

For the Dutch love of birds!



PHOTO: RENÉ VOS

The Dutch passion for bird watching is known across the world in birding communities. This love of birds is not surprising as a multitude of avian species roost in the polders, dunes, and parks of the Netherlands. Bird watching is a great way to explore and experience the stunning natural landscapes of this country.

BY ANNE PINTO-RODRIGUES

Moving to the Netherlands in early 2017 meant I had to find new locations to pursue my interest in bird watching. Thankfully our apartment in Amsterdam is a short walk from Vondelpark, and I was thrilled to observe many bird species there, most of which I had never seen before: the Eurasian Magpie, the Great Spotted Woodpecker, the European robin, and the Eurasian Jay, among others.

Subsequent trips to the heritage area of Zaanse Schans, the dunes of Scheveningen, and the UNESCO Heritage Site of the Wadden Sea gave me the opportunity to spot several waders (shorebirds) and migratory birds. Wanting to know more about the history of bird watching in the Netherlands, I dug deeper.

History of Dutch birding

Rotterdam resident and current chairman of the Dutch Birding Association, Remco Hofland, provided some great insights into the recent history of bird watching in the Netherlands. »



PHOTO: ANNE PINTO-RODRIGUES

“Forty dedicated bird watchers came together in 1979 to form the Dutch Birding Association,” says Hofland. “In those days, bird watching used to be a different experience. One had to use reference books to identify the species they had observed. Today, with smart phone apps to identify birds, sophisticated binoculars and superzoom cameras, bird watching has been redefined. Bird watching events like the national Garden Bird Counting Weekend or Big Days organised at the local level in the Netherlands have created a legion of passionate Dutch bird watchers. In fact, the 2016 Global Big Year winner, Arjan Dwarshuis, is Dutch and lives in Amsterdam.”

A Big Day is an informal competition among birders to see who can identify by sight or sound the largest number of bird species in a single day and within a specific geographical area. In the Netherlands, any

time of the year is good for bird watching, but peak migration occurs in September to October, making it the best time to observe a large variety of birds.

While broadly similar in definition to a Big Day, a Global Big Year spans one entire calendar year and the geographical area stretches across the seven continents. Dwarshuis traveled to 40 countries in 2016, and, in a span of 366 days, observed 6,852 different bird species — almost two-thirds of all bird species known to man.

The making of a champion

Dwarshuis conducts regular bird watching tours in Amsterdam’s Vondelpark. Joining some of his “bird walks” gave me a chance to learn more about his evolution into a champion birder. On my first bird walk, I asked how he got interested in bird watching. He narrated some delightful anecdotes from his childhood.

“I’m told my fascination with birds began when I was a few months old. As I grew older, I began to observe the birds that came to feed at the bird table in our

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PHOTO: ARJAN DWARSHUIS

backyard. As soon as I could read, my parents bought me my first bird book. Using my grandfather's old binoculars, I started identifying the birds in our garden," he says.

During his school days, Dwarshuis became a fanatic birder, counting migratory birds on the pier of Scheveningen.

"After finishing secondary school, I travelled and birded for seven months through Southeast Asia, Australia, New Zealand, Chile, and Peru. Twenty years later, I've observed over 7,000 of the 10,672 recorded bird species in the world!"

A few weeks later, on another bird walk, I quizzed him about his 2016 Big Year and the inspiration behind it. He recounted, "I had read about an American ornithologist, the late James Clements, who had observed 3,662 species in a single year (1989). Since then, I became obsessed with the idea of doing a Big Year. In 2014, I decided to go for it

and started planning. I connected with Jim Lawrence of the BirdLife Preventing Extinctions Programme (PEP) and together we came up with the idea of using my Big Year to raise funds for this critical conservation program."

Impact of the Global Big Year

Sensing my curiosity to know more about the impact that his Global Big Year has had, Dwarshuis elaborated: "The Big Year has allowed me to raise more »

Dwarshuis Recommends...

- **Binoculars** - For beginners: reasonably priced ones via the website of Vogelbescherming Nederland (Bird Protection Netherlands). www.vogelbescherming.nl
For serious birders: Swarovski binoculars, which are top of the line.
- **Camera** - Canon: Plenty of choice depending on your preferences, from an affordable PowerShot model all the way to a 600mm bird-photographing telephoto lens
- **Bird guide** - *Birds of Europe* by Lars Svensson
- **Bird watching groups** - Anyone with an interest in bird watching can become a member of Vogelbescherming Nederland. www.vogelbescherming.nl
- Children and young adults can join the Jeugdbond voor Natuur- en Milieustudie, or Youth in Nature. www.jnm.nl
- Professionals can join the Dutch Birding Association. www.dutchbirding.nl

than €32,000 for BirdLife PEP and I don't intend to stop till I reach €100,000. And via the year-long media coverage during my Big Year, I've been able to reach out to a large audience, especially kids. Hopefully I've inspired them to take up bird watching as a hobby. There were many media interviews after I completed the Big Year, which gave me an opportunity to emphasise the conservation message while continuing to draw attention to my fundraiser."

Dwarshuis made it his mission to get everybody interested in bird watching, even if it is just to identify the bird species in and around the person's home city. He exhorts, "Go to your nearest local park, and start looking at and listening to birds. No stroll will ever be the same! Of course, all are welcome to join one of my tours."

Where to bird watch

Nearly 520 avian species have been recorded in the Netherlands! Here, Dwarshuis shares with ACCESS readers his favourite places to catch glimpses of birds in flight and at rest.

1. The Wadden Islands

One of the most spectacular landscapes in the Netherlands, the Wadden Sea is the largest continuous mud flat in the world, and is shared by three countries: the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark. The Dutch part of this remarkable UNESCO World Heritage Site includes five islands. The landscape on each island is diverse, consisting of dunes, tidal marshes, polders, and woods. Texel, the largest of the islands, boasts the largest spoonbill colony in Europe. Since 2015, Texel has been hosting the Wadden Sea Bird Festival, the next edition of which is scheduled for 12 and 13 May 2018. The other four islands — Vlieland, Terschelling, Ameland, and Schiermonnikoog — also attract a large variety of shorebirds and songbirds.



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Did you know...

The Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*), grutto in Dutch, was voted the National Bird of the Netherlands in 2015.

2. The Lauwersmeer National Park

This national park, located in the provinces of Friesland and Groningen, is an ideal location for year-round bird watching. As a part of the Wadden Sea area, its grasslands, reed beds, and mudflats attract many small passerine birds and waders.

3. The Biesbosch National Park

A mesh of small rivers and creeks, this national park is one of the few remaining freshwater tidal areas in Europe. Its varied landscape makes it a good habitat for a wide array of birds, including birds of prey.

4. In and around Amsterdam

For those looking to get started with bird watching, the best place to observe birds is the local park. Other locations include the polder IJdoorn, the Landje van Geijssel on the outskirts of the city, and the dunes between Zandvoort and IJmuiden, located a little further away from Amsterdam. «

About the author

Anne Pinto-Rodrigues is an Amsterdam-based writer and blogger and bird watching enthusiast. She chronicles her experiences of interesting places and people on her blog No Roads Barred: www.noroadbarred.wordpress.com