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# Black-tailed Godwit Demographic Project

## Spring migration of Black-tailed Godwits in Iberia 2018

Portugal (Sado & Tejo), Spain (Doñana & Extremadura)



*Funded by University of Groningen, Birdlife Netherlands and Global Flyway Network*

*University of Groningen, FSE, GELIFES, Conservation Ecology Group  
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# Introduction

In 2004 the University of Groningen has started a long-term demographic project on a partly colour-ringed breeding population of Black-tailed Godwits *Limosa limosa* (hereafter: godwits) in SW Friesland and has since then coordinated all colour marking of godwits in The Netherlands. Mainly from December onwards, Black-tailed Godwits leave their wintering areas in West-Africa to stopover areas in southern Iberia. Here they are confined to three main areas: Doñana NP and Extremadura in Spain and the rice fields surrounding the Tejo and Sado estuaries near Lisbon in Portugal (Figure 1). Since 2007 these areas are visited by experienced volunteers and researchers from the University of Groningen in search for colour-ringed godwits. In this report you will find a summary and detailed day-to-day trip report of our work in Portugal and Extremadura in 2018.



Figure 1. Three main areas where many godwits can be observed during January-February; Extremadura (1), Doñana NP (2), Tejo-Sado (3)

Resighting colour marked birds during the stopover period is important for several reasons:

1. If a godwit disperses outside our study area, the chance that it will be resighted elsewhere in The Netherlands is small. Without the resightings in the stopover area, we would assume that this individual is dead and therefore underestimate annual survival.
2. Secondly, with enough resightings in the Iberian Peninsula we can calculate seasonal survival. In other words, we can calculate in which period of the life cycle mortalities occur more often.

- By measuring the density of individuals with colour marks, we can monitor the population size of the western European part of the Black-tailed Godwit population. In 2016 we published a scientific paper about this, a true milestone summarizing 9 years of fieldwork in Iberia. Please find below the abstract.

## Estimating the size of the Dutch breeding population of Continental Black-tailed Godwits from 2007–2015 using resighting data from spring staging sites (*Ardea* 114: 213–225.)

Rosemarie Kentie, Nathan R. Senner, Jos C.E.W. Hooijmeijer, Rocío Márquez-Ferrando, Jordi Figuerola, José A. Masero, Mo A. Verhoeven, & Theunis Piersma

Over the past 50 years, the population of Continental Black-tailed Godwits *Limosa limosa limosa* breeding of the East Atlantic Flyway has been in steep decline. This decline has previously been documented in trend analyses and six Netherlands-wide count-based population estimates, the last of which was completed in 1999. We provide an updated population size estimate and describe inter-annual fluctuations in the population between 2007 and 2015. To generate these estimates, we integrated a mark-recapture survival analysis with estimates of the densities of colour-marked individuals at migratory staging sites with known proportions of Continental and Icelandic *L. l. islandica* Black-tailed Godwits within a Bayesian framework. The use of these analytical techniques means that, in contrast with earlier efforts, our estimates are accompanied with confidence intervals, allowing us to estimate the population size with known precision. Using additional information on the breeding destination of 43 godwits equipped with satellite transmitters at Iberian staging areas, we found that 87% (75–95% 95% CI) of the nominate subspecies in the East Atlantic Flyway breed in The Netherlands. We estimated that the number of breeding pairs in The Netherlands has declined from 47,000 (38,000–56,000) pairs in 2007 to 33,000 (26,000–41,000) in 2015. Despite a temporary increase in 2010 and 2011, the population declined by an average of 3.7% per year over the entire period from 2007–2015, and by 6.3% from 2011–2015. We conclude that investing in an intensive demographic program at a regional scale, when combined with targeted resightings of marked individuals elsewhere, can yield population estimates at the flyway scale.

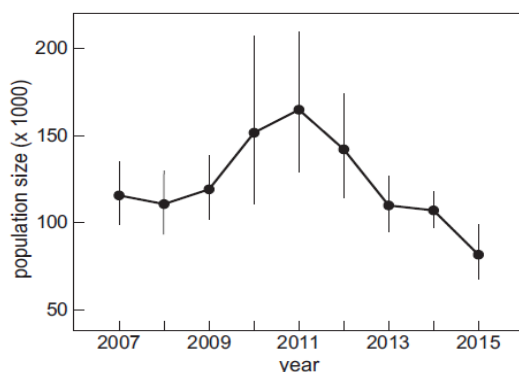


Figure 2. Population size of Black-tailed Godwits *Limosa limosa limosa* of the East-Atlantic Flyway based on colour ring densities on the staging sites. These estimates include godwits from the Icelandic subspecies *Limosa limosa islandica* using Iberian rice fields, which we assume to be 6.5% of the population size.

## Summary and overview sightings 2018

### Overview Sado and Tejo estuaries

The winter of 2017-2018 was relatively dry in the greater Lisbon area. When we arrived in Portugal in late January, we encountered therefore dry conditions in the rice fields. Hardly any fields had been ploughed yet and only a few fields contained water. Foraging conditions for godwits were therefore limited because they prefer wet, freshly ploughed rice fields to forage on. We spoke to farmers that had started to pump water on to the fields. They were way behind on their ploughing schedule and only in this costly way they would be able to get their fields ready for sowing in early April. Farming profits are already minimal because of heavy competition from Asian rice where they can use many kinds of heavy pesticides that have been forbidden in Europe. This forces them to produce mainly rice for baby foods: without pesticides their crops are smaller but they at least get a better price for their product. Ring reading conditions were excellent (except for some days with heat waves) with hardly any days lost due to bad weather or fog. And the drought made places accessible with a normal car which would have been off limits otherwise. We were shocked to find out that godwits are being (illegally) hunted in their core staging area when we ran into a hunting party at Ze do Pinho.

The hotspot used to be the Giganta ricefields near Porto Alto. The surface used here for rice cultivation is still increasing. But as hardly any fields were ploughed, godwits did not use this area a lot to forage. They mainly used the few fields with high water levels as a roost, which resulted in poor ring reading conditions generally. Foraging birds were found just north of Giganta at Cara Larga and later also at Ze do Pinho and Samora Correia. But the revelation of this year were the rice fields near Carregado, just north of Villafranca de Xira. Access and light conditions were not optimal here but with some persistence we managed to read a lot of rings. And another novelty was the return of the godwits to the Sado estuary near Zambujal and especially Comporta.

Over the whole month of February the number of godwits in the Sado and Tejo estuaries remained more or less constant at 40-50.000 individuals but we never encountered the massive flocks with more than 70.000 like in previous years. Maximum 40.000 birds came to roost at Giganta but regularly half of the group stayed at Carregado (maximum here was 32.400). No individuals were found back at Santo Estavao-Belmonte ricefields because nothing had been ploughed yet. The other ricefields at Benavente, Samora Correia, Salvaterra de Magos, Barroca de Alva, Paul de Trejito were scanned regularly but we hardly found any godwits there, except for some fields north of Samora Correia where we found 10.000 birds. To our big surprise we found some flocks as well in the Sado estuary: a few hundred near Zambujal and 3-5.000 near Comporta-Carrasqueira. In recent years godwits were almost absent in this area. Perhaps that they changed their distribution as a result of the drought, re-discovering the Sado estuary and exploring new areas like Carregado. Godwits were not at ease in this latter area where they had clearly problems to detect raptors in time due to powerline pilons and hedgerows; we saw many attacks and several godwits being taken by an array of raptor species.

In total 2573 resightings were made of 909 individuals with a full colour ring combination of the RUG-program in the Tejo estuary and 39 of 27 individuals in the Sado estuary. That is quite comparable to previous years or even a bit higher.

## Overview Doñana and Extremadura

We started the first 5 days of February in Doñana. That was 2 days more than anticipated but we had heard that the situation in Extremadura was really poor this year and decided to stay longer in the south. We found a few hundred godwits as usually at El Rocio, and about 2150 birds in the Isla Mayor and Minor ricefields and Dehesa de Abajo. Circa 95% of the rice fields had already been ploughed and were still at least moist. Some were even deliberately covered with water, funded by an EU agro-environmental scheme. But we learned that getting enough water from the river for rice cultivation is becoming more problematic in the increasingly dry summers and already causing abandonment of rice fields. Only in the first days we found reasonably good numbers at Veta la Palma (8750) but we could not find them back late. Last year we found 15000 godwits here in early February, mainly in the Lucio Cuquero Grande but this important lucio was for some unclear reason completely without birds now. Perhaps the birds moved between Veta la Palma and the natural marshlands of the National Park that also appeared to be wet this year.

The situation in Extremadura was terrible this year: when we arrived in the second week of February, >95% of the fields were dry and only about 50% had been ploughed. In the following 10 days there was hardly any agricultural activity which made the area unattractive to godwits this year. We also had the impression that in the core area between Santa Amalia, Valdehornillos, Medellin and Hernan Cortes less parcels were used for cultivating rice compared to a few years ago; perhaps due to insufficient water supplies in summer? In the first days we encountered only small groups in the core area and at other known sites near Palazuelo and Zurbaran. At the roost numbers peaked at 650 individuals (...). We enlarged our search-area but that did not yield large numbers of resightings. Despite the low numbers we saw new individuals every day which suggested that the turnover must have been high. This was confirmed by one of the transmitter-birds that came over from Portugal, stayed for 5 days in the area before it decided to go back; this exchange between Portugal and Spain was confirmed by sightings of 13 other individuals. Numbers stayed below 1000 but from the 15<sup>th</sup> onwards, there was a noticeable increase to 1450. We were already complaining last year when we encountered 6000-8000 godwits, but this year was definitely the worst in the past 10 years. It confirms a trend that Extremadura is gradually becoming less important as a stop-over site in favor of the Tejo estuary where rice cultivation is increasing and conditions are generally more optimal and predictable. In 2018 we published an article on this (more information below). Cherry on the cake was the presence of famous transmitter-bird Amalia, tagged in the area in 2013 and still going strong!

In total 394 resightings were made of 104 individually marked birds with a full colour ring combination from the RUG-program were seen in Extremadura and 143 resightings of 110 individuals in Doñana.

### **Numbers, individuals and percentage of the population seen**

Since 2012 a significant increase of the number of sightings was achieved until 2014; since then it has levelled off between 3-4000 sightings and 1100 individuals per year. This year we performed only slightly worse compared to 2017, despite to the lower numbers seen in Extremadura and Doñana, but still in line with previous years (see figure 2).

The decrease in sightings in Spain did not result in a decrease of the resighting-rate of the colour-ringed population. As you can see in figure 3 below, we have still resighted 70% of the ringed population which is an excellent score and close to the average of the past 5 years.

The estimated number of alive ringed individuals has levelled off at just over 1600 birds due to normal annual mortality, a row of years with bad recruitment in combination with a relaxed catching effort in the study area in SW Friesland. This estimate is based on an annual survival of 85% for adults and 45% for 1<sup>st</sup> cy birds (>10 d old). More recent estimates suggest that these figures might be too high for recent years which implies that we have probably seen a higher percentage of the ringed population than as suggested above.

## **Generational shift in spring staging site use by a long-distance migratory bird (Biol. Lett. 14: 20170663)**

**Mo A. Verhoeven, A. H. Jelle Loonstra, Jos C. E. W. Hooijmeijer, Jose A. Masero, Theunis and Nathan R. Senner.**

In response to environmental change, species have been observed altering their migratory behaviours. Few studies, however, have been able to determine whether these alterations resulted from inherited, plastic or flexible changes. Here, we present a unique observation of a rapid population-level shift in migratory routes—over 300 km from Spain to Portugal—by continental black-tailed godwits *Limosa limosa limosa*. This shift did not result from adult godwits changing staging sites, as adult site use was highly consistent. Rather, the shift resulted from young godwits predominantly using Portugal over Spain. We found no differences in reproductive success or survival among individuals using either staging site, indicating that the shift resulted from developmental plasticity rather than natural selection. Our results therefore suggest that new migratory routes can develop within a generation and that young individuals may be the agents of such rapid changes.

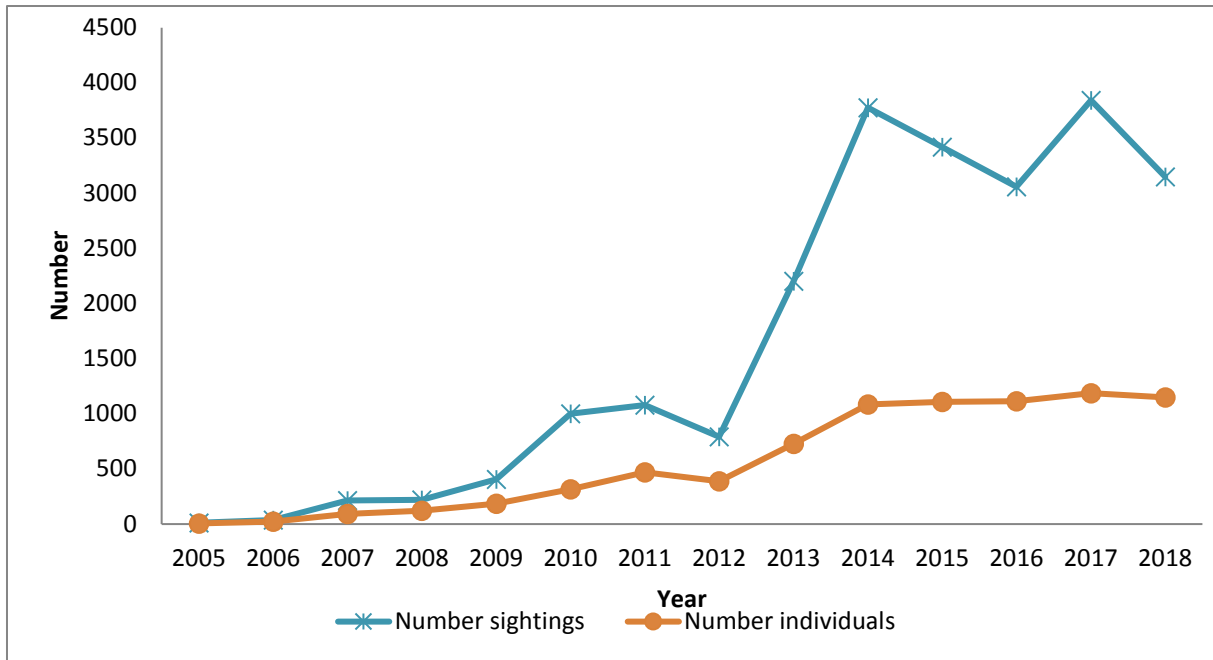


Figure 2 Total numbers of sightings and observed individuals in Extremadura, Doñana NP, Tejo-Sado in January-February of each year (no code flags).

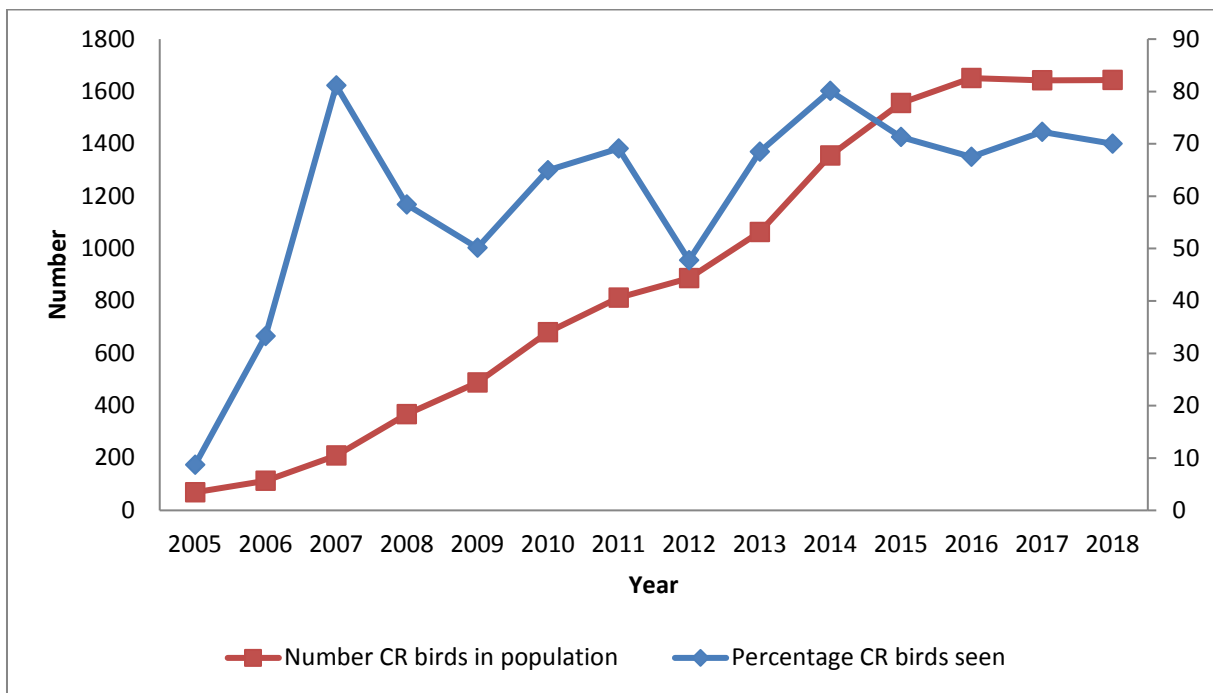


Figure 3 Estimated number of colour ringed birds that are still alive and the observed percentage in Extremadura, Doñana NP, Sado and Tejo Estuary all together in January-February of each year (no code flags).



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These colour ring reading trips would not be possible without the help of all co-authors, colleagues and volunteers that spent their (free) time or even their holidays (Jan and Rennie Kramer) scanning godwit legs: many thanks for that! Especially Astrid Kant and Ronald Messemaker made a major contribution again next to our permanent teams.

Thanks to Jose Masero and Pipe Abad (University of Extremadura) for organizing the apartment in Santa Amalia again! Also Miguel Medialdea helped us to organize the field work in Veta la Palma.

Thanks to Rui Alves and Livia Ala of the Companhia das Lezírias, Rui Paixão of Associação de Beneficiários da Lezíria Grande de Vila Franca de Xira for help with logistics and information.

Last but not least, all the people and organisations that gave us their hospitality to be as a guest in their areas. We are very pleased that we could make use of this.

**Team 1 Portugal: Maarten Hotting en Kees de Jager, 1-10 February 2018**

**Friday 2 February 2018.** *Sun with a single cloud. Hard wind (4 to 5 Bft) from the north.*

Just after sunrise we retrieved our access pass for the Giganta Ricefields at the Associação de Beneficiários. After the registration Rui Paixão wished us good luck with the spotting and kindly handed over a beanbag to accommodate spotting from without the car. We were eager to start our “job” and rushed (within the speed limit) to the Giganta gate. Pretty soon we saw a large group of Godwits in the air and then even more on the rice fields. We estimated 24,000 birds resting and feeding on flooded fields, together with various ducks (especially Northern Shoveler and Common Teal). A visit from a 2<sup>nd</sup> year Bonelli's Eagle did the whole group flush in to the air, giving us spectacular views and some nice pictures. Also some Western Marsh-Harriers were causing unrest. After a while peace returned, and the birds start resting. Resting took place at quite a distance and reading rings was difficult.



*2nd year Bonelli's Eagle causing panic*

We decided to check other parts of the rice fields for Godwits, but didn't find them. Just after noon we went shopping in Porto Alto and ate here at MCDonalds (which was new according to Maarten). After the food we collected the key for Belmonte rice fields at the Companhia das Lezírias' office. As it was already getting late, we decided to leave Belmonte for tomorrow and went back to Giganta.

Here we checked the northern fields (Cara Larga area) and discovered a beautiful group of Godwits (estimated 5,000 exx) with many ringed birds. We stayed at the group for the rest of the afternoon and drove some back and forth to view another piece of the group. Occasionally new birds came in and at the end of the day we estimated the total group at 8,000 birds.



*Godwits at Cara Larga just before sunset*

A quick look at the Giganta fields – just after sunset – provide us with a group of 8,000 glossy ibis (a few rings, but too dark to read a lot) and a lot of Godwits (28,000).

**Saturday 3 February 2018:** *Morning: clear blue sky; around noon rising clouds with occasional sun; around 17:00 a few light showers. All day strong (northern) wind.*

First check at Giganta rice fields. Most black ibises had already left, still a lot of Godwits (rough estimate 25,000) but unfortunately still in the back and rings where hard to spot. Small groups seemed to leave for the north, so we went to the Cara Larga field where we had done many readings yesterday. Here again a nice group of birds (+/- 1,000 exx) present, partly resting, partly foraging; unfortunately with backlight, but we were still able to read some rings.

We checked the rest of the Cara Larga area for Godwits, but the land was very dry and we didn't find a single godwit, but a ringed Osprey (project from the UK) and Spoonbill gave us some readings. In the meantime the group on the Giganta side had started feeding, but the water was much higher than yesterday. Almost all birds were up to the belly in the water and we could only read 1 ringed bird. Because of the circumstances we decided to check Belmonte.



*Osprey - Blue[2AA]; ringed at Rutland Water, Oakham, United Kingdom*

We quickly found the right gate and through an area with cork oak (good for the species list with f.e. Cirl Bunting and various tits) and a style unpaved path we reached the rice fields. Unfortunately they did not appear to be ploughed or under water. No Godwit to be seen.



*Belmonte rice fields; no ploughing, no Godwits*

After a field lunch we quickly went back to Cara Larga where - on the now familiar field - a nice group was foraging and the light was pretty good by now. We stayed until 17:00 when it started to drip a bit.

We closed the day with a check at Giganta, especially for ringed Glossy Ibis. Unfortunately, due to the cloudy weather, the light was too bad to read any of the mostly dirty / discoloured rings.

**Sunday 4 February 2018.** *Sun with few clouds, NW 3-4*

We started the day with a check at Giganta. A large group of Godwits (22,000 exx) was present. Most of them sleeping and some foraging; all at distance and in belly deep water. At Cara Larga we again found a group busy foraging. We could read various rings and take a nice sample of the ring density.



*B3LRYY; one of the Godwits we could read in the morning*

We proceeded with a search for the location where transmitter birds (Lippenhuzen and Wiuwert) were located several times during the previous days. After some searching we found a large group (10,000 exx) foraging on ploughed rice fields near Carregado. Unfortunately the birds were a bit difficult to view from the car because the field was lined with bushes. However we were able to read some rings through the (closed) gate. At a given moment the birds flew up and part of the group went down slightly further. This spot was better reachable and we could take the necessary readings there. The birds however were restless and went up after a while. This time flying in the direction of the Tagus.

On google maps we saw several pieces of land which seem suitable habitat for the birds, so we gave it a try and went that way. We discovered a few suitable areas, unfortunately without birds. Difficulty was the lack of public roads entering the rice fields.

The last part of possible suitable areas appeared to accommodate more different forms of agriculture and appears to be unsuitable for Godwits. A number of beautiful Southern Grey Shrikes stole the show and one bird even cooperated and let us take some pictures. Unfortunately, fate then struck in the form of a slightly too deep pit in the (very bad) road. Maarten (who was driving) could not avoid it and soon the car indicated that we had to check the tire pressure. Our right front tire didn't survive the encounter with the pit and was running flat. We parked the car in a safe place and called the emergency centre. Lucky enough the employee spoke English (we do not speak Portuguese) and with some difficulty we could explain where we were (or so we thought). Help would be on site within 30 minutes ....

Luckily there were some birds in the neighbourhood including Mourning Wagtail (at least 2 exx ), Black Redstart and some Siskins. The 30 minutes soon turned out to be 1.5 hours and after a new call to the emergency centre it turned out the emergency service couldn't find us (despite having our GPS coordinates). After having once again explained where we were, the towing service came after 30 minutes. Car on the trailer and of we went in the direction of Lisbon for a new one. On the way we passed the field of the morning, where a large group of Godwits were busy foraging. This is definitely worth a visit. After the usual hassle at "damage" at the car rental we got a new car and had just enough light to go to Cara Larga and watch some Godwits. So we could still end the day with a number of ring readings.

**Monday 5 February 2018.** *Sun, fresh in the morning (4-5 C), max 10 C in the afternoon (and in the car - out of the wind - already feeling warm); wind N3-4*

We spent the morning in the rice fields of Carregado. Immediately upon arrival, the whole group went into the air and we could estimate the group at about 20,000 birds. Some of the birds flew away in the direction of ESE, but the majority of them passed the N1. Here - from behind a fence - we could view the birds on ploughed rice fields. Many birds were busy foraging, but also very restless (regularly flushing and landing a short distance further). This made reading difficult and making a sample impossible.

After a while, the birds flew to a field a bit further from the road. Through a small path, we could survey these fields (standing behind a little dike with bushes). Over time, unrest won, and the birds took off again. Some of the birds went high in the direction of ESE, others landed at the other side of the N1 again and we could observe them - through a fence and the necessary plants. Maarten found a transmitter Godwit with missing ring (C1WG?G). After WhatsApp contact with Jos this turned out to be C1WGCG. Not much later Kees found the next transmitter Godwit (Y2RRYB - Wiuwert); one of the birds which led us to this place.

Around noon, all the Godwits left for ESE, presumably to the flooded rice fields that we saw the previous day, but which we do not have access to.



*Godwits foraging at Carregado*



*Y2RRYB - Wiuwert*



*Y2RRYB - Wiuwert*

Via the supermarket – to get our lunch - back to Cara Larga where we could read various birds while eating a sandwich. After lunch we spent the rest of the afternoon in Giganta where we drove to the west as far as possible. Only a single field that seemed suitable, but most fields are still unploughed. Nice observations were 8 Little Bunting in the grasslands and quite some Corn Buntings, some of which cooperated well for the photo.

At the end of the afternoon we checked the fields where the large group usually stands (resting place for the night). Unfortunately, just like the previous days, the birds again were far away and in deep water. Yet we can read two rings in a small group a bit closer. As an extra, we discovered a ringed Black-winged Stilt. We ended the day (traditionally) at Cara Larga, where we still find new birds.

**Tuesday 6 February 2018.** *Sun, N3-4, 5-10C*

After the success of yesterday, the day started again at Carregado. The birds were very restless and often flew up, usually just when you had a ringed in your scope.... The cause soon turned out to be a Northern Goshawk who went off with an unknown prey (went too fast to determine if it was a godwit). A large part of the birds went off afterwards (ESE), a small part came down on the fields behind us. After a little detour we could watch these birds and noted a number of ringed birds. However, the fun did not last long, as these birds also went to the other side of the railway where we cannot come (closed areas).





*Small part of the group at Carregado*

So, just a little earlier than planned, towards Giganta. Here the same picture as the previous days. Godwits present (but a lot less than before), but far away and sleeping with the belly almost in the water.

Looking for the missing Godwits we went towards Samora Correia, where one of the transmitter Godwits also has been located a number of times in the days before. The first fields we checked were unsuitable (dry and not yet ploughed), later fields seemed more suitable. Unfortunately, no godwit to be seen. It did yield a number of other species (f.e. Azure-winged Magpie and a Eurasian Hoopoe).

Then again to our "sweet spot" at Cara Larga. The Godwits did not disappoint us and we were able to read some birds again. Unfortunately it wasn't a big group (+/- 1000 exx) which meant we didn't need a lot of time to scope the whole group.

Yet again towards Carregado for larger numbers. Fortunately, the birds were back on the fields again, but still very restless. We did however manage to get some new rings. After most birds left behind the railway, we went back to Cara Larga for the end of the day. Here some more birds and some new rings. As we approached the twilight, small groups flew away towards the north. We expect to spend the night at Carregado.

As last of the day, a check at Giganta. It turned out that there were almost no Godwits at the usual site. As we saw the Glossy Ibises coming down a bit further down the road - instead of the usual place where we were – we drove there, hoping to find the "missing" Godwits there too. Unfortunately, only a large group of Black Ibises were found here.



*B6BYBL at Cara Larga*

**Wednesday 7 February 2018.** Sun, N3-4, max. 10 C, at the end of the day a few clouds and a drip of rain.

Today we had an exploration towards the SW on the program, with the expectation not to see many Godwits. Therefore, we first checked Cara Larga to read some rings. This turned out to be disappointing. The water on the good plots had dropped and there were barely any Godwits to be seen. A check at Giganta still yielded a group of 8,000 exx, but again all in the back. Via the supermarket in Porta Alto we went to the direction of Alcochete. Here we checked a few salt pans and the banks of the Tagus. In the salt pans not much, on the riverbank several. Also a group of +/- 300 Godwits of which 2 ringed (both Portuguese). Furthermore, among others, the Bar-tailed Godwit, Red Knot, Ruddy Turnstone, Kentish plover, Hooded Sandpiper and Curlew Sandpiper.

At a few salt pans west of Alcochete we found a pair of ringed Greater Flamingo. A nice piece of salt pans with an open barrier was very inviting and produced 19 ringed Common Redshank, a ringed Greenshank and three ringed Pied Avocet. However, it turned out that we had overlooked a sign and that we were on private property. This ended the readings as we were sent away.

Lunch on the banks of the Tagus, with several sandpipers, another ringed Common Redshank and a Crested Lark. Given the time (midday hour) and earlier contact with Jan Kramer that there was no Godwit around the Sado estuary, we only checked a number of rice fields east of Montijo. Here a group of +/- 80 Godwits were foraging on the unploughed rice fields.



*Crested Lark at lunchtime in Alcochete*

After a final check at Alcochete, with a Ringed Pied Avocet as result, we went back towards our standard spots. At Cara Larga now a large group (+/- 2000 exx ) was foraging. Because of the fallen water (almost) all the legs were visible. The amount of rings was a bit disappointing and after a 2<sup>nd</sup> year Bonelli's Eagle flew over, part of the group left for the North (presumably Carregado). We checked the remaining group (500-800 exx) and were able to take a nice sample.

We drove through the Cara Larga area towards Giganta. Here we found a large group (10,000+ birds) reasonable close by the road. Before we could read any rings well, however, a Marsh Harrier disturbed the group and not much later a Peregrine falcon did it a bit more. Only a small number stayed in the front, the rest went to the familiar spot on the back of the field.

During the twilight birds kept coming and in the end there were again about 15,000 birds. This time, a Marsh Harrier caused the group to come forward, but in the fading light we found only one ringed bird.



*Bonelli's Eagle checking for diner*



*Y6RBRB, one of the birds staying reasonably close*

**Thursday 8 February 2018.** Sun, max 11C, but frost in the night (ice on the fields and ripe in the shade), wind: N3

Early morning to Carregado; no bird in sight at first. However, we discovered a route towards the - according to the GPS readings - sleeping place of the Godwits. In the distance we could see the necessary birds, but a closed fence kept us from getting closer. Fortunately not much later the first birds landed on the accessible rice fields. As usual again very restless and not much later they went foraging in a field with direct backlight for us. Parts of the field was clearly frozen, every now and then you saw a bird "skating" over a piece of ice. Unfortunately they stayed at the field where we had to look against the sun and after reading the easy birds, we decided to go towards Giganta.



*Unfortunately a familiar sight at Giganta: birds at a distance and in belly deep water*

On route a quick check at Cara Larga, but the field there was almost dry now and work was also being carried out; no Godwit. At Giganta a completely different story: a large foraging group. Most of them with their belly in the water, but still some rings. We could also photograph a leucistic Godwits, one of two (different) birds we spotted during this trip.

Two overflying Bonelli's Eagles caused the necessary panic and this was the signal for us to try again at Carregado. The birds were still in the same field here, but luckily the sun was turning. The field was difficult to overlook because the edges were overgrown. Only from two fences we could view the birds (at an angle). Still the necessary rings. Our third Bonelli's Eagle of the day caused panic again. Especially when the eagle made a dive (without result) for the Godwits. So back to Giganta where we quickly checked a new spot where some Godwits birds were foraging. Unfortunately we flushed a Spotted Redshank, which caused so much panic that all the Godwits went off too. In a nearby building we found a Barn Owl; also overflying Barn Swallow (2 ex) and House Martin (1 ex).

The Godwits – back at the fields where they also sleep - were again busy foraging again and let us come reasonably close. Here we read rings until the darkness no longer allowed it. An estimated 30,000 birds on the sleeping place.



*Leucistic Godwit*

**Friday 9 February 2018.** *Morning: low clouds and drizzle; wind from S. In the course of the afternoon clearing and wind turned to N.*

Started at Giganta where a large part of the birds from yesterday evening was still present (sleeping, preening), despite we were not really early (just after sunrise). This was possibly caused by the poor weather - low clouds and some rain. Because the birds were reasonably far we soon decided to go to Cara Larga . At the gate, however, we encountered our successors (Haije and Egbert) and therefore continued directly together. At Cara Larga

a (large) hand full of birds including one ringed. The birds, however, flew quickly.

Given the weather and better forecast for the afternoon, we decided to go directly to Lisbon to bring back the car of Haije and Egbert. From Lisbon we drove directly to Carregado to show this new area. Fortunately, many Godwits were present, and the cloudy weather prevented strong backlighting. We spent here the rest of the morning. After a (late) field lunch still many birds on the fields, but when they startled by something the majority flew in the direction of Giganta; and we followed.

At Giganta, however, not many birds present and also at Carra Larga not the numbers that had flown away at Carregado (but more than in the morning). We did see some birds landing in the area, but we couldn't find the big group. Yet again to Giganta, where - after a tip - we found a reasonable

group at some new locations. Here we spent some time reading until most birds were resting (in to deep water).

A final check at the sleeping place yielded larger numbers and some rings. They were also flying in groups from different directions, so the estimated number eventually reached +/- 20,000 birds.



*G4GGWG showing his rings at take off*

**Team 2 Portugal: Egbert van der Velde and Haije Valkema, 9-18 February 2018**



**Friday 9 February 2018.** 14°C, Wind N3, clouded with sunny moments and rain in the morning, 2 x 20k godwits.

After 2 days of touring along the Atlantic West coast of Portugal and the touristic area around Sintra we arrived at the Tejo rice fields where we met with Maarten and Kees. They showed us the areas (Giganta and Ze do Pinho) with godwit activity including a newly discovered area North-East of Carregado pointed out by several transmitter-godwits. The area appeared to contain suitable foraging fields and had been used for roosting as well by ca. 20k godwits for the last week. Although the fields looked suitable they're on the edge of an industrial zone between a railroad and the hectic N3 road with a power plant in the background and many high voltage cables hanging above the fields. The godwits are regularly startled by (occasionally honking) trucks or quaking freight trains. Frightened flocks appear to be aware of the danger of the power cables and frantically split up when nearing.



*The not very idyllic rice fields North-East of Carregado containing huge numbers of foraging godwits.*



In the afternoon we visited the Giganta rice fields where the other 20k located birds appeared to shift their foraging to some other fields as the days before (because of reduced water levels) though the main roosting location appeared to remain unchanged. Strangely enough there seemed to be no agricultural activity in the whole area. Most rice fields were still dry and unplowed while others had already been prepared for sowing and already dried up again.

**Saturday 10 February 2018.** 14°C, Wind N4, sunny, 40k godwits.

We started our day at sunrise at Giganta rice fields where huge flocks of godwits were already leaving the roost in the direction of Carregado. After a short time of ring reading a Bonelli's eagle scared the remaining godwits away. The Ze do Pinho area (between Giganta and Carregado) was empty as well, most likely as a result of ca. 20 hunters. We talked to one of them and he made us clear that he only hunted for snipes. We decided to bring Maarten and Kees to the airport and visited the Belmonte valley on our way back. The fields there hadn't been plowed yet and there was no sign of agricultural nor godwit activity. After checking some smaller and unplowed rice areas around Benavente and Samora Correia we drove to Carregado. 20k Godwits were at the same two fields as yesterday, but intense sunlight, distance, heat waves and compact group density made ring reading impossible until the end of the afternoon resulting in a meager daily ring reading score. The roost at Carregado seemed to be abandoned and around 40k godwits gathered at the Giganta roost.

**Sunday 11 February 2018.** 15°C, Wind W2, clouded with a few drips, >40k godwits.

The Bonelli's eagles and several marsh harriers ruined our morning: first at the roost at Giganta and later at Carregado where we started with perfect ring reading conditions for a short moment. Fortunately we had several good moments at Carregado in the afternoon with approximately 25k actively foraging godwits.

After the disturbance at the roost at sunrise we ran into Dirk Tanger and Ed Sijp who arrived yesterday to enjoy the godwit experience. We showed them the roosting site with the remaining 500 godwits. Afterwards we explored the majority of the rice fields north and south of the N10 road between Vila Franca de Xira and Porto Alto but didn't find any godwits though several fields looked suitable (recently plowed and good water levels). We didn't notice any plowing activity in the whole area. Several meadows in the area had significantly been intensified compared to previous years with monocultures of *Lolium* sp. They now looked like modern Dutch meadows and some had already been mown and were injected with liquid fertilizer/manure.

At the end of the afternoon we returned to the roost at Giganta to count and enjoy the sleep migration together with Dirk and Ed. 15K mainly resting godwits were already present and the majority of the arriving birds came from the direction of Carregado, but also several thousand arrived from the direction of Samora Correia and Lisbon. We concluded that the birds from the direction of Lisbon must have been standing on the riverbanks of the Tejo, because there are no other wet areas in that direction. We had the impression that godwit numbers slightly increased compared to yesterday and the day before.



*The always imposing formation of the gigantic godwit roost at Giganta rice fields.*

**Monday 12 February 2018.** 15°C, Wind N2, sunny, >40k godwits.

Once more we had a day with difficult reading conditions. Most birds left Giganta at sunrise so we went to Carregado where the birds decided to forage on some fenced off fields. After quite some disturbance they moved to the back end of an unreachable field and by then the sunlight had already become too intense to read rings. Because numbers at Carregado dropped we decided to look for the group North of Samora Correia. The area appeared to contain many suitable fields, but was difficult to enter. Eventually we found an illegal way in passing through a farm at the Northern edge of SC. We found a group of 10k actively foraging godwits with good ring reading conditions, but unfortunately within half an hour a friendly farmer came to tell us we were on private property and we had to leave.

We contacted Rui Alves and he arranged that the 3 farmers who rent the land in the area (from Companhia das Lezírias) would inform their workers about our presence. Unfortunately we still didn't get access through the northern main gate that leads directly into the area, but as long as we have dry weather we will manage to approach the godwits. The northern gate seemed to be remotely controlled (by phone?) and not by key or pass.

Mr. Alves told us that they'd had a rather dry period and the rice workers would be happy with some rain. This might be the reason that most rice fields haven't been plowed yet. We spent the rest of the afternoon at Giganta where 10-15k godwits were spread out over several fields with rather high water levels scattered over the area.

At sunset we noticed some remarkable behavior with multiple large groups leaving the roost and flying away several km's in eastern direction. We first thought they'd form a new roost somewhere else so we followed them to the area around the small airport where the roost and foraging spots used to be in the past years, but after a few minutes they returned to the original roost. The fields around the airport were all unplowed and dry with stubbles like most fields we encountered so far.

Maybe the godwits were searching for other suitable spots to roost or forage or they were just spreading their wings after a long day of foraging/resting. Because they didn't climb up very high it didn't look like they were checking out higher wind currents for northern migration.

**Tuesday 13 February 2018.** 15°C, Wind W2, clouded with sunny moments, >40k godwits.

Today we went straight to Carregado where 30k godwits were actively foraging under great ring reading conditions. Finally we were able to acquire an excellent amount of color combinations (ca. 140 each). Before sunset we drove to the roost at Giganta where not much had changed, only the number of human spectators increased and less godwits arrived from the direction of Samora Correia because numbers at Carregado increased.

**Wednesday 14 February 2018.** 15°C, Wind W2, clouded with sunny moments, 45k godwits.

Another day with optimal circumstances for ring reading. The main flock still used the fields at Carregado, but halfway the afternoon most birds returned to Giganta and so did we. Astrid Kant and Ronald Messemaker arrived at the end of the morning and joined us in reading rings resulting in an incredible daily total of color combinations (ca. 350) and lots of fun.

**Thursday 15 February 2018.** 16°C, Wind W1, misty morning followed by sunny moments, 45k+3k godwits.

In the morning we both quickly snatched 50 color combinations from Carregado and then left to check out the Sado. We didn't expect to see more than 150 godwits, but at Zambujal we already found 400 and saw the first RUG-bird in the Sado area since 2012. There was a lot of variation in the rice fields of Zambujal: plowed/unplowed combined with wet/dry and water tables varying from 0-30 cm.



*The sunny and peaceful valley of Zambujal with 400 nervous godwits.*

As usual most of the other fields around the Sado were unplowed and pretty dry only at Alcácer do Sal we saw some suitable godwit habitat (wet and recently plowed fields) and at Comporta we were happily surprised by lots of suitable fields covering a huge area. The area at Comporta looked like how the Giganta rice field complex used to be in the past 5 years. We quickly ran into another group of 400 foraging godwits. Though we had the impression the group mainly consisted of *Islandica* it also contained godwits with RUG ring combinations. Because it was the end of the afternoon the group soon left for roosting enabling us to follow them. At the riverbanks of the Sado we ran into a total of approximately 3000 godwits at coordinates 38.407453,-8.791389. After driving back we had dinner with Dirk and Ed who'd been at the Giganta roost until sunset and counted 43k godwits.



*The roost at Comporta on the riverbanks of the Sado with Setubal's industry in the background.*

**Friday 16 February 2018.** 16°C, Wind S2, dense fog in the morning followed by a sunny afternoon, 45k godwits.

Even though we could hear them, we were unable to see any godwits at Carregado until the fog cleared around 12:45 PM.



*Thirty thousand actively foraging but invisible godwits.*

Because of instant intense sunlight it was still nearly impossible to read rings and around 14 PM all the godwits left the area so we went searching for them. At Ze do Pinho they started plowing and we

found a group of 3k. Ring density was relatively high so we stayed there until sunset and decently compensated for the useless morning.

We ran into a farmer who spoke fluently English (which is rare) so we fired him with lots of questions. He was able to tell us that they were way behind with plowing because of the drought. Even though it cost a lot of gasoline they started pumping water onto the rice fields because otherwise they'd be unable to start sowing at the start of April. Pumping enough water on an average rice field took one week and the godwits had started using the fields the day after the pumps started. Because of EU chemical restrictions for food, Portuguese rice farmers can't compete with Asian rice production forcing them to produce rice for baby food because of the relatively higher price compared to regular rice. They only use small amounts and less effective herbicides compared to Asia and the pre-EU-past resulting in more weeds reducing the production to a level that it's hardly profitable. Even so turning rice fields into grass land is also very costly because the fields don't lose water easily during periods with lots of rain resulting in many dead patches which then have to be sown again. When the rice starts growing in May they start scaring away all the birds because they destroy their crops. Godwits are gone by then he said and most birds present are after the American fresh water lobsters that since the 80's have started thriving in the rice fields. Birds he mentioned to be responsible for crop damage are: ibis (their biggest problem), stork, gull and sometimes flamingo. They scare the birds with dummy gun shots and he also mentioned that local hunters only go after snipes for as far as he knew (in contrast to what we'll experience tomorrow). It was an interesting and mutually pleasant conversation confirming information we already heard from others. He was pleasantly surprised by our agricultural knowledge when we told him about modern Dutch grassland management. Hopefully he doesn't bring this information into practice.

At sunset we went to the roost at Giganta where Dirk and Ed counted 45k godwits.

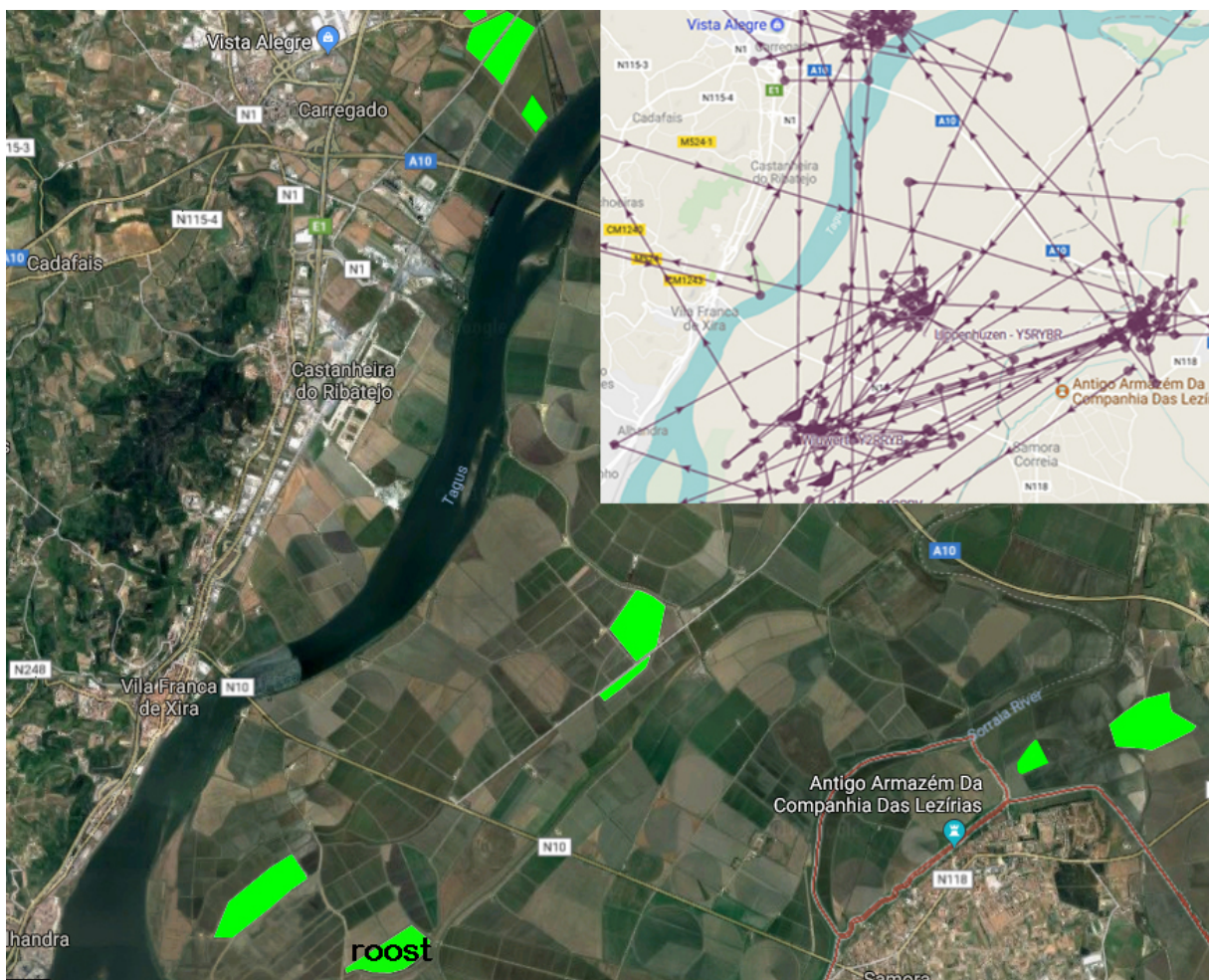
**Saturday 17 February 2018.** 17°C, Wind SW1, mild rain in the morning followed by a sunny afternoon, 45k godwits.

We decided to start at Ze do Pinho and expected thousands of foraging godwits on the freshly plowed fields, but instead we ran into a group of 7 hunters shooting at everything within their range. Many shots of hail were fired in flocks of waders including godwit, black-winged stilt, green sandpiper and lapwing. The birds were left for dead and not collected either. Interfering would probably only make things worse, so we tried to contact several Portuguese associates and could get a hold of José Alves who told us it was illegal and we could undertake legal actions if we had proof. Fortunately Astrid had been able to take good photographs of the hunters including the license plates of their cars so this story doesn't end here. Filled with anger we left the area and went to Carregado as most godwits did too. Halfway the afternoon we drove to Lisboa to pick up Wim and Siebe. Together we checked the area north of Samora Correia again and saw several thousands of godwits, but decided not to enter the area as we only had little sunlight left. We drove back to Ze do Pinho where around 10k godwits had returned to the freshly plowed rice fields. After a short but fruitful ring reading session we left for the roost at Giganta where we met José Alves and his wife accompanied by Jennifer Gill and Graham Appleton from the UK. We had a short but pleasant conversation. Numbers at the roost had significantly decreased to around half the amount we'd seen

the previous days. We enjoyed our final sunset at the Giganta roosting site and then left for dinner and preparations for our return to the Netherlands.

**Sunday 18 February 2018.** 17°C, Wind SW1, sunny, 20k godwits.

We showed Wim and Siebe the rice fields at Carregado and were able to get a great number of color combinations in a short amount of time. Just before our departure we ran into Jan and Rennie Kramer from the Netherlands. Jan enthusiastically told us about his findings during their travel along the godwit hotspots in Iberia. In the Sado area he'd only seen (a few hundred) godwits at Alcázar do Sal. We shared some of our experiences and then left for the airport.



*The limited fields where we encountered godwits in the period 9-18 February 2018 in the Tejo area, perfectly covering the transmitter tracks of three birds.*

### **Team 3 Portugal: Wim Tijssen and Siebe Bonthuis, 17-26 February 2018**

#### **Saturday 17 February 2018**

This is the fourth year for Wim Tijssen and the second time for Siebe Bonthuis. In 2017 Siebe joined the team of Wim Tijssen and Maarten Hotting for 5 days in the first period, and he enjoyed it that much, so this year Wim and Siebe form a team. The second team, Egbert van der Velde and Haije Valkema pick's us up at the Lisboa airport in the afternoon. The weather forecast looks very good for the last team, almost only sunny days and with temperatures reaching 18 to 20C in the beginning of the afternoon, so very promising!

After changing the driver-formalities for the car-rental, we are able to see some ringed godwits in late afternoon with the four of us in one car and luggage... While Egbert and Haije tell us where the birds have been staying the last days. We still have two hours in beautiful light in the afternoon, to have a look at the godwits with the four of us. We also meet Astrid Kant and Ronald Messemaker, who also kept an eye on the birds for some days. We join at the roosting place in Giganta other researchers and godwit-lovers; José Alves, Jennifer Gill, Graham Appleton and Veronica Mendez from the University of East Anglia, who were after the Icelandic godwits more in the saltpans. And make an appointment to have diner next day at Alcochete with us and have some good talks about...?



*Always nice late evening sky's, with the hills behind Villa Franca da Xira in the background*

The place to live for the teams is located in the DP-hostel in the centre of Villa Franca de Xira and now showing up that it is even more in the centre of the godwits, since the first team (Maarten Hotting and Kees de Jager) figured out that more godwits prefer the rice fields of Carregado on the west bank and just 6km north of Villa Franca! And, most important, it is very close to nice and good restaurants in a few meters walk! It is a cosy place to stay and good simple breakfast in the morning, makes it a pleasant way to do research in the area.

**Sunday 18 February 2018.** *Sunny, 10-18C light wind*

First day in the field! On our first morning, Egbert and Haije explain us the working of the car and show us the new 'hot' place and rice fields near Vala du Carregado where we stay on the Sunday morning with many birds close to the road. On Sunday morning it is really quiet along this normally busy side-road.



*You would not expect so many birds close to a Power station and many high-voltage pylons in the field, but the godwits cope surprisingly well with them.*

Although flying predators have more influence on the birds in such a risky area also with hedgerows around the fields. Sunny, almost no wind and lots of godwits makes it a nice start of the day. We also got a visit from a Frisian pair, Jan and Rennie Kramer, who made a tour along some godwit area's in February in Portugal and Spain. So lots of 'foreign' Frisian chats with two Frisian guys still in the field on their last day, before we have to bring them to the airport. At twelve o'clock we leave the field



and at that time it is also impossible to read some rings because of the heat waves. We bring Egbert and Haije to the airport, and afterwards have a good coffee break in Porto Alto at the famous 'birdy' coffee shop, annex bakery.



*They changed the birdy pictures in the coffee shop/bakery in Porto Alto into a plate of a pretty girl in a rice field instead of kingfishers and spoonbills... But the coffee and cookies are still of the same quality!*

Siebe and I decide to end the day in the Cara Larga area between some good flocks and perfect light almost until dark. And Wim takes some ring density sample sizes and we read the ring of a Lesser Black-backed gull. In the evening we have some nice talks during diner with José Alves, Jennifer Gill, Graham Appleton (from the website WaderTales: <https://wadertales.wordpress.com/>) and Veronica Mendez. In the end it turns out that the restaurant owner speaks very good Dutch, so lots of translations were not necessary! He discovered Wim's Dutch AZ-scarf and started to speak very good Dutch, good joke!

**Monday 19 February 2018.** Cold start, but 14-18 C during the day, sunny, almost no wind.

We start again at Vala do Carregado, it is now Monday's and we come to the conclusion that this road is much more busy then yesterday... Perfect ringreading circumstances with in total 32.400 godwits on two fields. And Siebe and Wim split a bit during the day, because of the sun and the two flocks. We also approached the flock from two sides. Wim mostly from the car and Siebe from another side behind the reed bed. In total we read more than 180 different combinations!



*Spring is in the air on our first full day in the field; flowers, coffee and godwits, what do we want more?*



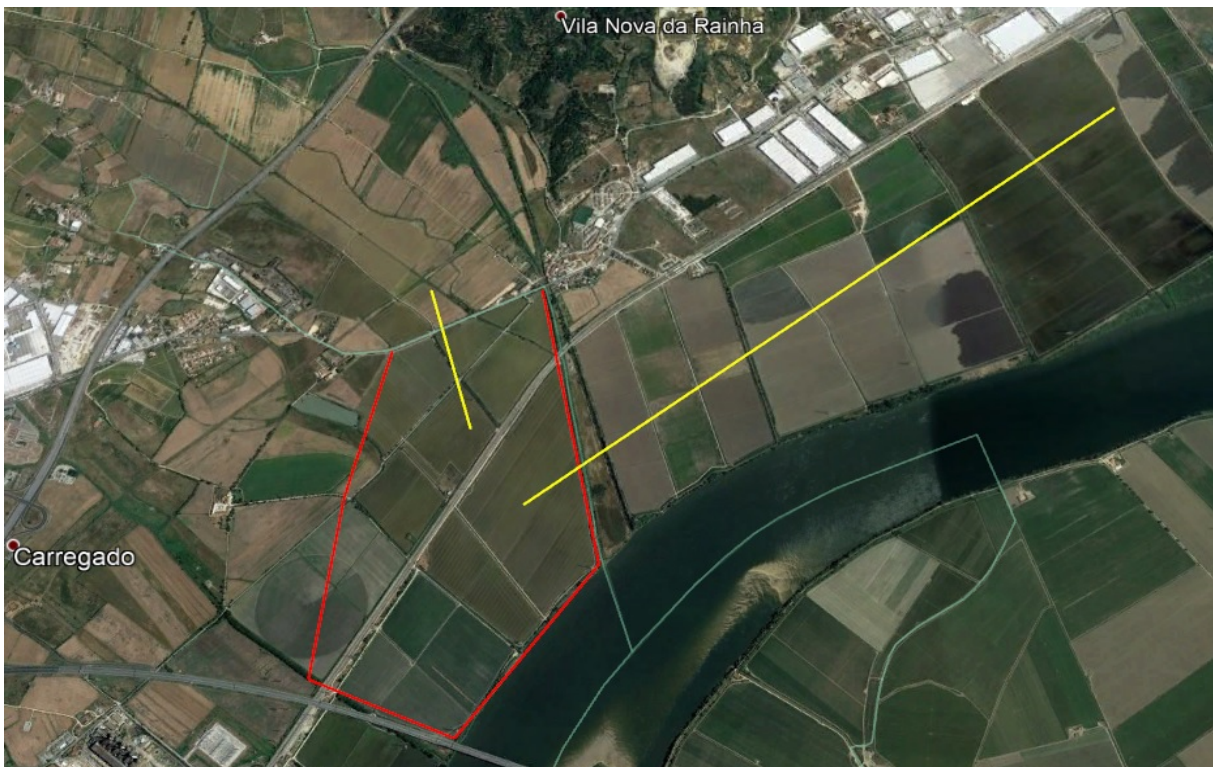
*“De Witte van de polder Mijzen”, also with light-coloured legs.*

And the white godwit, which is breeding now for 5 years in polder Mijzen in Noord-Holland, was also in the flock. A Sparrowhawk did some times an attempt to catch a godwit and also helicopters were causing some disturbance.



*A helicopter causing a huge disturbance amongst >20.000 godwits.*

It was really T-shirt weather after 10 o'clock and no wind. We manage to read one of the English godwits from the head-started project from the RSPB/WWT project in the Fens, north of Cambridge. These birds have a ring combination with the letter E, and were raised in captivity along the Ouse Washes. Later on the day we had a bit more clouds and a light wind. A perfect whole day at Vala do Carregado! So we deserve a good evening meal in the local restaurant!



*The area of Vala do Carregado, the yellow lines show where birds so now and then fly to after a disturbance by a raptor, or hooting traffic or other noise.*

**Tuesday 20 February 2018:** *Sparrowhawk catches godwit and ploughing in Cara Larga*

*Weather: wind light, temp. 2-20C, sunny.*

A bit cold in the morning but as soon as the sun is climbing, it is again very hot, so no jackets later on. We start again at the Carregado area with 30.000 birds. And there is so now and then lots of disturbance by raptors like Sparrowhawk, two Marsh Harriers, Common Buzzard and a Peregrine falcon. With so many birds in the field the Marsh Harrier and the Common Buzzard are fighting with each other for the best places and food... For ring reading sometimes fine, because birds come in different positions to show the rings on their legs!



*The Peregrine uses the high-voltage pilons to rest and to attack the godwits!*

So many birds on a field is also attracts raptors, food enough! In the early afternoon we decide to go to the Cara Larga area on the north side of the Giganta rice fields, after almost two days of intense ring reading in the Carregado area. And... we made a good decision because they just started ploughing and rolling the rice stubble fields. Just what godwits likes to feed on! Because of the dry season we can drive into the fields with our normal car.

We are also very lucky that we have the sun on the right side of the field, so we ending at almost six o'clock after sunset. The godwits are almost walking into our car at the end... so it is really dark when we stop. There is a lost dog in the field, who becomes friends with us in the next days. The goal for tomorrow is to start really early here with those good feeding circumstances for the birds.



*Ploughing has started at Cara Larga and everyone has a profit from it!*

**Wednesday 21 February 2018:** Cara Larga almost whole day, Giganta is empty...  
Weather: Wind 2B, very cold start at 3C, soon up to 15C, only sun...



*Again a sunny day and moving godwits by ploughing tractors in the field*

It is pretty cold in the first hour of light, Siebe starts with hand gloves..., but soon it warms up and we are very lucky in the field with again a ploughing tractor and a lost dog, so lots of movements in the fields! The density of the birds is not too high so we read during the day more than 100 combinations. The flocks are certainly not big, so time to take some good density-ring-samples. And we read for the first time a Belgium colour ringed godwit, White EAAR.



*Lots of cattle egrets behind the rolling and cultivating tractor, so you can better name them tractor egrets...!*

After lunch we do a tour in the Ponte d'Erva and Giganta ricefields in the south, but it is very dry and everywhere stubble ricefields, so no godwits. We end the day again in the Cara Larga area on the North side with our doggy friend with some smaller flocks and a very nice sunset as standard!



*Our friend the last days in the field, a curious lost dog, waiting for food...*

**Thursday 22 February 2018: Carregado – Samora Correia – Cara Larga and raptors...**

*Weather: Wind SE-2B, again a cold start(+3C), soon 15-18C and sunny again!*

We start at 08.15 in the Carregado area on the west bank. The usual big flocks up to 20.000 birds are along the same busy side-road and the same fields. Siebe is witness of the killing of a godwit by a Common Buzzard! You never expect this from a normally slow raptor... But the hedges around the field give good opportunities to hide and attack from a ambush. After a good ring reading morning we deserve first a coffee/lunch-break!



*After the coffee break you have to take this beautiful roundabout – Porto Alto*

We want to have a look on a different places and found a big flock close to the road just North of Samora Correia. The gate is closed but there is an official walking path in the field. But...there are two problems, a Marsh harrier is hunting and disturbing the flock, and it is very hot and sunny, so vibration in the air and hard to read rings. So you need to be close, or on a higher position. While Wim tries the footpath to get close enough to the birds, Siebe is climbing on the dike to have less vibration and hopes the Mars harrier helps to get the godwits closer!

Wim films this special scary moments for the birds. And we notice that some smaller groups are flying to other fields in the west. Later on in the afternoon we make a long walk along the dike, because we noticed a big flock disappears behind some high reed beds. But the birds are scary and before any ring reading can start at the end, they move further into the west. We try the rice fields over the bridge with a French speaking old Portuguese farmer. And decide to use the dike-road to have a look where the godwits went to. It is a narrow 4km path, but now dry, so worth trying it to find the flock back.



*Marsh harrier and Peregrine falcon causing lovely pictures on a sunny day*



*The map of the Samora Correia rice-fields and in yellow the dike-path we used*





*At the end a big bull is waiting for us twice, but no godwits!*

At the end of the 4 km long road an iron barrier shows up in the road, which is only going down using a card or whatever. So we decide to go back all the way, and again along the bull... But, Wim sees in his mirror a car showing up moving fast in the direction of the barrier, and we are very, very lucky, to escape this area fast after this car... Phew!

At the end we went back to the Cara Larga area, but it almost dark by then. The end of an exciting day! Which ends with a little hammer tap play in a restaurant..., even exciting!



*We ended the day eating and hammering crab... Unforgettable moments!*

**Friday 23 February 2018:** Carregado – Samora Correia – Belmonte - Benavente – Samora Correia – ending at Cara Larga rice fields: A bit night frost in early morning, soon sunny and warm, no wind!

We start at the Carregado rice fields on the west bank on the coldest morning. Again a godwit is predated, the third one, this time again a Sparrow hawk. After stealing our hunger for rings we wanted to have a look again at the Samora Correia place by the nice old little farmer. He comes out of his farm and willing to open the gate for us and we drive now on the small south dike, because far away we see a small flock of godwits on a wet field near the sluice. And the farmer says it is possible to drive on it, because of the very dry season.



*With a key from the Companhia das Lezírias we reach the Belmonte rice fields.*

Beautiful weather again and Wim remembers the road through the bush very well, so we are ending at the right place in the Belmonte. Very high stubble rice fields but at the end it looks we see some godwits flying...



*But it turns out to be a big flock of... Glossy Ibis! (and 150 godwits) at Belmonte.*



*Is Siebe handling money to the farmer? Or is the lock of the gate...?*

We check again the south bank of the Samora Correia rice fields, but just a 100 birds and to rings. We end the day in the Cara Larga area where ploughing has stopped. Smaller flocks now under very sunny circumstances with the sun behind us makes is a nice end of the day.



*Siebe and his Portuguese lifeguard...*

**Saturday 24 February 2018.** *A surprising big south tour to Setubal! Dry and sunny and 18 to 20C, NO wind.*

We start at 07.45 at our nice old farm at Samora Correia, despite a night frost the Barn swallow was singing for us! And we read 10 rings, so a nice start of the day. At least we have some rings in the book today, during all those years on the big southern Setubal tour, we only once read a ring of a Icelandic godwit.



*Despite the night frost the Barn Swallow is singing for us!*

And as expected all possible rice field areas seems to be empty on the big tour. When we end at the Comporta area we decide to follow a sandy road to the headland which is ending in near the shallow salt river delta of Setubal. For me the first time to visit these rice fields and it is really nice area under this beautiful weather conditions. Only sun, no wind and you can hear the silence of nature at this place! We check some Redshanks for Wim of course and read a few Spoonbill rings, when a Portuguese birder shows up which attends us to some Great Northern Divers which you should never expect at this place with 20C and in T-shirt and shorts!



*It's a beautiful day and the sun is shining in the Setubal delta!*

When we drive back we follow a sandy road to village Mointinha and guess what we see...! Finally a nice flock of godwits flying into a rice field in this area! Never seen in this place, so a nice reward for tenacity people. We decide to approach the 5.000 birds from two ways. Wim in the car and Siebe behind a house.



*Finally some godwits on the Setubal tour and a perfect scenery!*

We stay the rest of afternoon at this place and even read a metal ring and several coded flags. And surprisingly when we stop, Siebe and Wim still have different ring combinations, because of the high ring density in this flock with a high percentage of Icelandic godwits.



Here also a Common Buzzard helps us a bit in moving the birds for our ring reading efforts and changing the birds in different positions in the dense group.

*Very satisfied after 3 hours of ring reading almost 'between' the birds, that deserves a Snicker!*

**Sunday 25 February 2018:** *Carregado, no key, closed gates and Visitor centre Giganta. Sunny, dry and 15-20 degrees, wind 1 Beaufort, T-shirt weather!*

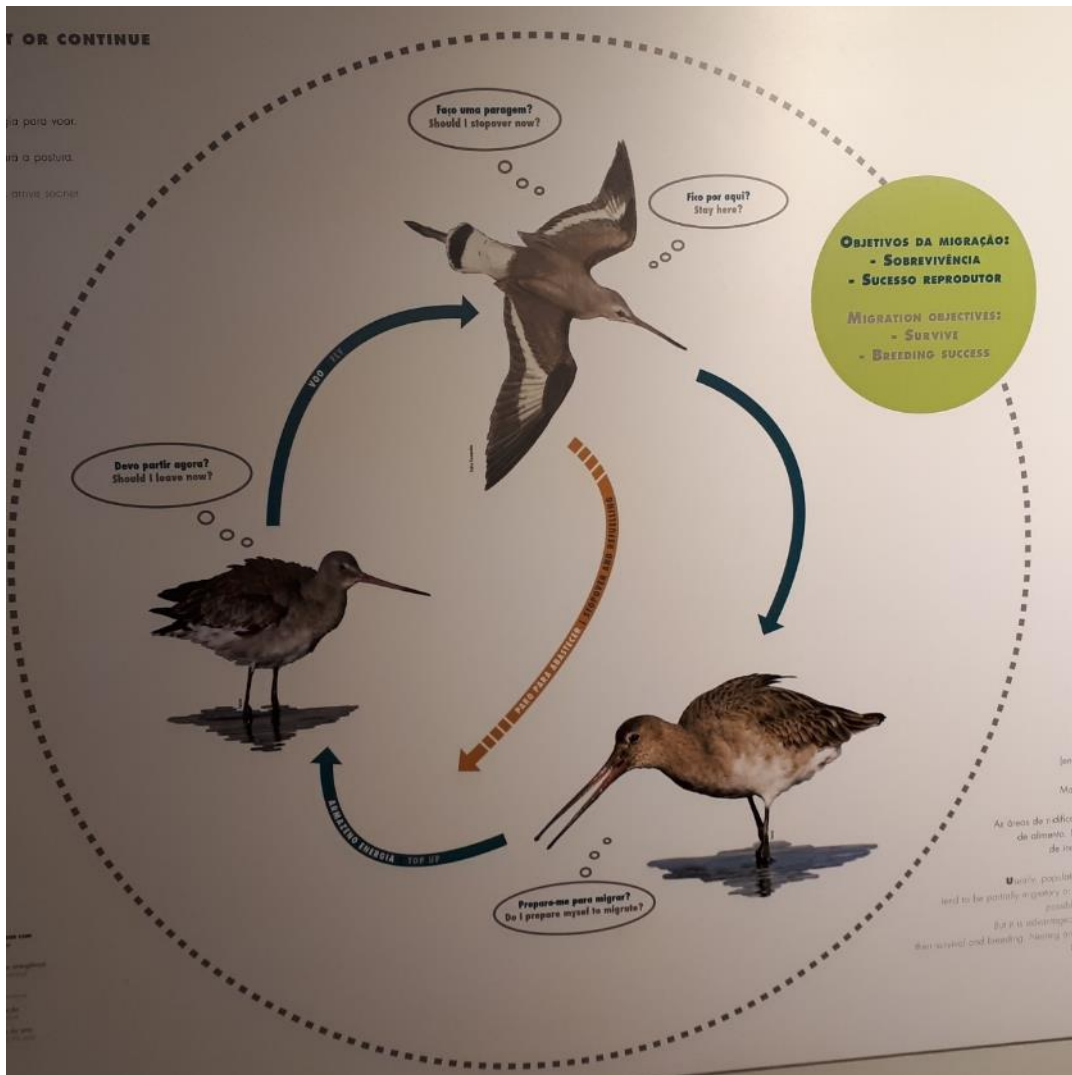
We start at the Carregado area, but there are less birds than in the beginning. Although good weather, the birds do not want to cooperate with us today, they stay on the wrong side of the road and too sunny circumstances. We decide to have a look further north along the west bank to Vila Nova da Rainha and Azambuja. We saw so now and then flocks moving north, so let's check what it looks like over there. Wow, many ploughed and wet fields and a suitable area. We see far away some small flocks but all gates are locked...



*Locked gates... but walking is no punishment with this weather!*

We manage to read a few rings, but by walking into the field there is more disturbance on the birds and the position of the sunlight is not working with us today. We decide to have a look in the Cara Larga area, but just a few birds and we try the Giganta ricefields again. There is only one ploughed field but the water level is just a bit too high for ring reading. Or birds stand on one leg resting with this nice weather. And finally, after 4 attempts from Wim to visit the nature visitors centre of Evoa but it was always closed, he has success with Siebe! We have free entry because we are nature researchers is the comment from the lady behind the desk. And they tell us that the godwits never arrived so early like last summer! We tell them that the reason can be a very bad breeding season of the birds in the Netherlands., so migration back starts earlier is a bit the artefact. So even in Portugal they notice that we have bad breeding seasons...

In the evening already a bit of packing suitcases for our journey home and a last very good Portuguese meal in our favourite restaurant.



In nature visitor centre Evoia in Tagus estuary they notice a bad breeding season

**Monday 26 February 2018:** Last day; Giganta, rain, car wash and back home!

Weather: Cloudy 10C, rapid changing weather circumstances, rain at 12.00.

Our plane will leave in the early evening and the weather forecast for our last day shows that it will start raining at 12.00 hour. Our plan is to use the afternoon for returning keys and access pass to the rice companies. And we have to clean the car before we bring it back. But it looks like we have a bit of a flat front tire, worries... First we bring back the key and a godwit pin and Dutch bird beer to the Companhia das Lizerias and pump up the tire in Samora Correia. Next is to have a look in the Giganta rice fields which were almost empty this year. But finally on our last day we see a farmer working on his field and a nice flock of godwits. The weather is changing, Barn swallows are flying very low in the ditch and we can stand in the shelter of a barn for the upcoming wet and windy period in Portugal as the forecast is.



*In front of us a ploughing rice farmer and the godwits jump from row to row and we see two GPS-transmitter birds and read lots of rings in our last two hours!*

Exactly at twelve o'clock it starts raining as forecasted and for the first time in ten days...! Exactly at the time we had chosen to leave and bring back cards and keys, unbelievable, a wonderful perfect timing!

We bring back the access card and get our 25Euro deposit back, hand over some Birdbeer and a godwit pin and say goodbye for next year. Only one thing to do is clean the car, although it starts raining it does not work out itself...

What a very nice time for team 3 in the Tagus estuary, with only beautiful weather, no wind and leaving just in time. As we did also at the airport..., we had just 3 minutes left or we had missed our plane! In the Netherlands we jumped into the cold, while the first skaters were on the ice! We read over 500 different rings of all ringing schemes. Using the BirdRingApp saved time. So it was a very successful trip, with a bit less birds as in 2016. But no complaints about the weather, the perfect place to stay and the good company of friends with the same passion for birds and ring reading!





*Last job to do; cleaning car for three teams who used the car.  
That is always the fate of the last team in Portugal!*



*The car itself goes easier...*

**Team 1 Extremadura: Jos Hooijmeijer & Libbe Zijlstra, 1-11 February 2018**

**Thursday 1 February 2018:** *sunny, 17 C, 3N*

Today we travelled from The Netherlands to Spain. We took a taxi from Seville airport to Dos Hermanas to collect our 4wd at Northgate Car Rentals. After that, there was still some time left for a short field visit so we went to Veta la Palma Fish ponds close to Isla Mayor. On the way there, we stopped at Dehesa de Abajo. The lake was full of water and covered with ducks, mainly Shovelers. In the far corner, we spotted a group of about 2000 roosting godwits. However, checking them would have meant we could not go to Veta la Palma so we moved on. In Veta la Palma we were expecting them at Lucio de Cuquero Grande where they were seen frequently the last few winters but the place was completely without birds. Perhaps they had been scared off.

All the marshlands N and W of the Lucio have now been converted into large-scale agricultural fields. The ones close to the finca have been sown with wheat/ barley and other crops; the ones behind Cuquero Grande are still very new and probably only converted recently. Miguel Medialdea, the biologist of Veta la Palma, told us that these new agricultural fields are in fact a benefit for waterbirds because they guarantee a better water supply. He can now control the water level of the northern natural lucio's much better. In the past, they were often suffering from drought at the end of the summer. We only managed to find a small flock of 600 birds just before sundown in one of the big fishponds. The birds started foraging in the last light and we managed to get 5 ring combinations before it became too dark. Let's see if we can find them tomorrow!



*Large scale agricultural fields in the northern part of Veta la Palma*

**Friday 2 February 2018:** *sunny, 16 C, 3 N*

In the morning, we drove straight to Veta la Palma. Again no birds at Lucio de Cuquero Grande but in the course of the day we found several groups in the area SE of the big red-white antenna, adding up to 8750 individuals, and resighted 27 birds from our own scheme, 2 foreign ones and several Spoonbills, and a Curlew. When we found the first group about 1hr after sunrise, more than 90% of the birds were resting, mostly on one leg. Only around 13:00, we found 1500 birds that were actively foraging, probably on Chironomids. All other groups we encountered were sleeping, often in fairly deep water making ring-reading difficult. They only use the natural lucio's and the big waters and side parts of the larger fishponds, if shallow enough. The smaller ponds that are protected with nets are not usable. The big ponds are used for producing fish with less commercial value like mullet and are the backbone of the ecological principles of Veta la Palma. They are not only important for huge numbers of waterbirds but are also a natural nitrogen filter so that the water that is released from the fish farm into the river is of almost the same quality as the river itself. The smaller netted ponds are used for breeding fish with high commercial value that can't be kept in the big ponds, like sea bream, that need a special diet. Without the nets, it would be impossible to make profit because cormorants and other piscivores would decimate the fish population. The number of small ponds is increasing but this will not be at the cost of the big ponds because the water of the small ponds is also filtered in the big ponds. The only problem with the small ponds are the nets because some birds get entangled in them but the plan is to replace by orange nets so that they become more conspicuous.



*Small netted ponds in Veta la Palma can't be used by waterbirds but are a vital part of the VLP business model nowadays.*

When we left Veta la Palma at 18:00 (1 h before sunset) the birds were still sleeping and only small groups were foraging. We don't have a clue why Cuquero Grande is not used anymore; like in all other places in VLP, water levels seem to be normal and comparable to last years. Even the ricefields around Isla Mayor were surprisingly wet or at least humid, despite the great drought that Iberia has been suffering from this past year. We heard from Ruben Rodriguez that the EU pays rice farmers nowadays to keep the fields wet especially for waterbirds (and hunters?!). Just outside Isla Mayor we found a group of 250 godwits on a wet ploughed field (>95% has been ploughed and is wet) but it was already too dark to see rings. On our way home, we stopped at Dehesa de Abajo but the big flock we saw yesterday was no longer present.

**Saturday 3 February 2018:** *sunny, 14 C, 3 N*

Today was a great day! We started at Dehesa de Abajo at sunrise where a group of 650 birds was already/ still sleeping in belly-deep water; we only managed to find 1 ringed bird. When we crossed the ricefields on our way to Isla Mayor we ran into a group of nearly 1500 birds that were all actively foraging on a wet, ploughed ricefield. We could get close and in the next hours read close to 30 ring combinations of godwits and some spoonbills. We decided to finish the day in Veta la Palma. We found groups in the same locations as yesterday. In the beginning there was not much activity but after 16:00 birds became more active and just before sundown >75% was foraging. Here we read again more than 30 ring combinations: quite a successful day!

We had planned to leave Doñana tomorrow but got news that in Extremadura hardly any godwits are present; so we will stay another day here and leave for Extremadura on Monday.



*Huge but mostly dry ricefields around Isla Mayor*

**Sunday 4 February 2018:** 95% cloudy, 11 C, 3 ZW, some light showers

The weather has changed today and so has our luck. At Dehesa de Abajo were slightly less birds: 550, but again densely packed and in deep water and no chance to see rings. Therefore, we moved on to our good site in the ricefields near Isla Mayor but only a handful of birds were there. We spent the rest of the day until 15:00 searching the huge rice field- complex around Isla Mayor but ended up without any godwits.

Fortunately, we read some spoonbills to keep us happy. The ricefields were not bone dry but all at least humid, however about 5% was actually covered with a thin layer of water as godwits prefer. If there would have been any godwits, they should have been easy to find.... Later we heard that due to water shortage some rice fields in this area might not be used this year and might be set aside. In summer it is nowadays more frequently impossible to let water in from the river because it is too saline due to the low water level in the river which leads to ingression of seawater. We have heard similar stories from Portugal in the Tejo estuary.

We moved on to Veta la Palma but here the situation had changed as well. All big flocks except one had gone! Many birds were foraging in small groups of 10-20 birds in the ditches next to the big ponds. We might have overlooked a few hundred but our estimate was no higher than 1800 birds present. The only big flock left was not much worth because they all kept sleeping until dark. Nevertheless, we had just over 20 rings at the end of the day.

We decided to stay another day in Doñana because the latest report was that in Extremadura only a few hundred birds are present.



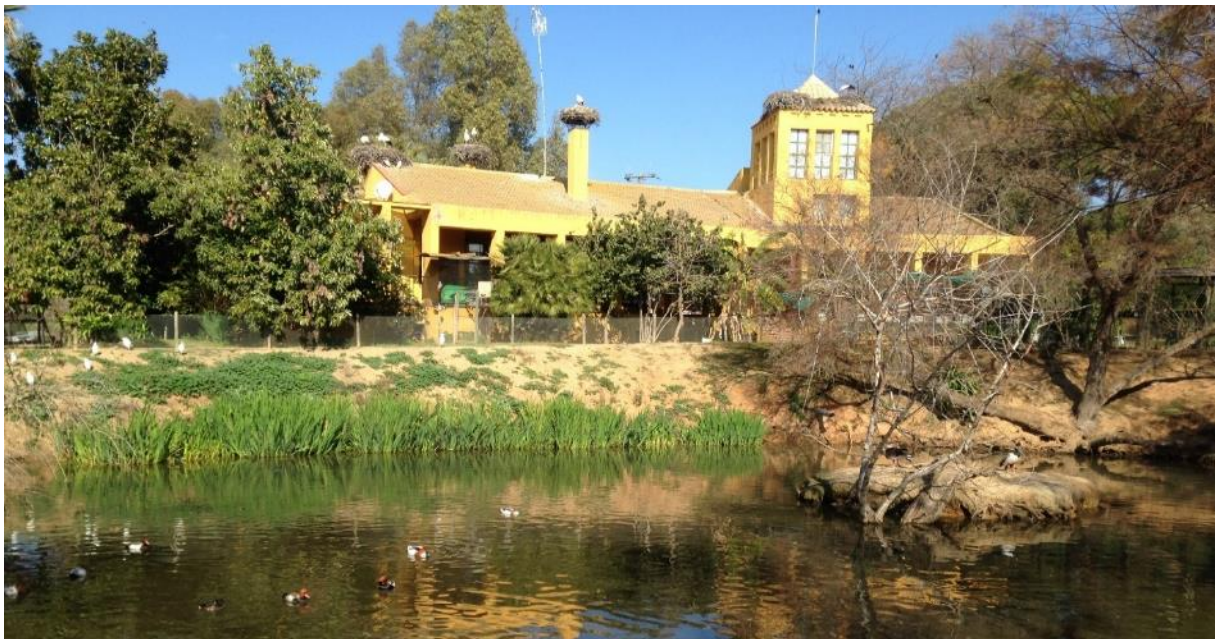
*Nice flocks of godwits in Veta la Palma*

**Monday 5 February 2018:** *10% cloudy, 13 C, 3 NW, some light showers at the end of the day*

We started again at Dehesa de Abajo where there was still a group of 600 birds present. But again, they were densely packed in belly deep water and all sleeping. So we continued to the ricefields just south of Dehesa de Abajo where we found 400 birds but unfortunately with a very low ring density. Scanning the ricefields south and west of Isla Mayor brought us no new groups, except spoonbills, so we decided to finish the day at the Veta la Palma. The northerly winds had exposed the mudflats of the bigger ponds and many birds were foraging. We soon had made up for the poor results of the first part of the day and finished with 21 resightings, not great but better than what we hear about Extremadura. Total numbers were comparable to yesterday but just before sundown 1500 birds left in a northerly direction. Perhaps we will see them later this week in Extremadura! We leave Doñana with 132 resightings of birds from our own scheme and 20 from other schemes.

**Tuesday 6 February 2018:** *90% sunny, 14 C, 3 NW*

Today we leave for Extremadura but before that, we checked the rice fields opposite Dehesa de Abajo. About 15% of them are wet and some recently ploughed. Like yesterday, there was a small flock of 250 birds present that was actively foraging. We scored a few rings and after that went for El Rocio. On the way, we had good views of the marshes between Huerta Tejada and the JA Valverde visitor centre. These marshes were surprisingly wet but east of the visitor centre, we only saw great dry plains. We continued through the vast agricultural fields and past some small ricefields before arriving at El Rocio, pretty as ever. The marshland was full of birds and we found 250 godwits scattered all over the area. Ring reading is notoriously difficult at this site but we found two ringed birds. We left the place and headed towards Santa Amalia where we heard the latest news from our Spanish colleagues: still hardly any birds in here and also the Cranes are decreasing now; so perhaps no competition between the 2 species as we thought of earlier as an explanation for the decline of godwits? For sure, the area cultivated for rice is decreasing and that might affect them both.



*Our home base in Doñana: the bird sanctuary and breeding station Cañado de los Pajaros*

**Wednesday 7 February 2018:** 90% sunny, 13 C, 3 NW

In the morning, we scanned the whole area between Santa Amalia, Medellin and Hernan Cortes. The fields are indeed very dry: about 5% is moist to wet and some 50% still needs to be ploughed. Just SW of Hernan Cortes we found our first group on a ploughed moist rice field. The birds were foraging with a low success rate (3.25 rice kernels/ 2 min; n=4). In this group was transmitter bird Madrigalejo. They flew off to a inundated ricefield near the main road to preen, rest and drink. More birds arrived and we estimated that 200 godwits were present around Hernan Cortes. When they started foraging again on an inundated ploughed ricefield they managed to find 39.75 rice kernels/ 2 min, tenfold better than in the dry rice field! The rest of the day, we checked places where godwits had been seen last week (Almoharin, no birds; Palazuelo, 72 birds) and scanned roughly the area between Santa Amalia, Almoharin, Casar de Miajadas, Puebla de Alcollarin, Vivares, Zurbaran, Torviscal, Rena, Ruecas and Valdehornillos without finding any extra godwits. The situation is really bad this year both for the birds and for us. Fortunately, the day got a fortunate end when we found a pre-roost just south of Valdehornillos with 650 birds. In the last light, we managed to read some rings but none of them had been seen earlier this day. Just before dark, the birds left so there might very well be another roost somewhere else and perhaps more birds are around than we thought. However, where to find just a few hundred birds in such a huge area?



*On our first day we ran into transmitter bird Madrigalejo near Hernan Cortes*

**Thursday 8 February 2018:** *100% sunny, 11 C, 2 N*

After a cold night there was ice on the ricefields this morning; well at least on the few that have water! Today we checked the ricefields all the way east along the E-903 till Acedera but found no godwits. So far, we did not see any farmers ploughing the ricefields.

After that, we decided to check the places where we found godwits yesterday. At Palazuelo we found again about 80 birds, at Hernan Cortes 400 and we finished at the pre-roost near Valdehornillos where only 52 birds foraged briefly before continuing to the real roost, a wet ricefield between Valdehornillos and Hernan Cortes. We stayed until dark and counted about 600 birds at the roost.



*Lots of dry stubble fields instead of wet, ploughed fields as godwits like them*

**Friday 9 February 2018:** *95% sunny, 11 C, 2 NW*

In the early morning, we drove to Conquista del Guadiana but all fields were still unploughed. We revisited the small rice fields south of Almoharin, where the farmer had finished ploughing. There were about 150 Ruffs present but only 2 godwits. We continued to Palazuelo where we found no more than 40 birds. There is no farming activity at all in this area except the occasional farmer spraying pesticides. We moved on to Hernan Cortes where we found no more than 130 birds foraging on ploughed fields or the inundated fields east of the village. At lunchtime, we met Jose Antonio Masero and Pipe Abad, our colleagues of the University of Extremadura and exchanged the latest news. After lunch, we hurried back to the ricefields close to Santa Amalia where we found a nice group of 350 birds close to the main road on ploughed ricefields. Here we saw more ploughing farmers. When a Buzzard overpassed, the group took off in the direction of Medellin. We tried to



follow them and found them back in a completely dry just ploughed ricefield where they were actively foraging. Based on resightings we could confirm these were the same birds as near Santa Amalia but now in total 530 birds. In the last light, we saw them taking off in the direction of the roost between Santa Amalia and Hernan Cortes. Today we finished with 22 resightings, not bad at all!

**Saturday 10 February 2018:** *100% sunny, 14 C, 1 NW*

Our final day in the field started extremely foggy but when the mist lifted, we had a complete sunny day without any wind. Great circumstances to score the last resightings of this trip. We focused on the core area between Santa Amalia and Hernan Cortes. The ploughed field where we saw them yesterday was now without birds but we found a group 800 birds close to the main road 2 km east of Santa Amalia. This was a group with probably a lot of new arrivals because we saw quite some new combinations. We only found a small group near Hernan Cortes and the roost was again at another ricefield than we expected.

In the past 10 days, we collected 43 resightings from foreign godwit ringing schemes and 179 resightings of our own scheme: 135 in Doñana and 44 in Extremadura of respectively 105 and 31 individuals. We knew in advance that we would get much less resightings in Extremadura than in previous years but after all, it was not too bad. And it was for sure good to see with our own eyes the harsh conditions for godwits here this year. We had the impression that many birds were in poor condition with fat scores 1 and 2.

In the evening the second team, Mario Huizinga and Jacob Jan de Vries arrived from Madrid; they will take over until the 19<sup>th</sup>. Let us hope some more birds will arrive in the week to come!

**Sunday 11 February 2018**

At 5:20 we took the buss from Merida to Sevilla where we caught our plane home at 10:30.



*Foraging godwits in one of the few wet rice fields available this year*

## **Team 2 Extremadura: Mario Huizinga & Jacob Jan de Vries, 10-19 February 2018**

**Saturday 10 February 2018:** *partly clouded, 8°C, 5N*

Today we travel from The Netherlands to Spain, by train (Mario) / car (Jacob) + plane + airport bus + Madrid train + bus (5 hours Madrid – Torrefresnada) and finally taxi driver Jos kindly takes us from the bus stop to our home in Santa Amalia for the next 10 days. During the long bus drive we are welcomed by more than a thousand cranes in the air, a wonderful welcome in the Extremadura.

**Sunday 11 February 2018:** *partly clouded, 14°C, 3N*

As we are both new in this area, we decide to visit first the spots where Jos and Libbe had seen most godwits in the past days. First stop is a few km to the east, just south of the main road from Santa Amalia to Hernán Cortés. A flock of about 59 godwits is foraging in a rice field and we can read our first four rings. We continue to scan the area in the direction of Hernán Cortés and find a smaller flock of 224 godwits, and we can also read rings of a 2cy crane (ringed in Lithuania) and a Norwegian lesser black-backed gull, seen for the first time since its ringing in 2012. We notice the huge difference in the rice fields in the area, compared to the Giganta rice fields we visited in February 2017: many fields are just completely dry and apparently unattractive for foraging.

After lunch we continue our exploration in the area between Hernán Cortés and Palazuelo. Initially we find a small flock of 16 godwits with one ringed, directly east of Hernán Cortés. It is difficult to find other godwits, but following team-1's observations we find an 'oasis' a few km north of Palazuelo with a flock of almost 100, containing no less than 5 ringed godwits and a ringed pied avocet. To our surprise we read a godwit we had already seen this morning near Santa Amalia. For some reason it had travelled more than 20 km.

Cruising west passing Valdehornillos we don't see a single godwit for two hours. Hoping for more luck we go to the same spot again where we started the day and that is bingo: 560 godwits with 13 RUG birds and some others. We see several small flocks of godwits leaving south east. Maybe there is a sleeping place around Medellín? We will try to find out in the next days. Total RUG individuals read today: 18 godwits, but only 7 new compared to the list of Jos and Libbe.

**Monday 12 February 2018:** *sunny, 14°C, 5W*

Today our priority plan is to find Amalia. Satellite data gives some indication that we should search the area south and west of Zurbarán, but not before we check the area north of the N-430 from Santa Amalia to Hernán Cortés: many rice fields but no godwits. Then we cross the N-430 and find 25 godwits south of Hernán Cortés, with no less than 4 RUG rings. A good start for the day. Then we follow the N-430, on the way reading a ringed Lesser Black-backed Gull. When we turn left to Zurbarán, the bridge is under construction. We decide to stick to our plan and take a D-tour of 15 km, with the last part being a real maze through the rice fields south west of Zurbarán. We search for an hour and a half, but don't see a single godwit. Just when we have almost seen every inch in the area,

we find a site with 7 rice fields filled with water ... and godwits! And there he is: L3YRYL aka Amalia! We are delighted of course, and we take some pictures and record video to inform the rest of the world that Amalia is in good shape, preparing for his journey to the Netherlands.



*Famous transmitter-bird Amalia*

We count 488 godwits with 3 RUG rings. We are unable to read a code ring with the telescope, but Jacob's extremely zoomed-in P900 picture helped us out. We visit the Palazuelo spot with 66 godwits, one of them with a RUG ring. The ringed Pied Avocet is also present again. Late afternoon we spend half an hour at the hot spot south of Santa Amalia, where we can read 11 RUG rings , including one code ring. The final two hours before sunset we explore the area around Medellín, but no sleeping area is found. We see some rice fields from a mountain though we want to visit the next day. Total RUG individuals read today: 18 godwits (10 new).

**Tuesday 13 February 2018:** *sunny, 15°C, 3W*

Plan for the day is to visit all the spots where we have seen godwits so far, especially looking out for satellite godwits Madrigalejo and Lippenhuzen, and then finish the day around Medellín. Only a few godwits and no RUG rings around Santa Amalia, Hernán Cortés and Valdehornillos. Frustrating begin of the day, but finally the Palazuelo oasis gives us 55 godwits and one RUG ring we had seen before, and the ringed pied avocet present as always. The rice fields south of Zurbarán are better with 396

godwits, including Amalia, 2 code rings and 3 other RUG rings. Amalia is foraging much closer than yesterday, so we take more pictures.

Then we quickly move on to the hot spot of Santa Amalia, and hot it is! 13 RUG rings in a flock of 356 godwits. And between them we find Lippenhuzen.



*Transmitter-bird called Lippenhuzen*

We finish the day in the rice fields north of Medellín, but only 26 godwits arrive there, no RUG rings. Total RUG individuals read today: 24 godwits (12 new). We see a consistent average proportion of 50% new rings every day. The total numbers of godwits we see is limited, but it seems that the turnover is quite high. Don't they like the area and move on?

**Wednesday 14 February 2018:** *cloudy, 15°C, 3W*

Strange start of the day: there are no godwits around Santa Amalia or Hernán Cortés. We find only 1CR at the Palazuelo spot and 3CR at the Zurbarán spot. We decide to explore a wider area today. We find 223 godwits at Moheda Alta (too far to see rings) and another 92 godwits between Obando and Vegas Altas (no rings). On the way back still no godwits around Santa Amalia, where are they?? We search south and west of Valdehornillos but find only a few. Total RUG individuals read today: 4 godwits (0 new). It really seems like many godwits have left the area. Or are they hiding somewhere??

**Thursday 15 February 2018:** *sunny, 20°C, 1E*

In the morning we visit the area between Medellin, Hernán Cortés, St Amalia: only 6 godwits. We meet godwit researcher Pipe. Pipe confirms 2018 is a strange godwit year, with much fewer than usual godwits in the area. He suggests we travel 50km west to the “Embalse de los Canchales” reservoir and we follow his suggestion.



*Embalse de los Canchales*

It is a beautiful area for a ½ day trip and the weather is great. We count 238 godwits, all in grey winterplumage and we read the rings of one godwit and one spoonbill. When we return to Santa Amalia, to our surprise we find there is a flock of about 1000 godwits! First on the usual “hot spot” site, but then we see them flying to the north side of the road. We follow them and we find them back in an old/long rice field that hasn’t been ploughed yet. Impressive to see, but difficult to count and to read rings. See picture. Very interesting, we stayed in the field until 19:15. Total RUG individuals read today: 24 godwits (13 new).

**Friday 16 February 2018:** *sunny after morning fog, 20°C, 1E*

Already at 8:15 we are in the same old rice field east of Santa Amalia, but it is very foggy. We manage to read a few rings.



*Fog in the rice fields*

Nothing to do here, so we drive north and spend a few hours in the Monfragüe national park, where we observe many vultures at a famous site.



*Griffon Vulture in Monfragüe NP*

When we return, weather has cleared up nicely and we see godwits all over the place: ca. 550 east of Hernán Cortés. Back in Santa Amalia around 16:00, we see some godwits but they keep coming in until there are over 1300.



*Jacob de Vries reading rings near Hernan Cortes*

Between 17:30 and 18:00 most of them crossed the N-430 to the same old rice field, where we can't count them but read some more rings.

Analysis of the rings we read this week revealed that we saw 13 new rings yesterday and 16 more new rings today. We are very curious to know where the new birds came from. Have they been in Doñana or maybe Portugal? Or were they in the area without being seen by us? Unfortunately recent life histories are not available, so we won't know for a while. But surely a new load of godwits has arrived in the Santa Amalia area. Total RUG individuals read today: 33 godwits (15 new).

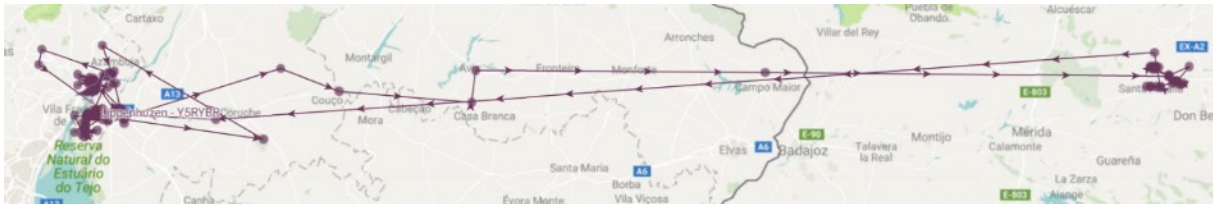
**Saturday 17 February 2018:** *sunny after fog, 18°C, 2W*

In the morning there is even more fog than yesterday. We check Zurbarán and Palazuelo, but we see only a few dozen godwits and Amalia is not present any more. After noon the fog clears up and when we arrive back in Santa Amalia we easily find the main flock. During the afternoon they switch between foraging areas from time to time, split up and join again, but we can follow them and read many rings, some over and over. The biggest flock was 1450. Total RUG individuals read today: 29 godwits. Only 7 new, which is less than 25%. Does it mean the influx of godwits is declining?

**Sunday 18 February 2018:** *sunny, 19°C, 2E*

The weather is nice today, and our goal for our final day in the field is to raise the number of read individual godwits from 94 to 100, including the ones read by Jos and Libbe. In the morning we are doing fine, when we quickly find the main flock around Santa Amalia, north of the N-430. From 12:00 all the godwits are sleeping on one leg, so we decide it is a good time to wash the car. When we return, the godwits are gone and unfindable for some hours. We read some Common Cranes rings and spot a flock of 22 Little Bustards flying just over our heads. At the end of the day they return to the same spot where they started the day. Probably they sleep there as well. At night we analyse our ring observations. Total RUG individuals read today: 31 godwits, again only 7 new but that means we reached our goal: 101 RUG individuals have been seen by us this trip.

Looking back on our stay, we feel that in 2018 Extremadura was not popular in the godwit community. Most striking example is maybe the satellite track of Lippenhuzen.



She was staying in Portugal when she decided to go to the Extremadura, to arrive there on the same day as we did: February 10. But after only 5 days she returned to Portugal, probably not happy in the Extremadura. So she has travelled 2 x 300 km only to find out that circumstances in Portugal are much better this year than in the Extremadura. Maybe comparing the colour ring readings this month in Extremadura and Portugal can give more of such examples.