

Dear visitors of Ecole d'Ete,

I'm artist Merel Zwarts, one of the members of The Outsiders. I'll like to share a short report of a project we initiated back in Utrecht:

On Sunday morning, 4th of July, a group of people gathers at Terwijde Farmhouse, an abandoned farmhouse in newly built neighbourhood in Leidsche Rijn, Utrecht. The mobile museum of Travelling Farm Museum waits for the early birds to arrive to go on an excursion. When the group is complete, I introduced ornithologist and birds illustrator Jos Zwarts, my father, who will be our guide for this morning.

The reason I initiate this excursion is because I intent to implement a way of thinking into the project that is less human centred, and more centred on how rural cultivation transformed landscapes and habitat of other-than-humans. Last year's we met farmers in the Utrecht-West area to talk about their crops and animals, but mostly from a perspective how we humans can gain from it in a direct or less direct way. We explored human food systems and it's relating culture.

The excursion of this day focuses on the species that are so present in our landscapes, who adapt to our actions. There is more animal life than the lives we domesticate when we speak of agricultural landscapes. Think of the life in the soil and the insects and birds in the air. Only the relatively older people nowadays can remember how full of birds, insects and wildflowers our farmlands and surrounding landscapes once were.

One of the most prominent forms of wild life we see in a kind of species that holds a special place in my personal life. It's that of birds. My father is a the birdwatcher. He's passionate about every flying species, but he's most fond of our feathered friends: birds. I'm even named after one. Merel is the Dutch name for the in Latin named Turdus Merula, the black coloured flying animal with the orange beak. My dad is not only passionate about watching birds, he's also a birds illustrator. I got my love for drawing and nature from him.

Birds play an important role in the ecosystem between humans, soil, plants and other creatures. How do we and our food system relate to the live of birds typical for the Dutch farming landscape? How are our lives interwoven? Both humans and bird species migrated from and towards these lands at the banks of the Leidsche Rijn river.

At the beginning of the excursion my father tells the story of how there was a peak in birds biodiversity in the Netherlands in the beginning of the 20th century, which was also the peak of the species of birds that are so typical for the Dutch Polder landscape. This was a result of the small scale cultivated landscape at the time, which where wet grasslands grazed by milk cows. This was the ideal habitat for a couple of meadow birds. Because of land consolidation, the transformation from small scale to industrial farming, including water levels, loss of wild flowers and the implementation of turbo grass, and of course the expansion of cities, it resulted in habitat loss for these meadow birds, so particular for the Dutch rural landscape.

Then my father and I introduce a selection of different meadow birds. While we play recordings of the bird songs, we introduce the new installation of the Traveling Farm Museum (which you see now). We invite people to bring those disappearing birds back to the landscape they used to inhabit. The black-tailed godwit, the oystercatcher, the northern lapwing, the common redshank and the Eurasian skylark.

Meet the 'Grutto' – The Black-tailed Godwit

In 2015 this bird was selected as the national bird of the Netherlands. Evolutionary 'created' in biotopes of our ancestors, when they started to cultivate and transform the VEEN into 'polders'. This happened especially in the mid of the nineteenth century, when due to new ways of fertilizing the land, the soil became populated by worms. Grutto's characterize the typical Dutch polder landscape. But they follow other cultivated landscapes as well. In the winter they reside in large groups at the Rice farmers in Senegal and Guinee. Now Labeled as 'Near Threatened". It's a migratory bird, migrating in flocks to the west part of the African Continent in the winter and return to the Dutch meadows and coast line in the summer. Wet meadows offer food, with their long beak they eat creatures that live in the ground. In the 20th century the grutto was a

common meadow bird, but since the turn of the century it decreased at a fast rate because of habitat loss. They are a delicacy in France and Great Britain.

Meet the 'Scholekster' – Oystercatcher

This black and white bird with the red beak is the Oystercatcher. In the Netherlands also known as 'Bonte Piet', because of its colours and behaviour. This bird is an important species when it comes to indicating the health of ecosystems.

This is the 'Kievit' - Northern lapwing

In English also known as the peewit or pewit, tuit or tew-it. Those names are onomatopoeic and refer to the bird's characteristic call. This GEKUIFDE bird is famous for its eggs. It's a old Dutch tradition to collect the Lapwing Eggs. The person who finds the first egg of the season in certain villages, wins. Between 2000 and 2015 the population of the Kievit diminished by half, and kept on decreasing ever since. This is caused by intensification of agriculture, low waterlevel and urbanisation.

Up next is 'Tureluur' - Common redshank

This bird with an onomatopoeic name is a noisy creature, alerting others of its kind with its loud call.

And this is 'Veld leeuwerik' - Eurasian Skylark

The Eurasian Skylark is officially not a meadow bird, but still an often seen bird in the Dutch Polders. It's a songbird that loves open farmland.

After introducing the birds we started to cycle together as a flock of birds behind our traveling farm museum to the lake Haarrijnseplas. Along the way, in the middle of a football field, just around the corner of old Terwijde Farmhouse, we encounter the oystercatcher. It's quite an eyecatcher with his black and white appearance and long red beak.

When we arrive at the location we again are greeted with an oystercatcher family, foraging between a flock of sheep. We continue our walk and along the way we encounter almost 30 different bird species. To name a few: We see different ducks on the water, a flock of sparrows above the cherry orchard, and a cormorant in the top of a tree. a European green woodpecker, a group of white storks, around 7 common buzzards, bank swallows, barn swallows, house martins, Eurasian blue tits, great crested grebes, Egyptian geese, mute swans, coots, chiffchaffs, great cormorants and crows, among many others.

Along the way Jos tells about how different species of birds adapt will to certain landscape transformations, and instead of breeding in cliffs, now build nests along skyscrapers. At the end of the route we spot different species of swallows. We close the excursion with a breakfast together, where we share more stories about birds in the neighbourhood.

Will former Leidsche Rijn and Montbeliard share some species or will this territory bring you other birds to notice? Now you'll embark on an exploration on the territory around Montbeliard. I'm curious which feathered friends you'll make along the way.

Best,

Merel Zwarts

The Outsiders