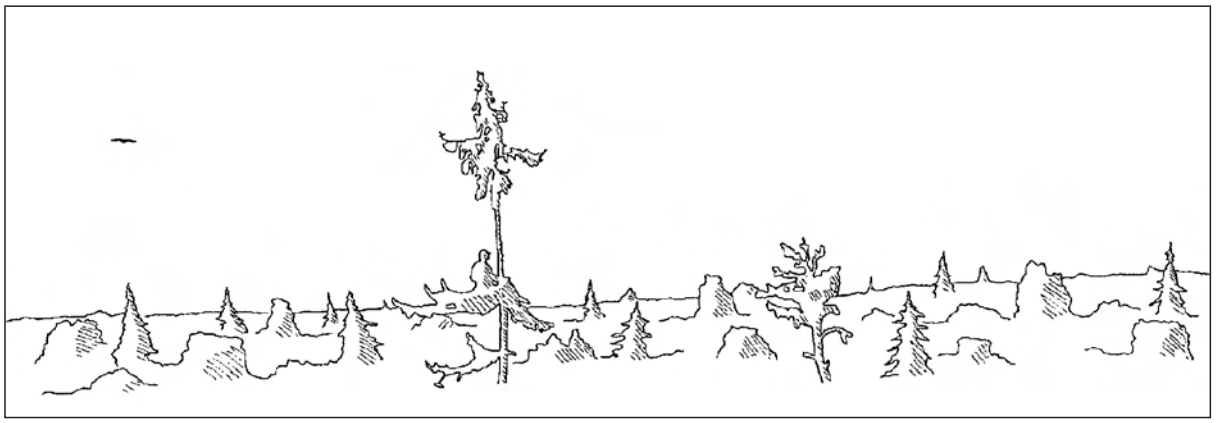

Ornithology from the tree tops

Hundred years ago, ornithology in The Netherlands was largely an affair of amateurs interested in avifaunistic and taxonomic issues. The very first volume of Ardea, published in 1911, shows a bric-à-brac of short papers covering such diverse subjects as bird protection (by Jac. P. Thijsse, who else), oology (by A.A. van Pelt Lechner, the author of Oologica Neerlandica, a work in two parts then just being published), distribution and abundance of Black Grouse in The Netherlands (signs of an increase imminent, including a colonisation of Holten where nowadays – against better judgement – large amounts of money are wasted to save the handful of birds from going extinct, a lost cause if ever there was), identification problems in Marsh and Willow Tit (until 1897 not recognised as two species), breeding bird numbers on the Wadden Sea Island of Rottum (based on a two-hour visit by A.A. van Pelt Lechner), Quail catching techniques in northern Egypt (more than 70 years later, bird catching was merited an entire chapter in the immaculately researched *The Birds of Egypt*), spring and autumn phenology of Swifts in Leiden in 1902–11 (by C. Ritsema; average arrival date was 28 April), the colonisation of Ede by Crested Larks in 1890, with already 14–16 pairs on military grounds in 1912, by J.L.F. de Meyere; when I started birdwatching in the 1960s, this was still a rather common breeding bird in Ede, but those days are gone), and so on.

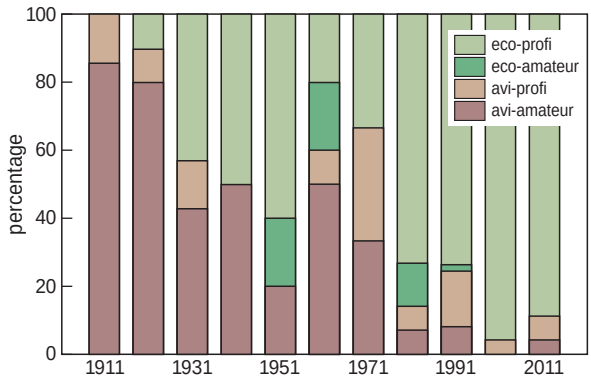

Figure 1. Papers published in the first volume of each ten-year period of Ardea (starting with 1911) show a preponderance of descriptive studies by amateurs in the first decades of the 20th century (Avi). The mid-20th century was a period of transition, during which descriptive studies and contributions of amateurs were gradually displaced by professional studies in behavioural ecology and population dynamics (Eco).

As years went by, the contribution of amateurs to Ardea declined, a phenomenon already alluded to in my first Treetop in 2003. It was paralleled by a decline in descriptive, avifaunal studies (Figure 1). Ornithology as a behavioural and ecological science took its place. At present, few publications in Ardea can be designated as avifaunistic or descriptive, the contribution of amateurs has dropped to almost nil.

This shift is understandable. Till well after World War II the average citizen had to work hard for his money, leisure was for Sundays (unless religion stipulated otherwise). Biology was not the kind of science which guaranteed a job, and parents never failed to impress this fact upon their offspring when choices had to be made. Then, between the late 1960s and late 1990s the real income of the average Dutch citizen more than doubled, whereas simultaneously geographical accessibility, mobility and time for leisure activities increased. Many males started birdwatching (still largely male-dominated), universities and schools of higher education spewed forth biologists and ecologists, wildlife managers and what not (where women are in the majority nowadays). An entire industry has evolved around nature and its sidetracks. Thousands of people make a living out of it, not only biologists but also

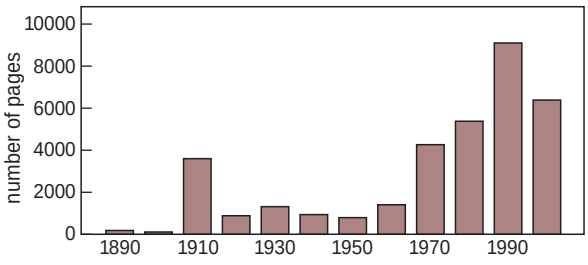

Figure 2. Since Alberda's *Aves Neerlandicae* in 1897, few avifaunal activities were undertaken until the 1920s, then remained at an increased level until the 1970s, when the real upsurge started (1897–2009: 125 avifaunas, 31,366 pages of text). Out of 301 writers (some pseudoreplication), only six were female.

managers, assistant-managers, senior advisers, marketing people, supporting personnel, press officers, self-appointed experts, conservationists, hosts, consultants and contractors. The birders created havens of their own. Several hundreds of ornithological societies came into being after the 1960s. Writing avifaunas has become a popular pastime (Figure 2); from 1976 onwards not a single year passed without at least one avifauna being published (up to six per year). My book shelves can hardly stand the weight of the hundreds of reports and avifaunas.The growing gap between amateurs and professionals did not deter the amateurs from being productive. In fact, for many parts of the country second-generation avifaunas have now been published, often in large format, full-colour and heftier than the previous volume. The contents, however, is more of the same, albeit updated with recent mappings, counts and records. Little progression has been made with new avenues for research, targeting specific questions or analyses of existing data series. We now know in great detail distributional and numerical trends, but next to nothing about the triggers involved (what we do know about underlying processes has been the work of scientists). Simple questions as to where birds forage and what they eat remain unanswered, not to mention temporal and spatial variations therein. Breeding biology is – with a few exceptions – not studied, methodologies are hardly ever questioned (or glossed over), phenological time series, ringing data and migration counts rarely analysed properly, habitat choice only spoken about in general, qualitative terms, floaters completely disregarded, photography not used as an asset with documentary value, and so on. Even basic questions as to why numbers dropped or soared, what triggered colonisation of new habitats and whether habitats are sources or sinks, are not addressed. In general, amateurs have come to a standstill (when measured by the information provided in avifaunas), in contrast to the scientists who run their rat race and try to be as innovative – and trendy – as possible (not always resulting in good science). Perhaps time to reconsider the future of avifaunas? Would it be an idea for amateurs to start asking questions? Or seek cooperation with scientists?

Rob G. Bijlsma