



Protecting and preserving breeding and migratory birds in the Wadden Sea

Kluut en pullen © Jelle de Jong

The Wadden Sea is the world's largest tidal system, stretching across three countries: The Netherlands, Germany and Denmark. There is no other place on the planet where such a dynamic landscape exists, with its diversity of habitats moulded by the wind and tides. UNESCO World Heritage status means international recognition of the enormous value of this natural area. Every year, 10 to 12 million breeding and migratory birds visit the area. Unfortunately, monitoring and research show that the populations of several bird species have been steadily declining for quite some years now. With the *Wij&Wadvogels* programme (Us&Shorebirds programme), nature organisations and governments are now banding together to help vulnerable populations.

High-flyers

The Wadden Sea is an important link for mostly arctic migratory birds that breed in an area stretching from Canada and Greenland all the way to central Siberia. They come here in both spring and autumn seeking food and rest in order to undertake their long migratory flights. These birds often fly to and from their breeding and wintering grounds in one go – in spring to northern Canada or central Siberia, and in autumn to western and southern Africa. Brent geese, knots and bar-tailed godwits, to name a few, make non-stop flights of many thousands of kilometres in the process.

Threats

Food, rest and safety for birds are decreasing. The main culprits are climate change, fishing, extraction of gas, oil and salt, human disturbance and predation of ground-breeding birds by animals such as foxes. The effects of the barrier that is the Afsluitdijk and the 'hard boundary' by dykes also still reverberate, causing reduced dynamics and thus a weaker resilience of the Wadden Sea. These threats mean that the pied avocet, a typical breeding bird in the Wadden area, has been raising too few young for years now. The same goes for the beach plover, beaked plover and arctic tern; all of them feature on the Red List of Dutch breeding birds.

Urgency for protection

Birds form an essential link in the biodiversity of the Wadden area and the whole world, making their conservation particularly crucial. Populations of a large number of species depend on the Wadden Sea, including migratory birds from arctic regions ranging from Canada to Siberia. Should the Wadden Sea lose its function for these species, their future would be anything but certain – with even extinction a real possibility, as in the case of the knot.

National action plan for shorebirds

This worrying situation prompted the decision to draw up a joint plan at the trilateral ministerial conference in Tønder, Denmark, in 2014. Its goal was to reverse the downward trend in breeding birds, which was reaffirmed in 2018 at the trilateral ministerial conference in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands. The Netherlands subsequently drew up a Wadden Sea Breeding Birds Action Plan as a concrete elaboration for the Dutch Wadden Sea. In addition to existing measures for Natura 2000 conservation targets, the Action Plan states that more needs to be done for breeding birds. The *Wij&Wadvogels* programme is now implementing these additional measures.

Wij&Wadvogels

The multi-year collaborative programme *Wij&Wadvogels* began in 2019. Seven nature organisations are working together to restore healthy bird populations in the Wadden area: Het Groninger Landschap, It Fryske Gea, Landschap Noord-Holland, Natuurmonumenten, Staatsbosbeheer, Vogelbescherming Nederland and the Waddenvereniging. *Wij&Wadvogels* is made financially possible by the Waddenfonds, the Investeringskader Waddengebied, the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, and the provinces of Noord-Holland, Fryslân and Groningen.

Three complementary tracks

To implement additional bird protection measures, *Wij&Wadvogels* is working with three complementary tracks:

1. *Physical measures* through construction and establishment of new sites for all kinds of birds and/or accelerated rehabilitation of existing sites, both inside and outside the dykes. These measures mostly lead to a different type of management.
2. *Changing behaviour* by making people aware of the negative consequences of disturbance. This is done with behavioural influence, communication and education, targeting both the general public and specific high-priority areas.
3. *Accumulating and sharing knowledge* by properly measuring the effectiveness of measures. Also by building and recording proven conservation evidence and active national and international knowledge exchange; learning by doing.

Hegewirsterfjild sets the example

All three tracks coalesce at the Hegewirsterfjild project location, an inland high-tide refuge and breeding area near Harlingen in Friesland. The excavation of agricultural land has made the area wetter and thus more attractive to birds. Guiding recreationists away prevents the birds from being disturbed by humans; the area is closed for much of the year, with people being led to a watchtower. And this has been successful: monitoring shows there were over 4,000 breeding pairs of 25 species of birds in 2022. That is 2,000 pairs more than in 2018.

More work to be done

There is much more to be done for birds in the Wadden Sea area. The *Wij&Wadvogels* programme, led by Vogelbescherming Nederland, will continue to make every effort until the conclusion of the programme in 2027. With a total of almost 50 projects, a budget of over €30 million and geographically distributed throughout the Dutch Wadden Sea area, the programme contributes to healthy shorebird populations. There is, after all, still every need to protect and conserve birds in the Wadden Sea area.

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