

National bird (and film star) has it tough, but

'Godwit is not helpless'

Cameraman and ecologist Melchert Meijer zu Schlochtern followed the Dutch national bird closely, from Senegal to Iceland, for his new film *Grutto!*

His work is done. The footage has been shot, the editing is finished. Now there is hard work going on to get the sound right. But that is a separate department. So cameraman Melchert Meijer zu Schlochtern has time in his office in Plus Ultra, where his production company is located, to look back on the filming of *Grutto!* The film is the latest nature documentary by Ruben Smit Productions. Smit is a WUR alumnus who is involved in the film together with Wageningen scientists such as black-tailed godwit expert David Kleijn.

Grutto! fulfils a long-cherished wish to 'do something about field birds,' Meijer zu Schlochtern begins. 'Our meadow birds have not been thriving for decades. Their populations are declining by five per cent every year. That is fast. The black-tailed godwit is an iconic species for our country. Most of the world's population breeds here. *Grutto!* tells the story of an opportunist that has adapted to human agricultural systems over the centuries.'

Field bird by default

Let's start by shattering a few myths: the black-tailed godwit is not a meadow bird at all. At least, not historically. The primeval black-tailed godwit is a marsh-dwelling bird. 'We filmed the godwit in Estonia, where it still breeds in marshes. In the Netherlands, we have dug out such bogs and replaced them with meadows. As a result, the godwit has become a meadow bird here. In the mid-20th century, this process led to a population boom among black-tailed godwits. Until the agriculture here became too intensive. Exactly the same thing happened in the parts



Text Roelof Kleis

of Africa where the birds overwintered. There, the black-tailed godwit lived on the mudflats of the Casamance in southern Senegal. Now it forages in the rice fields at the edge of the mangrove forests.'

Not so Dutch

Another myth: the Dutch national bird is really an African bird. The black-tailed godwit spends most of the year in Africa. *Grutto!* is the story of its travels. Meijer zu Schlochtern: 'We start the story in Senegal. En route to the Netherlands we visit Spain, Portugal and northern France. Along the way, we tell the story of the primeval godwit in Estonia and there is a detour to take in the Icelandic godwit.'

Unlike in previous Ruben Smit films, humans play a major role in *Grutto!* 'Everywhere it goes, the godwit faces problems caused by humans and is dependent on farmers. That is the story we tell, without passing judgment. The farmer is caught between nature management and business management. He has to mow his fields at some point. The first mowing in spring yields high-protein grass. The rice farmers in Senegal would be glad to see the back of the godwits, because they eat all their sowing seed. They hate the bird. When we arrived there and told them we were going to film godwits, they asked, "Why

'Everywhere it goes, the black-tailed godwit faces problems caused by humans'



Camerman and ecologist Melchert Meijer zu Schlochtern shooting the film *Grutto!* • Own Photo

don't you keep them in the Netherlands?" They thought we had released the birds there! They try to chase them away, but it doesn't work. They said they even wanted to poison the birds. If that happens, it will be the end of the black-tailed godwit. But I can understand it. In a resilient system, a farmer can cope with birds eating his seeds. But with climate change, the rains are irregular, harvests are dwindling and the soil is becoming salinized. It is bizarre, really: such a green area and yet so fragile. We record all of that cinematically.'

Iceland

The Icelandic godwit's story is extraordinary. At the end of the winter, on their return journey, 'our' godwit and the Icelandic one meet in Portugal. 'The Icelandic bird is a subspecies that is slightly redder. It winters in Portugal. Nearly the entire European population, some 70,000 godwits, can be found in a few rice fields near Lisbon in early February.' No matter how bad things get for the black-tailed godwit in the Netherlands, the population down there remains stable. How is that possible? The

answer is that the Icelandic black-tailed godwit is doing well because of climate change. 'The growing season is longer, the population is increasing, and so more land is being farmed. The godwit, which used to breed only in south-west Iceland, is now found all over the country. So the same thing is happening there as here in the past. Peat bogs are being reclaimed and the black-tailed godwit seizes the opportunity that throws up.'

There is 'some hope' to be gleaned from this Iceland story, says Meijer zu Schlochtern. 'But it is sad as well. Nature is being sacrificed at the expense of the golden plover and the snipe. And in the end, it will also be at the expense of the godwit.' But he is still positive about the bird's chances. 'I think we will save the godwit eventually. It is good at adapting. Several initiatives by farmers and conservationists are working well. But they do cost energy and money.' ■



The film *Grutto!* will be shown in Pathé cinemas from 7 July.