THE LINNAEAN NEWSLETTER

Volume 67, Number 9 February 2014

GRASSROOTS CONSERVATION OF GRASSLAND BIRDS IN THE NETHERLANDS

Louise Fraza

As soon as we entered the field, the calls of the birds filled my ears – the *grutto, grutto* of the Black-tailed Godwits (*Limosa limosa*), the *kieviet, kieviet* of the Northern Lapwings (*Vanellus vanellus*), and the *tureluur* of the Common Redshanks (*Tringa totanus*). Those calls are also their names in the Dutch language. It had been a long time since I had heard the godwits and their calls brought me back to long-ago spring days, cycling home

from school, when hearing them was so much a part of a total spring day experience. Nowadays, you seldom hear their *grutto, grutto* calls in this area. Lapwings are still common but their numbers too are much reduced from those of my youth. We counted five godwits, three lapwings and three redshanks. Our mission was to try and find some of their nests in order to alert the farmer not to mow in that area until the young had fledged and flown. Among the circling birds were several Eurasian Oystercatchers (*Haematopus ostralegus*), which are relative newcomers to these grasslands. When I was young they were only found near the shore. I was told this field was attractive to nesting grassland birds because it is low-lying and the farmer is not too anxious about mowing early.

Our group consisted of my sister-in-law, Carolien, my brother Peter, my sister Gerda and a local volunteer called Meindert. It was a beautiful spring evening in the middle of May 2013. We were in the village of Werkhoven (where I was born and raised) in the province of Utrecht in the center of Holland. A short distance away was the farmhouse where Carolien and Peter rent their living space. We sat down on the edge of the field and tried to observe where the birds went down so that we could later try to locate their nests and mark them so the farmer would not mow in the area. The evening was exceptionally beautiful. We were in the middle of a wide expanse of green, green grass. In the cloudless sky there were many swallows in addition to the grassland birds and occasionally we heard the *krak* of a Gadwall (*Anas strepera*), called Krakeend in Dutch. Gradually, the circling birds quieted and disappeared. Some of us observed carefully where the birds went. Meantime we sipped coffee from the thermos Carolien had brought and listened to the story of how she had become involved in these conservation activities.

About fifteen years ago she had seen an ad in the local paper, offering a course in grassland bird conservation under the auspices of Landschapsbeheer Utrecht (LBU), a government organization concerned with the management of rural resources. LBU directs volunteer activities and offers assistance in many aspects of Dutch country life. In the course, Carolien learned about the grassland birds and how to work with the farmers to protect bird nests from being destroyed during farming activities. The most challenging part of Carolien's assignment was finding farmers willing to be involved. Protecting the nests would mean modifying farming practices in ways that might be cumbersome and less lucrative. Carolien's enthusiasm infected her husband Peter and both have been devoted volunteers ever since. After a few years Carolien was made volunteer coordinator. As such she directs the activities of other volunteers, keeps track of statistics and acts as liaison with LBU staff. For the last eight years, the work of her local volunteer group was helped considerably by the farmers

receiving a government subsidy for each clutch saved. They were able to increase the number of farmers involved from four to twenty and enlist many new volunteers. Farm holdings in this part of the country are small and fields are farmed intensively to obtain the maximum yield of grass. Carolien had to be ingenious in combining several holdings to qualify for government reimbursement packages designed for larger areas. Unfortunately for reasons we will explore later, this year the farmers working with Carolien and her team will not receive any financial reward for nests saved.

Soon it was time to start searching for nests. The field was divided by shallow ditches and each of us took a subdivision to search. We had been instructed to watch for subtle tracks in the grass. To avoid detection, the birds usually descend a short distance away from their nests. They create tracks as they tend to follow the same path back to the nest each time. The grass was about twelve inches long and we strode carefully to avoid stepping on eggs. Our presence had forced the birds up in the sky again crying and circling. I, as the totally inexperienced one of the group, did not have a clue where to look. There seem to be tracks everywhere. After a while Peter, called that he had located a nest. We all walked over to admire it. It was of a Black-tailed Godwit. I was surprised how well hidden it was. The nest was deep down, virtually covered over by the grass and the four greenish eggs with dark splotches were almost invisible against the background. A while later, Meindert found a nest, a Redshank. Bamboo sticks were placed by each nest. By now dampness was coming up from the ground and it was getting cold. The expert local volunteers, Carolien, Peter and Meindert, agreed to return in a few days to check on these nests and try and find others.

A good portion (28-30%) of the Netherlands consists of grasslands. Being located in the delta of several large rivers, these were historically low lying and wet, making them attractive nesting sites for Northern Lapwing, Black-tailed Godwits and Common Redshanks. The birds nesting in the Netherlands constitute a large proportion of their overall European population (Hagemijer and Tulp, 2000) – 86% of the Black-tailed Godwit population in the European Union nest in the Netherlands and 33% of the Northern Lapwing. Consequently these birds have been intensively studied and efforts have been made to halt the alarming declines that have been noted since the 1970's. The program Carolien and her group are involved in is part of this effort. Changes in farm practices over the years seem to be the main reasons behind the decline. These fields are mostly used for dairy purposes, either for grazing or for winter feed. In the past, the wet grasslands were often not accessible for mowing until July, after the young birds had fledged and flown. With improved drainage this is no longer the case. Earlier mowing endangered the eggs and the chicks. Diversity of grasses made way for monocultures with less insect life as food for birds and new ways of fertilizing can make

the grasses too dense for chicks to move around easily.

Studies show that the widespread use of programs rewarding dairy farmers for nests saved, which is what Carolien and her group have been doing, have failed to halt the declines (Kentie, et al, 2013). Even though it emerged that the numbers of birds fledged from these reward programs were similar to those from more intensively protected areas, the chicks did not survive nearly as well. Leaving unmowed strips around nests to protect them from farming activities may also expose the eggs and the young to more predation since they are more easily detectible. The programs that were more conducive to the survival of the chicks are difficult to combine with commercial dairy farming. Essentially they aim to recreate conditions as they were before the declines began, such as keeping fields wet, mowing late, and provide herb-rich grasses.

The ultimate outcome of these studies appears to be that government efforts to protect grassland birds will be concentrated in certain core areas with high bird densities where the priorities are to protect the birds rather than produce profitable grasses. The center of the Netherlands is not an area where such strategies can be practiced. The fields are too small and the bird density is too low. Hoping to prevent a future without these grassland birds in their area, Carolien has vowed not to give up the work she has been doing to save at least some birds. She has to because for her, spring only starts when she hears the calls of the grassland birds.

References

Hagemeijer, W. & I. Tulp. 2000. Monitoring meadow birds in the Netherlands: monitoring meets policy. *Bird Census News* 13:57-65.

Kentie, R., J. Hooimeijer, K. Trimbos, N. Groen, and T. Piersma. 2013. Intensified agricultural use of grasslands reduces growth and survival of precocial shorebird chicks. *Journal of Applied Ecology*, 50:243-251.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

SHEILA B. FITZPATRICK: 1923-2013

Joseph DiCostanzo

The Society recently learned of the death of long-time member Sheila B. Fitzpatrick on September 21, 2013. Older members of the Society will remember her as Sheila Madden.

Sheila was born in Ireland June 6, 1923. After her mother's death in 1933 she came to Massachusetts where she was raised by her aunt, whose last name of Madden she used for much of her life. After college Sheila moved to New York City where she worked for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company for nearly forty years, retiring in 1988.

Sheila was an avid birder and joined the Linnaean Society in 1974. She quickly became an active member and was elected to the Council in March 1976 where she became the chair of the Membership Committee. She went on to serve as Secretary 1978-1979 and Treasurer 1979-1984. Even after stepping down as an officer Sheila organized the Annual Dinner for a number of years until she moved to Oregon after she retired. For her many services to the Society she was elected a Fellow of the Society.

With a bright smile and wonderful sense of humor, Sheila is fondly remembered by all who knew her. For many years she was a mainstay on my winter weekend Society trips to Montauk. It was always a joy to have her along; however, since she said her feet would get cold because of poor circulation, she often spent a lot of time birding from the door of the heated ladies room in the parking lot. From that vantage point she often added many species to the trip list and we still fondly talk of the "Madden bathroom watch" on the Montauk trip.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

LINNAEAN NEWS-LETTER

Editor: Joseph DiCostanzo
Linnaean News-Letter
15 West 77th Street
New York, NY 10024
Production and mailing: Thomas Endrey