

Book review

Goudplevieren en Wilsterflappers: Eeuwenoude fascinatie voor trekvogels (Golden plovers and plover netters: a deeply rooted fascination with migrating birds) – Joop Jukema, Theunis Piersma, Jan B. Hulscher, Erik J. Bunschoek, Anita Koolhaas & Arend Veenstra. 2001. Fryske Akademy, Ljouwert and KNNV Uitgeverij, Utrecht, The Netherlands. 271 pp., numerous figures (many in colour) and tables. In Dutch with 11 page English summary. A separate folder with captions to the figures and tables in English is available free of charge from T. Piersma, NIOZ, PO Box 59, AB Den Burg, Texel, The Netherlands. ISBN 90-5011-147-5. €27.25.

Reviewing a book is always somewhat of a challenge, all the more so when one cannot read the language in which it is written! Fortunately, the English summary and translations mentioned above appear to be relatively thorough, thus I can offer the following commentary.

The four *Pluvialis* plovers (Grey Plover *P. squatarola*, Eurasian Golden Plover *P. apricaria*, American Golden Plover *P. dominica*, and Pacific Golden Plover *P. fulva*) have received considerable recent attention in both scientific and popular literature. Notable works include BNA monographs for *squatarola*, *dominica*, and *fulva* (Paulson 1995, Johnson & Connors 1996), an extensive treatment of all four species (Byrkjedal & Thompson 1998), and a beautifully illustrated book for school children (Miller 1996). To this list we can add *Goudplevieren en Wilsterflappers* (Golden Plovers and Plover Netters) a fascinating account which integrates the biology of Eurasian Golden-Plovers with the history of a centuries-old technique used to capture them. The heyday of wilsternetting ended soon after World War II, and the netters of that era (a rich source of historical information) are now either deceased or in their twilight years. By compiling this book, Jukema *et al.* succeeded in preserving much of the lore and tradition of the wilsterflappers which otherwise would have been lost with the further passage of time.

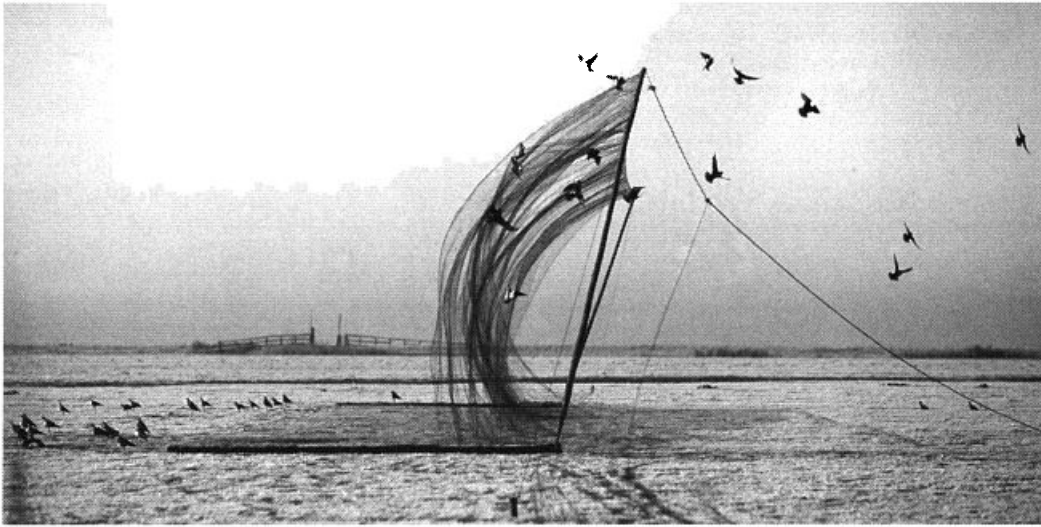
At least four centuries ago, European peasants devised a method to capture wilsters (as plovers are known in Dutch) for food. Their clever wilsternet has persisted in more or less its original form to the present day. The device consists of a levered system of poles, wire, cords, and net (the latter 25 m long by 3.5 m high). All of this lies flat on the ground at right angles to the wind. When the wilsternetter, hidden behind a canvas screen, tugs on a long triggering cord, the entire assemblage flips up and over, becoming a huge wind-driven clap-net. If the release is precisely timed, the net intercepts flying plovers (attracted by decoys) as the birds approach into the wind.

The authors divide their book into four parts. The first contains a general treatment of plover biology. While this concerns mostly the Eurasian Golden Plover, one finds here interesting comparisons with other members of the genus. Also in this section is a lovely colour plate of the *Pluvialis* plovers expertly rendered by Ingvar Byrkjedal. The second part deals with wilsternettors themselves – their techniques, history (there is considerable detail about individuals and families who trapped plovers for a living), and the politics and economics of the trade. Of particular interest to most readers will be the diagram showing how wilsternets are constructed, and a chronicle of their exploitive use. With respect to the latter, an estimated 100,000 plovers were taken annually in the early 20th century by some 300 Dutch netters. The

kill declined to around 18,000 plovers by 1969, and commercialised netting was finally banned in 1978. Since the ban, the wilsternet has come into its own as a tool for ringing studies, and wilsternetter ranks have decreased to about 50 individuals who now capture plovers only for scientific purposes. In the third part of the book, Jukema *et al.* focus on what has been learned from these research efforts. They consider such topics as moult, the annual cycles of body mass and migration, and demographics. Aside from *apricaria* studies, wilsternets also have been used for other wader projects in The Netherlands – for example, work on polymorphism in male Ruffs *Philomachus pugnax*, and physiology of corticosterone in Bar-tailed Godwits *Limosa lapponica*. It was encouraging to learn that numbers of Eurasian Golden Plovers have increased over the past few decades. The authors attribute this trend to “abandonment of commercial wilsternetting in The Netherlands” combined with a ban on plover hunting in Denmark and reduced hunting “in southerly countries like France and Spain”. Part four of the book considers environmental threats to plovers and the role of wilsternetting in the research needed to address these problems. Loss of wintering grounds in The Netherlands (especially grazed grasslands which provide abundant earthworms, a primary winter food for *apricaria*) is of immediate concern. Much of this habitat has already disappeared with changing patterns of land-use.

I have only minor criticisms of the book. In their chapter “The mystery of Pacific Golden Plovers”, the authors conclude that *fulva* captured in The Netherlands during the early 20th century were from a population (perhaps a “distinct subspecies”) that became extinct about 1940. Recollections obtained from interviews with “13 wilsternettors born between 1907 and 1933” suggest these birds were once relatively common, and that they had a thicker, more downy plumage than *apricaria*. Jukema *et al.* propose that Netherlands-wintering *fulva*, unlike their counterparts in the tropical Pacific, were cold-adapted for temperate regions of western Europe. The only tangible evidence consists of nine museum skins from the period, and these do not clearly demonstrate any difference in plumage density when compared to *fulva* wintering in the tropics. Notably, at least six of the nine specimens are first-winter juveniles. In my opinion, the age ratio supports a simpler explanation of *fulva* in The Netherlands than the book conveys – this being the extralimital wandering of young birds. Why *fulva* became less frequent in the region post-1940 is uncertain. Aside from the extinction question, I was puzzled by a map (Fig. 6.6) which implies that *fulva* wintering in California are errant migrants from the Taimyr. Small numbers of *fulva* occur in California, but they probably get there from breeding grounds in





A wilsternet in action. Photo by Jan van der Kam from the book *Goudplevieren en wilsterflappers*.

Alaska. Researchers looking for capture methods to fit certain field situations may find wilsternetting an attractive possibility. To my knowledge, specialised use of the technique has occurred only once, this being in the project conducted by Ingrid Tulp and Hans Schekkerman (2001) on breeding grounds in Siberia. But, there is an important caveat here which Jukema *et al.* do not mention (at least in the English summary) – collision of fast-flying birds with a rapidly moving wilsternet inevitably results in a certain level of injury and death. Tulp and Schekkerman have prepared a 4-page handout titled “A portable, easily installed clap-net for catching shorebirds in tundra (and elsewhere)”. In this, they give specifications for a smaller version of the traditional wilsternet, and also suggestions for reducing bird injuries. Anyone contemplating wilsternetting would do well to contact these workers (h.schekkerman@alterra.wag-ur.nl) for a copy of this useful information.

In summary, the importance of *Goudplevieren en Wilsterflappers* is twofold. Here we have a resource on plover biology (particularly *apricaria*), plus a detailed and unique treatment of how an exploitative device which put untold numbers of Eurasian Golden Plovers on the menus of big-city “posh restaurants” evolved “from a hunting tool to a modern research technique”. Unfortunately, those lacking skills in Dutch (as this reviewer!) will be unable to fully appreciate the book’s content. Despite the language barrier, I urge wader specialists to take a careful look at this impressive work and consider adding it to their library. The major elements of each chapter are easily followed in the English summary. Also, you will find a reference list of 454 citations; plus a wealth of graphics including outstanding photography

(the color reproduction is excellent), with all captions translated in the accompanying insert. As an additional plum, the book includes a CD containing interviews with wilsterneters, sounds of the wilster lure-calls used by netters, and a film sequence showing the wilsternet in action! It should be noted that first author, Joop Jukema, studies birds as an avocation. His achievement in producing this fine book (and many other publications as well) is testimony to intense dedication that sets an example for waderologists everywhere!

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Miller, D.S. 1996. Flight of the Golden Plover: The amazing migration between Alaska and Hawaii. Alaska Northwest Books, Anchorage.

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