

World Migratory Bird Day 2013

“Networking for migratory birds”

Statement from Professor Theunis Piersma

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And

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(Photo by Zhang Ke)

A black-tailed godwit breeding in a meadow in The Netherlands is as much a honoured guest of Dutch dairy farmers in March-July, as she is of the rice-growing Balanta farmers in Guinea-Bissau in August-December and of the rice-farmers in Portugal and Spain in January-February. Migrating birds like these godwits make global connections, and so do the people inspired and concerned by their plight.

As a committed research scientist, I am spending all my time looking for the connections that migratory birds make with each other, with their habitats, and even how they tightly connect different habitats, far apart, in the course of their amazing annual cycles. What happens to a bird in one place affects the chances that it shows up in other places. What happens here, affects the ecological roles a bird can play elsewhere. Long-distance migrant birds demonstrate that our world is one.

Migrant birds entice people into serious networking too! The small community of scientists trying to disclose the secrets of bird migration is strongly interconnected globally. Through the Global Flyway Network we study the plight of shorebird migrants in several flyways simultaneously, exchanging experts, methods and insights. After all, the ecologies of red knots ‘wintering’ in West-Africa have much in common with those from northwest Australia. To reach and breed in parts of the circumpolar High Arctic tundra, both flyway populations have to successfully negotiate a northward migration, relying on food-rich mudflats in the internationally shared Wadden Sea and the Yellow Sea, respectively.

Wherever we study them, migrant birds are in trouble. Thus, I am deeply concerned about the future of most of migrant champions and the habitats they rely on. They are such champions precisely because the habitats that suit their needs are so few and far between. My best hope stems from yet other networking efforts, the connections now made with inspired people outside the narrow confines of my trade.

In the part of the world where I was born and raised, the province of Fryslân in The Netherlands, the endangered black-tailed godwit has now been crowned as *King of the Meadows*. An increasingly wide circle of citizens, businessmen, farmers, artists and scientists have come to realize that the future of our countryside, its economy and cultural values, are totally bound up with the future of this migrant bird.

The city of Leeuwarden embraced the King of the Meadows as a key player in their bid to become European Capital of Culture in 2018. It is this search for an ecologically sustainable and internationally interconnected future, with due respect for godwits and other ‘soft’ ecological and cultural values, that offers my best hopes for our fellow earthlings, the totally amazing migratory birds in particular.



Theunis Piersma explaining the incredible story of the red knot in the hands of IMF-director Christine Lagarde, a bird that connects the Banc d'Arguin in Mauritania with the Wadden Sea in Europe (at 5000 km), and the northcentral Siberian tundra (5000 km). Mrs Lagarde released this radiotagged knot on 10 January 2013 near Iwik, Banc d'Arguin, Mauritania.
(Photo by Marieke Feis)

