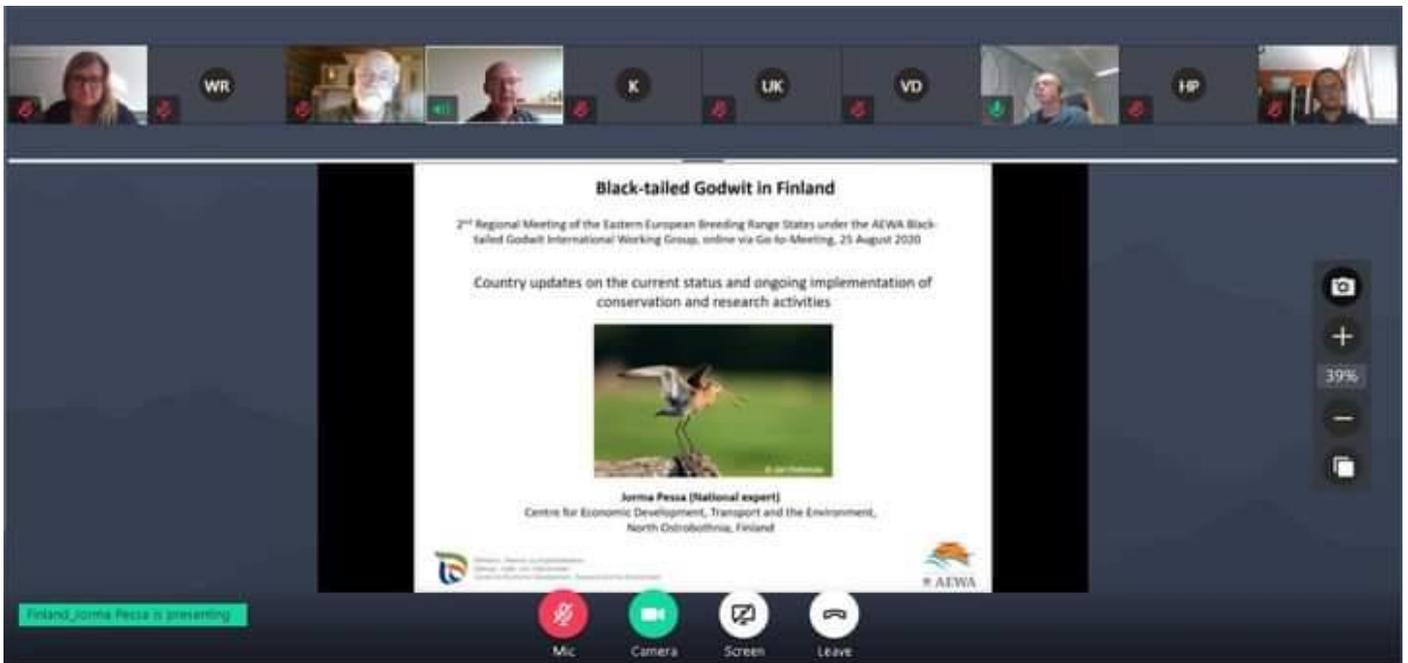




Newsletter of the AEWA Black-tailed Godwit International Working Group

Newsletter 2 – Autumn 2020



Challenging times require creative solutions. The Regional Meeting of Eastern European Range States was organised online August 25, 2020

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1. Introduction

By Erik Kleyheeg, Coordinator of the AEWA Black-tailed Godwit International Working Group (BtG IWG)

The year 2020 has not been an easy one. In the Netherlands we are currently in the strictest Covid-19 lockdown yet. Fortunately, many of us have found digital ways to continue our work. This includes knowledge exchange and lobbying activities in order to improve the protection of Black-tailed Godwits. In this newsletter, just before the Christmas Holidays, I wish to share some updates with you. I wish you all happy holidays and a healthy 2021.

2. Regional Meeting Eastern European Range States

By Erik Kleyheeg

On August 25, 2020, the second AEWA Regional Meeting for Eastern European Range States was organised by the BtG IWG. Due to Covid-19 restrictions it was not possible to meet in person, so we switched to an online workshop through Go-To-Meeting. The meeting was attended by 12 participants from six different countries. Prof. David Kleijn gave a keynote lecture about preliminary results of the PhD project of Miguel Monteiro, providing the latest insights in Black-tailed Godwit habitat selection, breeding bird densities and predation pressure in Estonia.

As a standard element of a Regional Meeting, each country represented shared updates about the status and protection of Black-tailed Godwits. In this meeting there were updates from the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Finland, Estonia, Slovakia and Belarus. Based on the updates, a new workplan was drafted with prioritized actions in the Eastern European Range States. It was agreed that it would be valuable to have more frequent meetings to keep each other updated about the situation and progress being made with the actions in the International Single Species Action Plan in each country. It was decided that the next meeting will be organised in 2021, preferably in person, but online if necessary.

For more information please email erik.kleyheeg@sovon.nl

3. International Workshop Grassland-breeding Waders

By Erik Kleyheeg

On November 17 and 18, 2020, a consortium of Dutch partners lead by BoerenNatuur organised an International Workshop on the Protection of Meadow Breeding Birds, partly funded by the European Commission. The aim of this meeting was to review the on-the-ground actions taken related to the International Multi-Species Action Plan for the Conservation of Breeding Waders in Wet Grassland Habitats in Europe (2018 – 2028) and review successes and bottlenecks experienced while implementing these actions. The Black-tailed Godwit is one of the species targeted in the Multi-Species Action Plan.

There were multiple reasons for organising this workshop. The primary reason was the need identified during the N2000 Atlantic Seminar in Antwerp in 2019 (see the report [here](#)) to exchange knowledge and experiences across country borders as well as stakeholder groups. Secondly, since the Multi-Species Action Plan has no formal coordination yet, it is up to the stakeholders involved to take initiative for this exchange. The sense of urgency was shared broadly, as shown by the attendance of 80 participants with various backgrounds, including policy makers at EU, national and regional levels, representatives from farmers and conservation organisations, and researchers.

After the workshop and hopefully inspired by it, the challenge for the participants is to identify concrete follow-up actions. The meeting report, which is currently being drafted, will assist in this. The report will be uploaded on the BoerenNatuur website (www.boerenatuur.nl) in January. If you are interested in reading the report, but unable to find it online, please contact me directly.

For more information please email erik.kleyheeg@sovon.nl

4. Black-tailed Godwit Battle Plan in the Netherlands

By Erik Kleyheeg



“Attack is the last line of defence” is the slogan of a Black-tailed Godwit Battle Plan which was presented to the Dutch Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality on November 18, 2020. The Battle Plan was drafted by former Dutch Minister Pieter Winsemius, It Fryske Gea, the Frisian Environmental Federation and Vogelbescherming, the Dutch Birdlife partner, with input from a large set of stakeholders. It calls on the government’s responsibility to maintain biodiversity and focuses on the Black-tailed Godwit as ambassador of all declining meadow birds. The plan outlines priority measures to safeguard the breeding population of Black-tailed Godwits in the Netherlands, intended to improve the habitat quality on agricultural land. Importantly, the Battle Plan also provides insights in the expected costs to achieve its goals and lists a number of structural funding opportunities.

To many, this Battle Plan feels like a last resort to save the Black-tailed Godwit from further decline and eventual extinction from the Netherlands. The Minister has responded positively to the presentation of the Battle Plan, stating that this is the right time for such a plan given the various opportunities currently arising to implement the proposed measures. Please find an English summary of the Battle Plan attached (below).

For more information please email erik.kleyheeg@sovon.nl

5. Colour-ringing of Black-tailed Godwits in the Marais Breton (France)

By Frédéric Robin

In the south of the Loire estuary, the Marais Breton hosts the main French Black-tailed Godwit breeding population. With up to one hundred pairs, this marshland is one of the most important Godwit colonies in Western Europe. This population has been definitively associated to the *limosa* subspecies by the recent publication describing the new subspecies *lobahii* (Zhu *et al.* 2020). The Marais Breton is the one of the few places in France where the Godwit population is stable to increasing. Over the last twenty years, farmers have shifted their economic model to produce food with the best environmental conditions (high table water levels, low cattle densities, late mowing) and developed local applications (rustic species used, local food distribution).



From 2012, the Marais Breton Godwit population has been surveyed by a colour-marking programme. Forty adults and 176 chicks have been ringed so far. Habitat use, nest survival, food viability are also studied to understand why this population is doing so well at this local scale. In total 1,013 resightings have been done along French coast, Iberian Peninsula and West Africa. Only one second-year bird has been resighted during spring migration in Netherlands in 2014. None of the birds from this programme have been recorded as breeders at higher latitudes (Belgium, Netherlands, Germany or UK).

To inform people about farmers and Godwits in France, a website has been opened in 2018: www.bargeaqueuenoire.org. Anyone who is interested can visit this website to learn about Godwit biology. Importantly, you can also record rings observations here: www.bargeaqueuenoire.org/base-limicoles.

Reference: Zhu, B.-R., Y.I. Verkuil, J.R. Conklin, A. Yang, L. Weipan, J.A. Alves, C.J. Hassell, D. Dorofeev, Z. Zhang & T. Piersma, 2020. Discovery of a Morphologically and Genetically Distinct Population of Black-tailed Godwits in the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. Ibis, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ibi.12890>.



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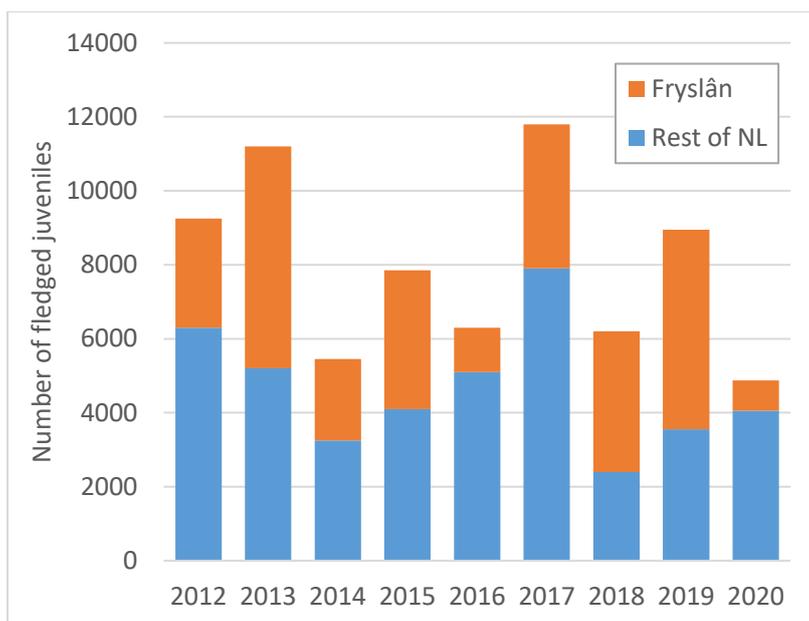
6. Black-tailed Godwit reproduction in 2020 in the Netherlands too low, again

By Erik Kleyheeg

Each year since 2012, the number of fledged juvenile Black-tailed Godwits in the Netherlands are estimated using a standardized method developed by researchers from Sovon Dutch Centre for Field Ornithology, Birdlife Netherlands and Groningen University. This method is based on counts of colour-ringed juvenile birds on post-breeding communal

roosts. Based on earlier analyses of the Dutch breeding population size and the annual mortality of adult godwits, it was calculated that every pair should fledge 0.47 chick per year to maintain a stable population trend. Based on a current estimate of 27,000 Black-tailed Godwit breeding pairs in the Netherlands in 2020, the population would require approximately 12,500 fledged juvenile birds.

This year, the total number of Black-tailed Godwits that reached the fledging age of approximately 25 days was 4,950 individuals (95% confidence interval: 2,600 – 11,650). This means that the reproductive output was less than half of what is required for a stable population. Hence, a further decline of the Black-tailed Godwit population is expected in the coming years. When looking at the numbers in more detail, there is a striking difference between the province of Fryslân, which hosts a large proportion of the breeding population, and the rest of the Netherlands. Whereas the number of fledged juveniles in 2018 and 2019 were higher in Fryslân than in the rest of the country, in 2020 they were about a 5-fold lower. The likely cause of this difference is the high density of predators, whose populations have benefitted from the vole peak in 2019, which was particularly pronounced in Fryslân.



Number of fledged juveniles per year in the Netherlands based on Schekkerman et al. (2020).

For further reading about the calculation of the number of fledged Black-tailed Godwits in the Netherlands in 2020 (in Dutch): Schekkerman H., Gerritsen G.J. & Hooijmeijer J. 2020. Jonge Grutto's in Nederland in 2020: een aantalschatting op basis van kleurringdichtheden. Sovon-rapport 2020/91, Sovon Vogelonderzoek Nederland, Nijmegen ([full text](#)).

For more information please email hans.schekkerman@sovon.nl

7. Global Flyway Network: track Black-tailed Godwits online

By Erik Kleyheeg

After the BtG IWG newsletter of this spring, prof. Theunis Piersma kindly drew my attention to the website of the Global Flyway Network (<https://www.globalflywaynetwork.org/>), which provides an overview of the impressive work on waders, including the Black-tailed Godwit, performed by Team Piersma (a group of researchers based at the University of Groningen, NIOZ Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research, and associated institutes). I can warmly recommend everyone who is interested in Black-tailed Godwit research to visit this website and browse through the numerous reports and blog posts.

Particularly interesting is the live map on the website which allows anyone to follow the movements of Black-tailed Godwits equipped with a satellite transmitter. A quick look at the map tells that all tracked birds are currently on their

wintering sites, either in West Africa or on the Iberian Peninsula. I will not be very long now before the first birds start making their way north.



Screenshot from the map with live locations of Black-tailed Godwits on December 18, 2020. (<https://www.globalflywaynetwork.org/flyway/east-atlantic-flyway-inland-waders/map>)

For more information please visit <https://www.globalflywaynetwork.org/>

Request for content - Please get in touch if you have any news, projects, results, pictures or wider initiatives that you would like to share. The next newsletter is scheduled for Spring 2021.

Distribution list - If you would like to be removed or added to the distribution list please contact me on the below details.

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ATTACHMENT: English Summary of the Black-tailed Godwit Battle Plan.

Summary

BLACK-TAILED GODWIT BATTLE PLAN



An initiative by Pieter Winsemius, It Fryske Gea, the Frisian Environmental Federation and Vogelbescherming Nederland (the Netherlands Society for the Protection of Birds)

Summary

BLACK-TAILED GODWIT BATTLE PLAN

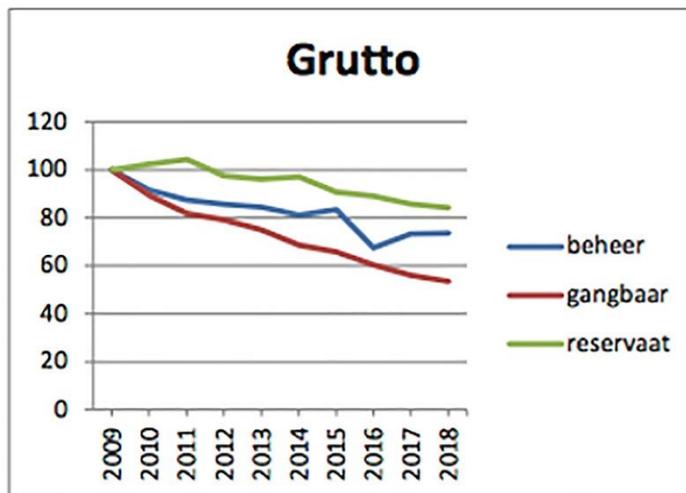
In 1988, millions of people yelled: “Charge!” It spurred the Dutch football team on to become European Champions. Now we have to charge into battle together to save the black-tailed godwit.

Attack is the last line of defence

Maintaining biodiversity in the Netherlands is one of the government’s more unusual and challenging responsibilities.

The black-tailed godwit - our national bird - is rapidly disappearing from our country. Whereas in 1970 there were still 120,000 breeding pairs of these grassland waders, there are currently fewer than 30,000 left and their decline is continuing unabated. The Netherlands has an international responsibility for the black-tailed godwit: no less than 80% of its European population breeds in our country. The decline of these grassland waders is a consequence of the loss of the unique pasture landscape from the low-lying areas of the Netherlands. The numbers of other grassland waders such as lapwings, oystercatchers and redshanks are also dwindling.

Recent trends in the black-tailed godwit as a function of management type



At the instigation of Pieter Winsemius (former Minister of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment), *It Fryske Gea* (the Frisian landscape), the Frisian Environmental Federation and *Vogelbescherming Nederland* (the Dutch Society for the Protection of Birds) the *Black-tailed Godwit Battle Plan* was drawn up with input from six “meadow bird” provinces, agricultural organisations, wildlife organisations and scientists. This plan is intended to reverse the downward trend of the black-tailed godwit and other meadow birds. The organisations have drawn inspiration from successful campaigns involving other iconic wildlife species such as the salmon during the cleaning up of the Rhine after the 1986 Sandoz chemical spill, and the seal during the improvement of the Wadden region wildlife habitat (mudflats). Animals and plants form a thermometer representing the quality of the habitat.

The focus on restoring biodiversity has increased in recent years, following news about the observed decline of insects and the appearance of previously very common bird species on the Red List of Endangered Dutch Breeding Birds. This loss of biodiversity has resulted in projects such as the Delta Plan for Biodiversity. Over the past few years, knowledge regarding the protection of meadow birds has increased and the organisation of agricultural wildlife management has adapted. Several excellent initiatives for meadow birds have been launched in this country. However these developments have so far not had the desired effect. That is why the time to go into battle is right now!

Opportunity areas

In order to save the black-tailed godwit, optimal landscaping and management are required in specially designated areas of high potential for meadow birds. These are large enough to act as source areas for the recovery of the populations of black-tailed godwits and other species. The opportunity areas are in the meadow bird provinces of the low-lying parts of the Netherlands: Friesland, North Holland, South Holland, Utrecht, Groningen and Overijssel. The provinces, farmers, wildlife organisations and volunteers will jointly select the opportunity areas.



Regions where relatively large numbers of meadow birds live and where the opportunity areas are being sought.

Measures

The success in the opportunity areas is dependent on four measures:

Extent and openness

Ideally, the opportunity areas will cover an area of around 1,000 hectares and have a core of 200 hectares in the form of a meadow bird reserve. Around this core, extensive, wildlife-friendly agriculture will be practiced, in particular dairy farming. The opportunity areas will be open with minimal building and no trees or thickets. Meadow birds like to have a good view whereas their enemies, predators and birds of prey make use of trees and cover to strike.

Water table

Crucial to rescuing meadow birds is the raising of the water table in the opportunity areas by a substantial amount. During the breeding season, the water table will need to be raised to 10 or 20 centimetres below ground level. At the moment the water table is 80 cm or more below ground level, which is far too low. Where the water table is high, adult black-tailed godwits can find worms to eat in the soft soil.

Agricultural management

Without adapted agricultural management, black-tailed godwits will be unable to raise enough chicks. For each breeding pair, at least 0.8 chicks need to fledge every year to maintain the black-tailed godwit numbers. This requires targeted action. Mowing and grazing can only take place once the birds have fledged. The injection of slurry needs to be replaced by the spreading of rough farmyard manure. Injecting slurry ruins the habitat for worms and other soil life. The combination of a higher water table and rough manure creates a wealth of herbs. Pastures that are rich in herbs and flowers are essential to insects. Meadow bird chicks are dependent on a sufficient supply of insects for their food. In order to make this agricultural management possible, the average livestock density in the opportunity areas will have to come down from an average of 2.5 adult cattle per hectare to just one.

Predator management

Due to the dwindling population of meadow birds in highly fragmented areas, too many nests and chicks are being lost to predators such as foxes, cats and herons. Active predator management is therefore a necessary, temporary emergency measure to restore a healthy balance. This calls for region-based plans. The elements of such plans include: (a) the removal of bushes and scrub to limit cover and vantage points for predators; (b) using high water tables and the enclosure of pastures to hinder access by predators; (c) when mowing ensure nests remain unrecognisable to predators and (d) deterring and hunting.



Funding

Optimal design of the opportunity areas and the corresponding good management of meadow birds requires a solid financial basis.

One-time investments

One-time investments are needed for the altering of the water table, the creation of constructed wetlands and the of ditch banks. Woods also need to be removed to open up areas and make them less appealing to predators. In order to switch from slurry to rough farmyard manure, investments in different kinds of cattle sheds are needed.

Management compensation

To turn the opportunity areas into successful, sustainable meadow bird areas, a reliable economic basis for affected farmers needs to be found. In addition, the continuity of long-term schemes must be safeguarded and be tied to the land rather than to the farmer. This will prevent the meadow bird management from being abandoned when land is



Rescue plan

...ape, a top-up of the current compensation will be
...management compensation of €2,400 per ha; i.e.
...the correspondingly higher costs of €900 per ha; i.e.
...agement with management compensation of €1400 per
...gement to the type of management required in such an
...efore call for an investment of €1.2 million. As there are
...uld be required.
...s of re-landscaping: €1100 per ha, or around €35 million.
...ished in five years, the higher costs as a consequence of

sold. It is the government's job to ensure continuity. The current six-year contracts for agricultural wildlife management do not do that. Within the opportunity areas, there need to be long-term management contracts running for at least fifteen years. The

compensation for agricultural wildlife management in the opportunity areas needs to be increased and focused on intensive management involving a high water table, grassland rich in herbs, rough manure and late-season mowing.

An alternative is a change of use from farmed land to agricultural/wildlife habitat whereby the land would be subject to a one-time devaluation. However, the major investment that this calls for would be recovered within just over ten years due to the reduced management compensation. This is a cheaper and more sustainable solution.

Funding extensivisation

In the opportunity areas, the livestock density will have to be drastically reduced. This can be accomplished by having fewer head of cattle per farm or by farms being given more acreage while keeping the same number of livestock. Funding for this change could be found in the sale of phosphate rights, the use of nitrogen levies, and the use levies to raise the water table in peat meadows in order to capture CO₂ and prevent subsidence. This extensivisation will require active parcelisation, including the buy-out of farmers ceasing activities and the purchase of exchange land: if individual farmers are unwilling to switch, they will need persuading to carry on their farming operation elsewhere. The switch could be boosted by the use of a transition fund and by providing support for the affected farmers.

Management compensation

In addition to the abovementioned one-off investments, the annually recurring costs and benefits also need to be revised. For instance the management compensation for agricultural wildlife management in the opportunity areas needs to be increased and to focus on intensive management involving a high water table, grassland rich in herbs, rough manure and late-season mowing. Moreover, farmers need to be encourage to work together on managing areas by the payment of management fees. An average increase in management fees of 100 euros per hectare would give a dairy farmer with 70 hectares of land 7,000 euros per year.

CO2 pricing

In peat meadows, the capture of CO₂ (released when the water table is low) could result in extra income for farmers. By raising the water table from 10 to 20 cm below ground level is estimated to save around 10 tonnes of CO₂ emissions per hectare. At the current CO₂ price of around €30 per tonne, compensation could amount to €300 per hectare. These CO₂ allowances could possibly be funded from the market.

Outside the peat meadows it is also possible to achieve net CO₂ sequestration of up to three tonnes per hectare in permanently 'wet' grassland. With a CO₂ price at €30 per tonne, this would lead to a potential 'reward' in the order of €75 per hectare.

Water Board charges

Each year farmers pay on average €100 in Water Board charges. For conservation areas, this is around ten euros. By bringing Water Board charges for land with a high water table and intensive management for meadow birds in line with charges for conservation areas, the cost to the farmer per hectare will fall considerably. The resulting loss of income to the Water Board should be compensated by increasing Water Board charges across the board rather than those paid by the agricultural sector alone. A change in legislation is needed to introduce this scheme.

Higher milk payments

Part of the funding can be taken from the market by increasing milk payments in the opportunity areas. If the milk payments were to be increased by 2 cents/litre, the income of a farmer with, for instance, 70 ha and 70 cows producing 6,000 litres annually, would go up by around €8,500 per year. The amount of money required to be able to afford this increase in these milk payments is in the order of €3.5 to 4 million per year. This could be achieved by a voluntary increase in payments from dairy processors. Virtually the entire volume of milk is processed by thirteen dairy companies, several of which already make higher milk payments in the event of exceptional performance. If the voluntary route is not feasible, then a collective surcharge on purchases by retailers could create scope for this. With some slight amendment, the forthcoming Scope for Sustainability Initiatives Act would create the opportunity of making such an arrangement binding. The surplus revenue could be paid into a fund that would be paid out to farmers in opportunity areas.

Annual income for farmers

If, in the opportunity areas, there is a targeted management package supplemented by higher management compensation, lower water board charges, higher milk payments and - where applicable - earnings from CO₂ sequestration, an attractive revenue model could emerge, whereby the affected dairy farmers would receive €20,000 to €25,000 in additional income for their contribution to the recovery of the meadow bird population.

Restoration of the population

If there is no change to current policy, the number of black-tailed godwits is expected to fall from around 33,000 breeding pairs to 28,000, and these birds will eventually disappear, perhaps altogether, from our countryside. Implementing the *Black-tailed Godwit Battle Plan* is likely to turn around the current decline in the population of the species and have a positive effect on the populations of other meadow birds.



Corrie Gort

The Black-tailed Godwit Battle Plan is an initiative by Pieter Winsemius, It Fryske Gea, the Frisian Environmental Federation and Vogelbescherming Nederland.

*The plan was made possible with the help of:
The provinces of Friesland, Groningen, Utrecht, South Holland and North Holland
De LandschappenNL
Natuurmonumenten
LTO
BoerenNatuur
The joint Wildlife and Environmental Federations
The World Wildlife Fund*

With the expert advice of Theunis Piersma (meadow birds), Dick Melman and Tim Visser (opportunity areas), Rudy Rabbinge and Björn Dirks (CO2 capture) and many more.