

EVOLUTION OF WADER NUMBERS DURING RECENT YEARS AND DANGERS THREATENING WADING BIRDS IN NORTH-WESTERN EUROPE

by Count L. Lippens.

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I. Evolution of the numbers in recent years

A. WADERS INCREASING:

1. *Lapwing (Vanellus vanellus)*.

The increase of this species was brought about by several factors:

- a. *Extension of habitat.* In temperate Europe the Lapwing is now established as a breeding bird in numerous places where it was unknown twenty years ago. It has profited from draining of wetlands as well as from modern agricultural methods. I should like to emphasize once more that it has been scientifically proved that the taking of lapwing's eggs, as it is done — with discipline — in the Netherlands, does no damage to the species.

Let us remember that in the Netherlands several hundreds of thousands of Lapwings breed and that the species is fully protected: at all times it is forbidden to shoot it as well as to capture it (moreover it is the same for all the other waders excepting Golden Plover and Snipe). The taking of eggs, made every spring over a period of three weeks (until 15/20th April) concerns the first clutch. It is proved that a Lapwing will lay four eggs a second time when its first clutch has been taken and generally 3 more eggs if its second clutch has also been destroyed. Therefore, it is obvious that the damage done by taking eggs cannot be compared with that brought about in the countries in which Lapwings are shot during 7 to 8 months of the year.

The shooting of Lapwing is especially disastrous during March when they have just started to breed.

- b. *Habitats during migration and wintering.* The Lapwings gather in large flocks at the beginning of September and stay on open country which allows them to escape from hunters.
- c. Finally the increase came from the measures of protection taken in all Northern countries some years ago. The species has widely profited from the abolishment of all Spring shooting after the 28th February.

2. *Avocet (Recurvirostra avosetta)*

This bird which became extremely rare around 1930, has enjoyed total protection during the last twenty years in almost all the countries of Europe. Shooting made Avocets run the risk of being exterminated and the suppression of shooting, voluntarily agreed by hunting associations, has allowed this bird to increase in more and more considerable numbers and to re-colonize habitats from which it disappeared long ago (e.g. the British Isles, Belgium, etc.).

Let us draw attention to the fact that the same danger threatened the Shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*) at the same time and that the suppression of its shooting, volutarily agreed by hunters, has also allowed this species to become again a common bird in a great part of Europe.

These two examples as well as those of the protection of swans, storks, Spoonbills, Brent Geese, etc. and the more recent of the protection of diurnal birds of prey, show that in presence of a spectacular decrease of one or several species hunters are perfectly conscious of their responsibilities and able to instigate the measures of protection which are necessary. Sometimes it is done with delay but the principle is admitted and the necessary restrictions accepted.

B. WADERS WHICH ARE MAINTAINING THEIR NUMBERS:

Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*)

Golden Plover (*Charadrius apricarius*)

Snipe (*Capella gallinago*)

Golden Plovers are maintaining their numbers because they use the same habitat as Lapwing on migration and for wintering and also because the reasons of their decrease have been suppressed. These were the massive captures by means of nets. This kind of hunting, particularly used in the Netherlands, has been almost entirely abolished.

Oystercatchers are maintaining their numbers because they have been fully protected (as is the Avocet) in many countries and also because they winter in great numbers, in the countries in which they are protected.

Snipes seem to maintain their numbers but it is difficult to be sure about this because annual and local fluctuations are important. Surely Snipe are not increasing and undergo inevitably the pressure of an intensive shooting made easier by fast means of transport. The countries of North Africa as well as Ireland in which an important stock of Snipe is wintering, organize already — with departure from the big European towns — hunting trips directed towards Snipe shooting. It will be necessary to pay great attention to their evolution. If the Snipe is maintaining its numbers, this is probably due to the fact that most of the countries of Europe have abolished spring shooting during the month of March. If these measures have not been sufficient to bring about an increase in Snipe, there are surely other reasons for decrease which may become dangerous.

C. WADERS DECREASING:

These include all other species, i.e.

— *Charadrius squatarola* (Grey Plover)

— *Charadrius morinellus* (Dotterel)

— *Charadrius alexandrinus* (Kentish Plover)

— *Charadrius hiaticula* (Ringed Plover)

— *Charadrius dubius curonicus* (Little Ringed Plover)

- *Arenaria interpres* (Turnstone)
- *Calidris* spp. (all *Calidris* Sandpipers)
- *Philomachus pugnax* (Ruffs)
- *Tringa* spp. (all *Tringa*-Sandpipers)
- *Limosa lapponica* (Bar-tailed Godwit)
- *Limosa limosa* (Black-tailed Godwit)
- *Numenius arquata* (Curlew)
- *Numenius phaeopus* (Whimbrel)
- *Scolopax rusticola* (Woodcock)
- *Lymnocyrtus minimus* (Jack Snipe)

N.B. Little information is available concerning:

- *Himantopus himantopus* (Black-winged Stilt)
- *Capella media* (Great Snipe)
- *Phalaropus* spp. (Phalaropes)
- *Glareola pratincola* (Pratincole)
- *Burhinus oedicephalus* (Stone Curlew)

The diminution of the species mentioned here seems to be serious for some groups. It has not been possible to stop this decrease in spite of the measures which have been carried out:

- establishment of numerous reserves for breeding and migration
- prohibition of spring shooting in several countries
- full interdiction of hunting for some species in some countries.

In some places in which regular observations have been carried out for thirty years (for instance in the unaltered landscape of the Reserve of Zwin, near the mouth of the River Scheldt at the Dutch-Belgian border) it has been possible to follow this diminution and to establish that five to ten times less waders are watched now than formerly. This is particularly true for: Sandpipers, the Smaller Plovers, Grey Plover, Ruffs, Jack Snipe, bartailed Godwits and Turnstones.

The decrease is less for Curlews and Whimbrel, blacktailed Godwit and Woodcock. However, this last species does not yet seem to have recovered the heavy losses undergone during the cold winter of 1963 (and considering its ecology it is out of the scope of this study on waders).

II. Dangers threatening waders

1. On breeding areas:

The destruction of marshes and wetlands, spring hunting where it is still permitted.

2. On wintering areas:

- a. There does not seem to exist any danger for waders wintering in Africa, except perhaps for some species of which the whole population is wintering in restricted areas (as for Black-tailed Godwit in Senegal).

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- b. The hunting pressure becomes excessive for waders wintering in Europe. During very cold periods this pressure degenerates into massacres.
- 3. *Along migration routes:*
 - a. The destruction of wetlands.
 - b. Excessive hunting during too a long period, with means always more disastrous by an increasing number of hunters who, thanks to the always easier and swifter means of communication can reach the most remote places in a very short time.

III. Remedies for the decrease

The remedies for this decrease — which goes at a fastening rate — are dealt with by other reports, but it is obvious that they must be of two orders:

- a. Protection of wetlands (Project MAR) and establishment of numerous reserves, for breeding as well as for migrating.
- b. Rational limitation of hunting, particularly by suppression of the murderous spring hunting and by a total protection for the species on the decrease, at least for a period of several years.