

Annual conference of the International Wader Study Group, Jurata, Hel Peninsula, Poland, 4-7 October 2002



WSG Chairman Hermann Hötter opens the conference.

The 2002 WSG annual conference was hosted by the Waterbird Research Group KULING, which is based at the Department of Vertebrate Ecology at the University of Gdańsk. It was held in the spectacular surroundings of a former military holiday complex just outside the village of Jurata in an old pine forest (with unusual woodpeckers!) on the Hel Peninsula in the extreme north of Poland. To the south lay the Gulf of Gdańsk and to the north, the open waters of the Baltic.

We were all grateful to Włodzimierz Meissner and Magdalena Remisiewicz and their team – Szymon Bzoma, Cezary Wójcik, Mikolaj Koss and Mateusz Ściborski – for all they did to make it such a memorable and enjoyable weekend. The conference program was embellished with some delightful drawings by Michal Skakuj and Cezary Wójcik. These have also been used to decorate this issue of the *Bulletin* together with additional drawings by Cezary Wójcik made later to illustrate some of the things that actually happened.

The conference started on the Friday evening with Larry Niles' 'bedtime' talk on Red Knot studies in the West Atlantic Flyway. Saturday morning began with the usual WSG

Annual General Meeting, followed by a full programme of talks with more on the Sunday morning. On Sunday afternoon we boarded buses that took us on an interesting trip to the Beka nature reserve at the mouth of the river Reda, where we learnt of plans to improve the habitat for breeding waders. After this, we all went to Hel! (For those who may be worried about ending up there, we are pleased to report that it actually seemed to be very nice!) There, we visited a seal aquarium and were welcomed at the marine science laboratory. Finally, on the Monday morning there was a workshop on the project "Tringa glareola 2000".

One of the highlights of the weekend was the social event on the Saturday evening. This was a very happy occasion. There was dancing to local music; there was much mirth; much tasty Polish beer was consumed and we gossiped the night away. A tug-of-war tournament induced more cheering than a football crowd. Teams from the main countries represented at the conference battled it out until the winner played against the Polish home team. Modesty prevents the Editor from reporting which team won! (though he was not a member of the winning team).



The Dutch tug-of-war team in action.

To Hel and back: a personal account of the 2002 WSG conference

Larry Niles

Endangered and Nongame Species Program, New Jersey Division of Fish & Wildlife, USA

As soon as I arrived in Hel for the Wader Study Group Conference, I realized that I was about to take part in something both unusual and unexpected. Having been invited to sit in on the ExCo meeting, I entered a small crowded room and was alarmed to find Theunis Piersma spread-eagled across two chairs, his face twisted with the pain of a bad back. I had not been to Hel before – was this a portent of things to come?

Soon, however, I was reassured. Bob Loos deftly launched into an

Scanning the Baltic from the beaches of Hel.





ExCo working hard, dosed high on coffee.

exposition the WSG's financial affairs – familiar territory and comforting. Then, David Stroud patiently outlined plans for several new volumes in the *International Wader Studies* series, many of which amounted to a distillation of the work of literally thousands of amateur wader enthusiasts. Although it was evident that ExCo welcomed these plans warmly, I was quite dazzled by the tremendous amount of work that was going into these publications. To me, they and the ExCo meeting presented what became recurring themes of the entire weekend: the important role of volunteers, the power of leadership through experience, and the strength of international cooperation.

Throughout the three decades of my work in North America, I have known of the WSG's work, mainly through the *Bulletin*. More recently, I've often chewed it over with various Brits, Dutch and Australians who come to the Delaware Bay each year. I learned of the WSG's past from Clive Minton, the present from Humphrey Sitters and concluded that it was an academic association of professional wader biologists; not unlike the professional organisations we have in North America. I am now convinced that it is not!

Without question, the WSG is a very 'professional' organisation, but by far the greater proportion of its output comes from a large body of enthusiastic and highly competent amateurs. The amount of time and energy they must devote to banding, nest-monitoring, counting, etc. leaves me bewildered.

After wide-ranging discussions with Magdalena Remisiewicz of Poland, Herman Hötker of Germany, Jannik Hansen of Denmark, Nigel and Jacquie Clark, Robin Ward and David Smart of the UK as well as Kees Oosterbeek and Andre Duiven of the Netherlands, I came to understand that, regardless of economic or social environment, there exists in Europe and Russia a strong movement involving a wide cross-section of the public to study waders and collectively seek their protection. The WSG is the fruit, the expression of this movement. In the US, we have the public interest,

but little amateur involvement and few visible products. To our loss, it is professional staff that does most of the work.

The paper sessions of the conference said as much about the WSG as the presented data. As someone who has only recently started to work on wintering and breeding wader populations, I was captivated and energized by Jannik Hansen's paper on Purple Sandpipers, and Julia Kasatkina's work on Grey Plovers. Later, in the Polish beer sessions, I was grateful for Hans Schekkerman and Ingrid Tulp telling me about their modification of the Dutch wilsternet for use in the Arctic and for Pavel Tomkovich's musings on the art of finding knot nests (nothing works easily!). Throughout the conference I felt the sincere desire to share experience and the collective need to reach a greater understanding of the ecology of waders.

I am not naïve and I understand that many professionals must live or die by their ability to create original ideas, to be ahead of the field. But at the WSG conference, everyone's passion to understand and protect shorebirds seemed to override the need for fame and contracts – all for the sake of the animals we chose to steward. This is not common in ecological circles!

Who can be blamed for all of this honest cooperation? Reading newspapers from Poland to the UK one might think it a consequence of a new confederation of nations and a pervasive spirit of cooperation. Or was it the hospitality of the Poles – the hard work of Magdalena, Włodzimierz, Szymon, Cezary, Mikolaj or Mateusz in hosting a meeting that allowed people of all countries to pull on the same rope (though in opposite directions!). They were so gracious, they even allowed the British to remove their shoes in a room with food!

Certainly the success of the meeting belongs to our Polish hosts. But I think that in no small way it was also owes much to the leaders of the WSG. Without appearing aloof or demanding, they gently led a meeting where everyone could share and benefit from people who know much about the world and the world of shorebirds and conservation. In fact, the US has no counterpart to the Wader Study Group and my lasting thought was what a shame it doesn't.

All conference participants looking happy in Hel.

