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Red Knots and the Red Square

It was never part of the plan, but a lifelong pursuit of Red Knots and other waders did bring me close to moments, people and places that carry some significance in recent human history. The shorebirds themselves, with the notable and recent exception of Bar-tailed Godwit E7 and her fellow trans-Pacific travellers, have never generated much lore and appreciation in the minds of most people. Waders typically are the 'grey birds' that live far from the spectacle of human cause, human glory and human misery. A life with waders surely must be a life that is as far removed from the 'Human Drama' as one can have it, right? Perhaps this was my plan, but today my personal account of recent human history is sprinkled with wader related memories. I have been encouraged to write about them in this short account.

First a bit of background. The preparations in 1979, and the actual expedition to the Banc d'Arguin in Mauritania in early 1980, had defined me as a dedicated wader biologist (or at least the wish to be one and the commitment to work for it). To talk about what it would be like to study waders at Banc d'Arguin, in the autumn of 1979 Meinte Engelmoer and I visited William Dick, Wader Study Group coordinator at the time, and the main organiser of the successful first ever wader expedition to the Banc d'Arguin in 1973. William had us combining a London trip with the Wader Study Group meeting in Nottingham. The expedition to Banc d'Arguin in January–March 1980 was exciting, challenging and eventually successful, so we had to return to the next WSG meeting to tell the story, the one of 1980 held in an austere public school at Uttoxeter, Staffordshire. By then I was fully hooked on both waders and the WSG.

One thing led to another, so in February 1981 we were on our way to Sidi Moussa, a small estuary on the Atlantic coast of Morocco. We wanted to study the refuelling of northward migrating waders coming from Banc d'Arguin on their way to the Arctic breeding grounds and using staging areas in Morocco before fuel stops in the British estuaries and the Wadden Sea. We had acquired a cheap Volkswagen van and crossed western Spain on 23 and 24 February. Wherever we stopped at roadside restaurants for a pee and a bite, we noticed people intently watching the TV screen. For several stops that day, the TV showed a conference room in which nothing seemed to happen. Very odd, but our lack of Spanish meant that we didn't ask any questions. Only afterwards did we learn that we had witnessed the stalemate in the Spanish parliament

after some militaries had tried to make a coup on the fledgling democratic system. King Juan Carlos somehow resolved the problem.

A year later, in early 1982, we were back in Morocco for a follow-up study (with another VW van!). I remember the shock of discovering, in a French-language Moroccan newspaper, that the UK had declared war on Argentina over the Malvinas. Wars do not necessarily lead to good things, but the Falklands war at least triggered the subsequent demise of the cruel generals' regime in Argentina.

These were times of great political change anyhow. The first WSG meeting in Poland, the one in Gdansk in 1987, may have hinted at a leaky Iron Curtain. With the benefit of hindsight, somehow the meeting announced the end of the Cold War (although nobody could tell at the time). Our WSG bus trip from Hook of Holland (where we picked up the Brits) through the Netherlands on to the still divided Berlin towards the old East-Germany and then into Poland, was certainly a rousing experience. In Gdansk it was very moving to meet the East-European colleagues that we had known by name for a long time who could then become friends! And my first meeting there with Pavel Tomkovich is well in my memory. Even then I was proud of the power of WSG to bridge borders: the first edition of *Breeding Waders in Europe*, published in 1986 as a *Wader Study Group Bulletin* Supplement, was compiled in Cold War days necessitating slow and complicated snail-mail exchanges. I believe that the WSG can be proud to be the very first with such a wide-range population assessment in the field of mapping of birds and other beasts.

In early April 1988 we were on our way to study the departure behaviour of waders leaving the Banc d'Arguin, but very frustratingly we were stuck in the harbour of Nouadhibou. Our access to Banc d'Arguin had been denied for security reasons (or so we were told), as Prince Philip was visiting the place. The Royal Yacht *Britannia* was in sight, and when we saw British uniforms at the quay we tried our luck and talked with them. Rumour had it the Prince would visit the town, so we hatched a plan to wait and present him with the 1980 expedition report *Wintering waders on the Banc d'Arguin* in an attempt to gain attention and hoping that this would then lead to access. The guys in uniforms were very friendly and even told us the time of the Prince's shoreline arrival! A few hours later Prince Philip was ferried in, and standing on the quay we handed



IMF Director Christine Lagarde just before being handed Red Knot 'Christine' for release at Iwik, Banc d'Arguin, January 2011 (photo: Marieke Feis).



King Willem-Alexander visiting Chongmin Dontan, Shanghai, China on 28 October 2015 (photo: Zhengwang Zhang).

over our book (which was immediately transferred to an assistant), whilst Dr Luc Hoffmann, who was in his company, greeted us as friends and then made arrangements for us. We were on our way and still managed to 'capture' most of the departure season!

Fast forward to May 1999, on the Delaware Bay beaches. Together with Allan Baker and Patricia González, our small Dutch team (Anne Dekinga, Anita Koolhaas and myself) were going to meet the US Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt (of the Clinton administration). Babbitt came over to probe the issues of the declining stocks of spawning horseshoe crabs and the Red Knots fuelling on their eggs, which we thought was a remarkable level of governmental interest given that the Dutch government at the time could not care less about the rampant destruction of the Wadden Sea intertidal flats by large-scale mechanical dredging! Anita, Anne and I were trying to measure rates and efficiencies of crab-egg digestion by Red Knots and other shorebirds. We had built small cloth-clad aviaries in a garage of the US Fish and Wildlife Service and kept various shorebirds of multiple species for a few days. We fed them, measured amounts of fresh eggs and collected their poo. When the day came, for security reasons, we (1) were kept unaware of the precise timing of Babbitt's visit ("If I tell you, I have to shoot you") and (2) were told that the garage doors should be fully open when Babbitt would arrive. Exactly at the announcement of his approach ("Here in ten minutes"), a Sanderling managed to escape into the larger confines of the garage. Panic: data above diplomacy! However, Anne captured it just before we were forced to open wide the garage door. In any case, Babbitt got his hands-on experience with a Red Knot. Fluent in Spanish, he listened to the story about the amazing migration of Red Knots from Patricia speaking her native tongue.

Another decade later, January 2011, Banc d'Arguin again. Certainly state-like in demeanour and charisma was certainly Christine Lagarde, the French director of the International Monetary Fund, who decided that on her free day in Mauritania she should visit Banc d'Arguin. Lined

up on the beach at Iwik we were introduced to her, and handed her a freshly captured Red Knot baptized 'Christine'—the first (well, sort of!) carrying a Time-Of-Arrival tag—whom she accepted to release back into the wild. 'Christine' was a bit stressed, but Christine certainly was not and did a very good job in placing the knot on the beach (so that we could retrieve her and get her stressed-out). Another hands-on experience by a VIP!

In recent years, the study of, and concern about, the desperate situation of migrating waders losing intertidal refuelling areas at great speed, has pulled me to China quite a few times. This brought bonuses like visits to Beijing's magnificent Forbidden City, 'life' encounters with the world-famous fossils of feathered dinosaurs at the Chinese Academy of Sciences and a stroll across Tiananmen Square. As I write I am flying back from Shanghai, where our King Willem-Alexander on 28 October 2015 demonstrated that wader and mudflat issues must have grown in Dutch governmental minds. The King took me by surprise by taking over an exposé on the role of the Yellow Sea shores for long-distance migrants. He made the point that the 10,000 km flight that some shorebirds fly to reach the Yellow Sea in spring is actually beaten by the 12,000 km long nonstop flights from Alaska to New Zealand. Indeed! 'E7' had made it into a Royal mind.

And what about the Red Square, with the Lenin Memorial and Kremlin on its side? If one takes the trouble to relax a moment between examining 'stiffs' of Red Knots, Spoon-billed Sandpipers, and of course Bar-tailed Godwits, in the overwhelming skin collection (curated by Pavel) of Moscow State University's Zoological Museum, and hangs out of the windows and (if I remember well) looks left, one sees the Red Square. I vividly recall thinking then how tightly knots and squares are connected.

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