

## Four nice days under the pine trees...

After eleven hours of car-drive I arrived at de Hoge Rielen, Belgium - tired but filled with excitement. The car was parked, and a ten minutes walk under the tall pine trees was needed in order to enter the bungalow, a walk accompanied by the calls from woodpeckers - "Welcome to the Wader Study Group Conference!"

It was my first WSG meeting and I had been looking forward to meet other colleagues sharing the same passion: the lovely waders. During the first evening I meet birders from UK, Alaska, Holland, Italy, Ukraine, Germany, and from my own country Denmark. At home wader people are a minority, but here everybody was discussing waders, and during the first night many species of shorebirds came to visit my dreams.

On Friday morning the EXCO members held their meeting, and I was walking the whole afternoon in the woodland area. Of course no waders were around, but the pine forest was inhabited by Black, Green, and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, six species of tits, some squirrels, and by all the small rabbits jumping around. When I returned to the canteen for dinner, many new participants had checked in and the air was filled with cries of reunion and expectations. Afterwards we all walked to the Theatre where Patrick Meire informed us about the Scheldt estuary, the

destination for the Sunday excursion. I don't remember whether the bar was open the first evening, anyway, the Belgian beer was certainly tasteful.

Saturday morning we all meet at the canteen for breakfast before we were welcomed in the Theatre at 9.00. The Annual General Meeting lasted an hour and was run in a good spirit where all the different reports was accepted. In the next nine hours many interesting talks were proposed only interrupted by questions, coffee breaks, and lunch. In the breaks people were either discussing waders, enjoying the coffee and fresh air between the pines, or studying the great variety of posters presented at the conference. We were shown very excellent wader pictures from the new volume of the *Handbook of the Birds of the World*, and heard a talk about genetic markers in populations of Dunlins which resulted in, I think, the highest number of questions during the whole conference. After dinner we had a social evening in the bar where many discussions were continued and new contacts between colleagues established. However, we all knew the program for the following day, so the intake rate of Belgian beer was kept at a minimum. At the end of the day, some people heard a Barn Owl calling near bungalow number eleven!

The Sunday talks were concentrated on three species of waders; Oystercatcher, Avocet, and after the excursion on Slender-billed Curlew. Many smiles were exposed among the participants when the topic "bed loyalty index" showed up in a talk, but it was not bed loyalty after the social evening of last night Humphrey Sitters was talking about, but the loyalty of a

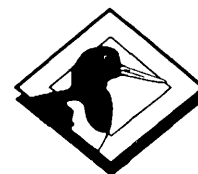
wintering population of Oystercatchers to different mussel beds!

Now we all went on a three hours boat trip on the Scheldt estuary, armed with binoculars and lunch packets. I must admit, that it was a very pleasant way of watching birds sitting in the bar with a cup of hot chocolate. Lapwing was the only species of shorebirds on the trip. The other highlight was a Peregrine Falcon hunting high in the sky. After dinner the three best posters were nominated, and next, two talks about the conservation of Slender-billed Curlews were on the program. These ended up in an interesting discussion between the Belgium and Russian participants, more a talk about politics than waders. I think! Again the beer and the Barn Owl were a part of the social evening but new topics for discussions had of course turned up.

Monday was the last day of the conference, and a workshop on wader population estimates was on the program. On the basis of mid winter counts, totals of the West European wintering populations of waders were estimated and the highscore was the 1 315 000 Dunlins.

Suddenly, the conference was over and we all dispersed to our respective corners of the world. Thank you for four nice days under the pine trees - hope to see you all next year in Denmark!

Mark Desholm, Denmark



## An Alaskan View of the 1996 Wader Study Group Conference

My husband, Bob Gill, and I have been members of the Wader Study Group for many years but we had never managed to venture to the other side of the world to attend the Group's annual conference. This winter we found it impossible not to attend, due to the irresistible combination of

unimaginably low airfares, an alluring program devoted strictly to waders, and the offer of good friends to watch our two young children while we were away. So, we stepped on a plane from Anchorage, Alaska, and, after many uncounted hours spent crossing eleven time zones, we arrived in

Belgium. Attending the meeting was well worth the tortuous diurnal adjustment we forced our bodies to endure.

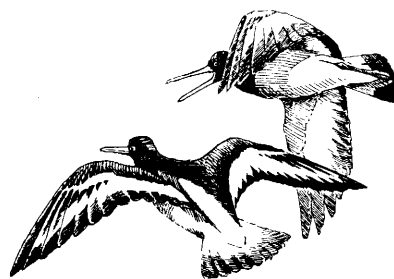
The conference was in a rustic, woodland setting at the Hoge Rielen, a 230 ha park on the outskirts of the

small town of Kasterlee. The grounds were quiet and remarkably removed from the hustle and bustle that characterizes the surrounding populated areas that we visited. The efforts at conservation on this nature preserve were quite impressive - the water-saving manual-pull showers, the recycling of every material possible, the automatic hall lights, the limitation of automobiles on the grounds, the use of bicycles. Individuals who were housed in the outlying dormitories had a substantial walk to the conference hall, but were rewarded with the sights and sounds of woodland birds during the day and starlit walks at night. We were grateful to those who had the foresight to bring flashlights (*i.e.*, torches) to guide the rest of us across darkened shortcuts through the forests, especially the night it rained. We were saved from an otherwise certain fate of soggy feet and tree-bruised heads, particularly after sampling some of Belgium's finest brews during the evening socials!

Presentations were given on Saturday and Sunday, which allowed many more people to attend than if they had been scheduled during the week. The atmosphere was informal but professional, equally conducive to serious discussion and light-hearted quips. The opening presentation was given by Theunis Piersma on "The many unknowns about plovers and sandpipers: an introduction to a world of research opportunities." This talk, published in full in this *Bulletin*, provided a pertinent context for the conference by reminding us that, despite the great progress scientists have made in understanding waders, we have much to learn, particularly in other areas of the world. Our knowledge of waders breeding in Europe far surpasses that of species breeding on any other continent. If a wader biologist is looking for a niche to learn something new, South America is the place to work: virtually nothing is known about any aspect of biology for the 15 species breeding there. Worldwide, the greatest gap in our knowledge lies in the realm of demography, information which is critical for conservation actions.

Subsequent presentations addressed a broad range of subjects, including intriguing theoretical questions (*e.g.*,

evolution of parental care), imminent conservation problems (Lapwing conservation in relation to agriculture, effects of shellfisheries on Oystercatcher populations), basic scientific methodology (efficiency of rope-dragging, genetic markers for migrating Dunlin), physiology (Avocet temperature regulation), distribution and habitat use (Solitary Snipe, Baikal Lake wader community), and many other interesting topics. The diversity of ideas was stimulating; the travelogues of research on the European and Asian continents provided an interesting comparison for our North American studies.



Sunday afternoon we were treated to a delightful excursion by boat to a wader's-eye view of the fresh and brackish tidal marshes and mudflats that border the river from Hoboken to Dendermonde. Patrick Meire served as our guide, providing us with an expert commentary on the intricate ecology of this complicated system and the incredible political challenges in managing it. Although we saw few waders because of the high, incoming tide, the waterfowl were abundant. It was interesting to view the changes in vegetation as we progressed upstream along the salinity gradient. Some of us braved the rather cold wind on the bow for a while, but most quickly learned that one could get quite an interesting view from inside, while drinking warm beverages and conversing with colleagues.

After the last regular session on Sunday evening, we were quite entertained by Petra de Goeij, who awarded prizes for the best poster presentations. Petra required the winners to give a 60 second summary of their work, which they

accomplished with quite a bit of creativity and light-heartedness. It was a nice way to end the general meeting.

A smaller group remained on Monday to participate in a workshop on estimating the size of wader populations. The primary use of such estimates is to identify and ultimately protect sites that host a critical proportion of a species' population. It was impressive to see how far advanced the efforts are in the United Kingdom and Europe. Not only were good population estimates being refined and updated on a regular schedule for most wintering species, but there were long-term data available to identify population trends and cycles. These, in turn, provided insight into the effects of factors such as harsh winter temperatures on the dynamics of the populations. In North America, we have single population estimates for only a handful of wader species-for most, we are lucky to estimate population size to an order of magnitude.

What became extremely apparent was the benefit of having a group of dedicated individuals willing to organize regional census efforts, as well as an enormous army of volunteers to count the birds. Such volunteer efforts would be nearly impossible for most areas of North America, particularly in remote areas of Alaska that support large numbers of staging waders. The recent effort along our Pacific Coast to census waders in spring, however, provides us some hope that we can estimate the size of many North American wader populations through a combination of government and volunteer efforts.

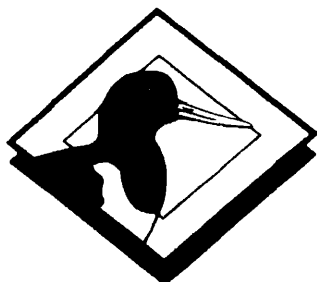
Bob and I came away with several thoughts with respect to the North American-European connection. First of all, it was great to have the opportunity to interact with our colleagues from other continents. We really need to be as migratory as the birds we study! Specifically, we would recommend that a formal effort be made to have Wader Study Group meetings scheduled regularly every three or four years to address global issues. This would give those of us working in the Americas, Africa, Australia, and east Asia a specific

date for joining with the critical mass of Europeans to exchange information. Finally, we would recommend to our North American colleagues that it is time to establish a more formal continental working group than we have now. To be most effective in our scientific and conservation efforts, we need to establish a way to communicate and work together on a regular basis. The Wader Study Group provides an excellent model for us.

Patrick Meire and his colleagues at the Institute of Nature Conservation are to be commended for organizing such a great conference. I also thank the speakers and those who prepared posters for sharing their information with all who attended. The hospitality was unfailing throughout our stay. I am particularly glad that I finally met several colleagues with whom I had corresponded over the years and others whom I had known only through their publications. We look forward to attending more Wader Study Group Conferences in the future.

*Colleen M. Handel*

The General Secretary would welcome views from non-European WSG on Colleen's suggestion for occasional WSG Conferences to be held with a more global themes. Would such meetings be a significant attraction to those waderologists needing to travel inter-continentially? Perhaps the first of such a cycle of meetings with global themes will be provided by the South African WSG meeting.



**SPECIAL WSG MEETING  
LANGEBAAN, SOUTH  
AFRICA  
12-15 AUGUST 1998**

A special meeting of the Wader Study Group will take place on 12-14 August 1998, at Langebaan, Western Cape, South Africa, with arrival and registration on the afternoon of Wednesday 12 August. One of the planned themes of the meeting is "Where should we going in wader research?" On Saturday 15 August, it is planned to hold a workshop on the Curlew Sandpiper. The meeting will be held in association with the 22<sup>nd</sup> International Ornithological Congress which takes place in Durban the following week; registration for the IOC is on 16 August, and it continues until 22 August.

There are many daily flights between Cape Town and Durban; the flying time is approximately two hours. Flight arrangements (and car hire in the Western Cape) for people attending the WSG meeting can be handled by the IOC conference organisers. The Second Congress Brochure for the IOC is now available. Contact the Secretary-General, Dr Aldo Berruti for more information: phone/fax +27 21 262 6114, email [aldo@birdlife.org.za](mailto:aldo@birdlife.org.za).

The Wader Study Group has a worldwide membership; many members seldom have the opportunity to attend the Annual Conferences, invariably held in Europe. The objective of this meeting is to provide members who will be attending the IOC an opportunity to have direct contact with the Wader Study Group. (Note that the 1998 AGM and Annual Conference will take place in Europe as normal; the Langebaan meeting is an additional meeting).

The village of Langebaan (and the adjoining Langebaan Lagoon) is approximately 120 km north of Cape Town. Given continuation of the three-year breeding cycles on the Siberian tundra, 1997 ought to be a good breeding year, and there therefore ought to be substantial

numbers of "overwintering" waders at Langebaan Lagoon in August 1998. By mid-August, the "spring" wildflowers in the areas around the lagoon are regularly at their best.

Full details of the meeting and booking forms will be included in the December 1997 *Bulletin*. Anyone wishing to offer a paper or present a poster, or needing further information, should in the meantime contact Les Underhill, Avian Demography Unit, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7700, South Africa. phone +27 21 650 3227 fax +27 21 689 7578 email [lgu@maths.uct.ac.za](mailto:lgu@maths.uct.ac.za)

*Les Underhill*

Thank you!

Many thanks to all those who have helped recently with all stages of recent *Bulletin* publication:

**EDITORIAL**

Nick Davidson, Mike Evans, Julianne Evans, Barbara Ganter, Phil Holland, Henk Koffijberg, Lys Muirhead, Jean Patterson, Theunis Piersma, Rui Rufino, Thomas Stroud (computing consultant) and Robin Ward (for bailing the editor out of a tight spot!).

**PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION**

Reg Davies, Julianne Evans, Linda Porter, and Rodney West.

**ILLUSTRATIONS**

D. Beadle, Nick Davidson, Adriano de Faveri, Eugeny A. Koblik, Jens Gregersen and others.

And apologies, as ever, to anyone inadvertently omitted!