

Preface

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Wet grasslands are typical elements of the Central, West and East European landscape. Wet grasslands are usually man made rather than natural habitats. They have been formed on places which were formerly salt marshes, freshwater marshes, swamps, peat bogs or riverine forests. Due to their low intensity of farming, wet grasslands can be regarded as semi-natural habitats. Wet grasslands are among the most important breeding habitats for waders (Charadrii) in Europe (see Piersma 1986). The population of at least one species, the Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*, breeds nearly exclusively in this habitat. The other seven wader species which may be considered as grassland or meadow birds (Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*, Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*, Dunlin *Calidris alpina*, Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*, Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*, Curlew *Numenius arquata* and Redshank *Tringa totanus*) do this to a lesser extent.

Wet grasslands are, however, not the original breeding habitat of these species. Their natural habitats - saltmarshes, freshwater marshes, inundated swamps near rivers, dunes, peat bogs etc. (see Tomiałojc 1987) - have to a great extent disappeared, in some cases being transformed into wet grasslands. Wet grasslands are in many places therefore a substitute for the original natural habitats. This substitute habitat still allows a large number of waders to survive in our cultural landscape. Wet grasslands form a refuge not only for waders but also for a number of plants and animals which, like the waders, have lost their natural habitats.

Wet grasslands are largely areas of agricultural interest. Agricultural use of land has greatly been intensified during recent decades. Wet grasslands, as areas of traditionally low intensity farming, have been especially affected by this development. Meanwhile, wet grasslands seem to be threatened in many European countries due to an intensification of farming practices. Waders, due to their position close to the top of the food chain in these habitats, are well suited as indicators for the 'ecological health' of wet grassland habitat. A declining wader population is usually the first noticeable alarm signal which brings conservation organizations into action.

Meanwhile many of the decisions regarding the development of agricultural politics are not taken on a national but on a European level, namely within the countries of the European Community (EC). These agricultural decisions on the European level affect the welfare of great parts of European breeding wader populations to a much greater extent than any other developments. Nature protection measures therefore also have to start on the EC level.

On 23 September 1989 the Wader Study Group (WSG) brought together experts of several European countries in a workshop on breeding waders of wet grasslands, held during the WSG conference in Ribe, in Denmark. The aims of this workshop were:

1. to review the situation of wet grasslands in Europe (especially in the countries of the EC);
2. to update the information on population sizes and population trends of waders breeding on wet grasslands within the EC;
3. to give examples of basic research and applied research on grassland waders and habitat management; and
4. to draw conclusions from all this information and to transform these conclusions into recommendations for all those involved in the conservation of wet grasslands and their biota.

These proceedings include most of the talks which were given at the conference. National reviews for Belgium, Denmark, France and Portugal which were not presented in the workshop, have been added. The papers in the proceedings differ in length and some other features. Some papers reflect contradictory views (see the contributions of Albert Beintema p. 3-5 and Hugo Witt p. 73-78). The diversity of the papers in this *Bulletin* partly reflects the diversity of approaches to studying and conserving wet grasslands and the waders breeding in this habitat. No attempts have therefore been made to assimilate the differences between the papers. The recommendations, however, were approved by all participants of the workshop.

Throughout these proceedings the expressions 'grassland' and 'meadow' are used in an identical sense. By definition 'grassland' is the correct expression because it includes all areas covered mainly with grass, regardless of their use. Meadows are grasslands kept especially for hay production. Since many 'meadow birds' nest on pastures (grasslands for grazing animals) the term 'meadow' is too strict for this volume. 'Wet meadows' and even more 'meadow birds' are, however, expressions which are widely used in the literature, so we use both expressions in this *Bulletin* to refer to waders breeding on wet grasslands.

The proceedings are divided into four chapters. In the first Albert Beintema and Henk Visser present some general aspects of the biology of waders breeding on wet grasslands.

The second chapter consists of the reviews on different countries. Besides descriptions of population sizes and population trends (papers by Albert Beintema; Koen Devos, Patrick Meire & Eckhart Kuijken; Brigitte Klinner; Philippe Dubois, Roger Mahéo & Hermann Hötker; Rui Rufino & Renato Neves; Ken Smith, and John Frikke), various aspects of the conservation of wet meadows are described. Set-aside programmes and related approaches are considered by Albert Beintema, Eckhard Reinke and John Frikke (for a more detailed study see also Hugo Witt). Legal aspects are mentioned by Eckhard Reinke and John Frikke and management aspects are included in the papers by Koen Devos, Patrick Meire & Eckhart Kuijken and Eckhard Reinke. Nick Davidson compares the situation of grassland waders on saltmarshes and estuarine wet grasslands in Britain. Finally I try to review the status of waders breeding on wet meadows in the countries of the European Community.

Chapter three gives examples of special case studies. The first three papers cover single species. Paul-Eric Jönsson's study gives details of the population biology of the Dunlin; Bruno Ens presents a socio-biological study on the Oystercatcher, and Jeff Kirby & Rhys Green investigate how successfully Black-tailed Godwits defend their nests. Dunlins and Oystercatchers are not typical meadow birds, and indeed Bruno Ens's study deals with Oystercatchers breeding on saltmarshes. His and Paul Eric Jönsson's studies have, however, been included in this issue because they give many details of the general biology of both species. Their results provide understanding of

processes in population biology which are also likely relevant for the more typical meadow birds.

Breeding success, an important factor in all these three studies mentioned before, remains a main theme in the contribution of Hugo Witt. He examines how an agricultural set-aside programme influences the breeding success of Black-tailed Godwit and Curlew. Some management aspects in a Danish reserve (Ole Thorup) and in salt-meadow habitats in Austria (Bernd Kohler & Georg Rauer) complete this chapter.

Chapter four summarizes the results of the conference (compiled by Mike Pienkowski). A brief summary of the discussions at the end of the conference and the recommendations translated into eight European languages are given.

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