



AGRICULTURAL NATURE MANAGEMENT ON A LARGE SCALE

Hope for the redshank



Frank Berendse and Kees and Ans van 't Klooster in the Arkemheen polder.

State secretary Dijksma has announced a major reform of agricultural nature management which provides for new opportunities for nature on the farm – in large, contiguous areas. Professor Frank Berendse, one of the founding fathers of the new policy, pays a visit to a successful livestock farmer in the Arkemheen polder. ‘This gives me a good feeling’.

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Look, you can still see the bits of eggshell. It's very satisfying to see that a nest has hatched.' Dairy farmer Kees van 't Klooster enthusiastically points out an empty godwit nest marked by simple steel railings. A month ago, Van 't Klooster placed protection around the meadow-bird nests on his land. He found the nests by spending hours observing the birds' behaviour from his tractor. 'Some farmers and volunteers from the agricultural nature management society like to ramble through the fields but I'd rather use the tractor as a birdwatching hide. Then I can monitor four different fields at once and after a few hours I can fence off several nests.'

The nest protection not only enables the person operating the mower to avoid the nests of vulnerable meadow birds, it also ensures grazing cows keep out of their way. Only frisky young cattle such as heifers will occasionally investigate a field bird nest, curious to see the source of the chirping and scratching.

NATURE'S IMPERATIVE

The Council for the Environment and Infrastructure concluded in its advisory report *Nature's Imperative* published last spring that agricultural nature management has had little effect in the Netherlands. Sharon Dijksma, state secretary of Economic Affairs, has taken nearly all its recommendations on board as the basis for a new nature policy. One of the report's main authors was Frank Berendse, professor of Nature Conservation and Plant Ecology at Wageningen University, part of Wageningen UR. >

Now Berendse is standing with Kees and Ans van 't Klooster on the old Zuiderzee dyke north of Nijkerk. The professor and the farming couple have never met before. The discussion is animated: Berendse is an outspoken critic of agricultural nature management in the Netherlands while the Van 't Kloosters are proud of what it has let them achieve for the meadow birds.

GODWIT CHICKS RUNNING

Redshanks have taken up position on a number of fence posts and are observing the visitors while a skylark sings up above. The Arkemheen polder stretching out in front of the visitors is a mix of different shades of green. Some irregular plots with sheep grazing are rough, dark green and full of sorrel, with flowering rush in the ditches. Other fields, littered with cowpats, are coloured lighter green while the fields mown last week are paler still. This variation in the grassland offers advantages to the meadow birds. 'Sometimes we see godwit chicks running. Then we help them avoid the mower and run into a rougher field,' explains Ans van 't Klooster.

This polder was reclaimed in around 1350 and was never affected by the statutory land consolidation which involved reallocating land. Winding creeks and zigzagging ditches reflect the old water courses through the wind-blown sand from the Gelderse Vallei to the former Zuiderzee bay. The polder borders the Arkemheen-Eemland National Landscape, run by nature management agency Staatsbosbeheer and the society for nature conservation Natuurmonumenten.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR RUFFS

Mr and Mrs Van 't Klooster have been running a dairy farm since 1981 and switched to organic farming in 1997. In partnership with several other farmers, they now farm 95 hectares, more than enough for grazing their 85 dairy cows and 45 young animals.

But nature plays a key role here too. 'Over there, by the old steam pumping station,' says Van 't Klooster, 'the groundwater level is due to be raised by 30 centimetres.' Frank Berendse sees that as a very important move. 'This is a big step in the right direction. That will provide new opportunities for ruffs and snipes,' he says enthusiastically. 'Soon you'll see the fields turning pink again with all the ragged robins growing.'

The efforts to give nature a boost made by the Van 't Kloosters come under the category of agricultural nature management. Arable farmers do it too, for example by sowing the edges of their fields with grasses and flowers. And hedge banks and brushwood are being preserved and restored all over the Netherlands to provide conditions more conducive to the development of birds of prey and

'I use the tractor as a birdwatching hide'



Nest protection in the meadow.

other fauna. The farmers in question conclude a management agreement with the government and receive a grant to compensate for the loss of income.

But a few hedgerows here and ditch banks there is not the way to go about it, says the Council in its recent advisory report. Agricultural nature management is only successful if applied across large areas and in places with strong potential near nature reserves.

FORTY PAIRS OF GODWITS

Berendse had looked up the figures for 2011 in preparation for this meeting. The family's nest protection has delivered results: 'Last year there were 40 pairs of godwits, 40 pairs of redshanks and 40 pairs of peewits on the close to 100 hectares, a density as good as what you would find in a nature reserve.'

The Wageningen professor says this dairy farm is a good example of how it should and could be done. 'Agricultural nature management will really get results if the farmland is part of a contiguous area where nature conservation measures are in place, preferably with a nature reserve in the vicinity, like the Arkemheen and Eemland meadow bird reserve here. Variations in mowing, grazing, fertilization and groundwater levels are clearly successful in a grassland area like this. This gives me a good feeling.' These are strikingly positive words for an outspoken critic.

Ten years back, Berendse showed that agricultural nature management had virtually no effect, in a study that made it into the journal *Nature*. 'Farmers with a management agreement for nature management had hardly any more meadow birds on their land than farmers without such an agreement,' explains Berendse.

Follow-up studies by Wageningen researchers confirmed this. Taking 100 randomly chosen sites across the Netherlands, there was hardly any difference in the nature results between 2000 and 2010 achieved by farmers who received grants for agricultural nature management and farmers without such grants.

Despite all the measures and grants, the population of godwits, the symbol of grassland areas, has fallen from 125 thousand in the 1970s to 35 thousand now. Skylarks are down to only five per cent of their former levels. 'The 40 million euros spent every year on grants are not justified in terms of the restoration of biodiversity in farmland,' argues Berendse.

SOMETIMES THINGS GO WRONG

According to Berendse, Arkemheen is evidence that a diverse bird population can develop if the preconditions of a sufficiently large area, sufficient clean water and sufficient variation in groundwater levels are met.

'Sometimes that may not directly benefit godwits or skylarks but instead you may see great egrets or spoonbills alongside the ditches or little bluethroats in the brushwood,' says Berendse. Sometimes you can make all the plans you want but the circumstances will dictate a different outcome. And sometimes things go wrong. For example, the downside to nest protection is that predators such as foxes, stoats and weasels are able to find the nests, as are crows and harriers. That became clear a few years ago during camera surveillance of the Van 't Klooster family's fields. 'We had a fox's den close by. That might explain why we had a really bad godwit year,' explains Kees Van 't Klooster. 'In the end, Staatsbosbeheer had seven foxes shot and things have improved since then.'

A redshank calls the alarm. 'There may still be chicks around,' says the farmer. A little later, he picks up a peewit egg. 'Look, the last peewit egg, that's special too,' he says with a smile, referring to the Dutch traditions surrounding the first peewit egg.

'Will you be visiting again?' ask Kees and Ans van 't Klooster at the end of the walk. Berendse promises he will. 'We need to be more explicit about the preconditions for successful nature on each farm and specify the types of nature that offer most potential for particular farm types. As Wageningen UR, we could also help farmers develop a long-term view for the nature on their farm and their farm income sources. That means we ecologists need to collaborate more with agricultural economists.' ■

Info: www.wageningenur.nl/agri-environment-schemes

NEW NATURE POLICY IN THE NETHERLANDS

In the *Nature's Imperative* report, which appeared last spring, the Council for the Environment and Infrastructure advocates setting long-term targets for nature policy and sticking to them. If adverse economic conditions mean there is less money available, alter the speed but not the goal: a sustainable future for nature in the Netherlands.

The Council also wants to put an end to the technocratic set of instruments consisting of nature target categories and various other qualitative and quantitative details. Don't fix the required number of godwits or ragged robins per hectare, instead make sure the basic conditions have been met, such as a large enough area with the right environmental quality and water. Then Nature will sort itself out.

A striking feature is the low priority the Council gives to expensive measures such as ecoducts. It is much more important to expand and improve existing nature areas and create regional nature networks: clusters of nature areas with farming areas applying agricultural nature management as buffer zones.