

Winter counts (PTT) in Flanders (Belgium)

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Abstract. A small scale point-transect-count project has run now for 27 years in Flanders. A review of the most important bird population changes was published by Herremans (2010). We provide an overview here with additional data on the increase and recent collapse of the wintering Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus* population.

Introduction

From 1989 onwards, we used the Dutch point-transect-count system developed by Sovon (Boele 1998) and extended it to Flanders (northern part of Belgium) where it was promoted amongst volunteers of bird clubs.

Method

Transects were chosen by volunteers: a transect consist of 20 points, each counted during 5 minutes on the same morning. The first 5 years there were 4 counts per year (one each season), but as in the Netherlands, we only continued with the wintercounts afterwards, making PTT become entirely a winter bird count. The count period is between early December and late January, but in practice, most routes have been counted between Christmas and New Year.

Results

Despite considerable effort in coordination and feedback of results to participants (particularly in the first 15 years), the project never became very popular in Flanders. On average only about 45 transects have been counted each winter (maximum of 70 in 2013–2014) (Figure 1). In total, 169 transects have at some stage been counted but most were only active during a few years: on average 7 count years per route. 45 routes were visited at least during 10 years, but 17% only during one winter (Figure 2). As in many monitoring projects, starting is easier than perseverance. See Boele et al. (2008) for the contrastingly greater success of the project in the Netherlands.

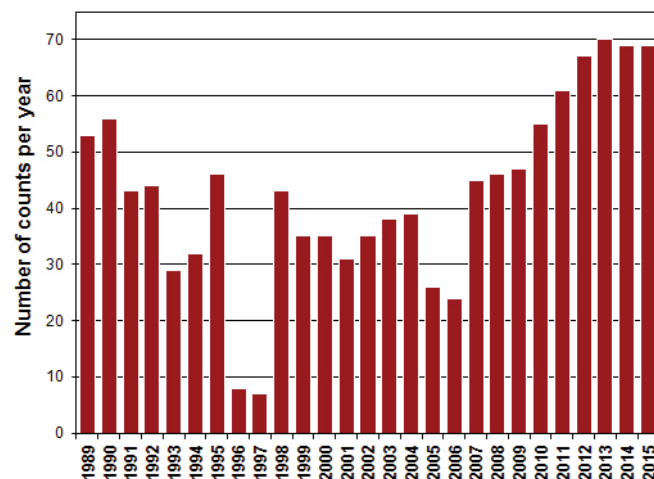


Figure 1. The number of transects counted per winter in Flanders.

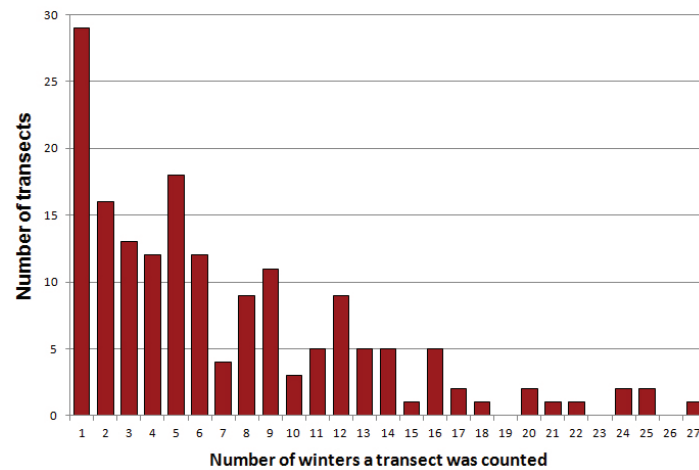


Figure 2. The number of years transects have been counted in Flanders.

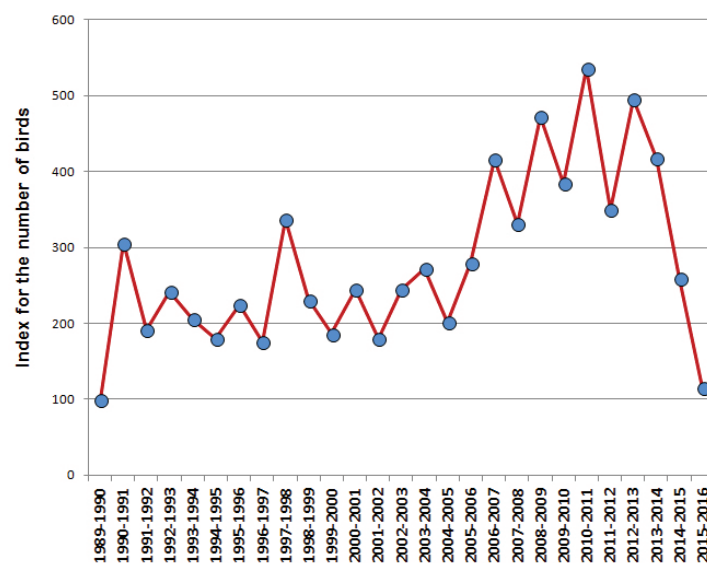


Figure 3. Gradual increase and sudden collapse of the wintering numbers of Wood Pigeons in Flanders in response to changes in agricultural policy and practices.

This implies that the resulting data are only meaningful for a limited number of common and widespread species in Flanders. A review of the species showing greatest change has been published (Herremans 2010). It was no surprise that birds of agricultural land were the principal losers: e.g. Partridge *Perdix perdix*, Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*, House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* and Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*. Exotic species (Canada goose *Branta Canadensis*, Egyptian goose *Alopochen aegyptiacus*, Eurasian collared dove *Streptopelia decaocto*), forest birds and birds previously widely persecuted (raptors, Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*) showed the strongest increase in numbers. With a massive decline of 97%, Willow tit (*Poecile montanus*) is a notable exception with opposing trend amongst the forest birds. Mild winters increased bird diversity, even the following winters, because it favours increased overwintering of a set of “winter softies” (Herremans 2010). The data have also been used to monitor raptors (Herremans & Tutak 2007), particularly to assess the decline of Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* (Herremans 2011, 2015). During the project, the main change in winter bird communities in Flanders was the massive increase in Wood Pigeons *Columba palumbus*, particularly just after the turn of the century, and its sudden dramatic collapse the recent two winters (Figure 3; Herremans 2016). This is a result of the “greening” of agriculture under European policy, making that maïs stubble is now suddenly much less available throughout winter. As a consequence a few million Wood Pigeons had to find new wintering grounds the last two years.

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Received:

Accepted: