of ground-breeding species will be in vain, if further layers of protection are given to generalist predators and, for example, you ban fox snares and Larsen traps. I would love to tell the politicians in the UK, what they have now and what they risk destroying, based on what we have lost here in Holland. Predation is something that can be managed and must be managed or we will lose the battle to prevent the extinction of our waders. We cannot leave it up to nature, we need to make an active choice and if we decide to save our beautiful birds, half measures are no good." ■

RESEARCH IN PRACTICE

Waders for Real

Lizzie Grayshon
GWCT Wetlands Ecologist



Initiated in 2015, the Waders for Real project in the Avon Valley in Hampshire aimed to improve breeding success of lapwing and redshank and increase the number of breeding pairs on a nationally important site. Historic declines were driven by habitat degradation, but recent evidence suggested that predation was limiting recovery.

Habitat and predation pressure interact and vary between sites, hence understanding the specific reasons for a decline is critical. Much like the godwits in Groningen, our monitoring before the start of the project showed low nest and chick survival due to predation was limiting population recovery even in the presence of restored habitat. A combination of habitat improvements, temporary electric fencing and more targeted legal lethal predator control has led to the stabilisation of lapwing pairs with an increase in productivity and an 84% increase in redshank pairs over five years.

The Avon Valley holds a range of avian and mammalian predators during the spring. These species form an important part of the ecosystem, however, the increase in generalist predators such as foxes and crows in the UK means that in many cases population recovery is not possible without legal lethal control at least during an initial recovery. Engaging and enthusing local land managers and farmers is also essential. In the Avon Valley a collaborative approach through a Farmer Cluster has increased habitat restoration and predator management without external funding. For more information on the Waders for Real project visit gwct.org.uk.



Clockwise from above: Management of cattle grazing is a key part of improving habitat for waders; to counter centuries of drainage farmers have set about rewetting their land by clearing drains and creating shallow pools; young waders need muddy banks to forage for invertebrates; redshank, like godwits, nest on the ground, making them an easy target; protected stone martens are capable of clearing every nest in a territory; a lapwing chick is weighed and tagged.
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