

The decrease of the Pinkfooted Goose (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) in the province of Zeeland, Netherlands

by
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(Met samenvatting: De achteruitgang van de Kleine Rietgans in de provincie Zeeland)

I. Introduction.

WEBBE (1958) discusses the decrease of the Pinkfoot (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) on the Veerse Gat estuary between the isles of Walcheren and Noord-Beveland. He adds some quotations from the diaries of Mr LEYBORNE POPHAM, who used to go wildfowling in this area in the years of about 1892—1933. I have a lively interest in the study by Mr WEBBE (a) from the scientific view-point and (b) because the Veerse Gat estuary is part of an extensive wildfowl sanctuary founded in 1939 and managed by the Stichting „Het Zeeuwsche Landschap”, a foundation for nature conservancy in the province of Zeeland, of which I am the secretary at present. When I settled on the isle of Walcheren in 1947, one of the first wildfowl problems I tried to solve was: "Where are the former Pinkfoot concentrations of the Veerse Gat estuary and why have they gone". In fact I did not discover very much, mainly because in the local vocabulary all grey geese are lumped together as "Vries-ganzen" (Frost-geese). Only few people identify the Whitefronted Goose (*Anser albifrons*). The only observations known to me have been published by VLEUGEL (1948) who mentions three Pinkfoot observations on Zuid Beveland in 1940 and 1941 concerning two small flocks and one single bird. Another difficulty in tracing the Pinkfeet of the Veerse Gat and the cause of their complete absence in recent years was my lack of data on their former distribution and the history of their decrease.

Since the data published by WEBBE are providing new and interesting starting points, I have renewed my efforts. In the autumn of 1958 I have interviewed some people at Veere and I have also propounded the question to Mr. M.DE BRUIN, archivist at Middelburg and expert of the history of the changes of the coastal lines in this province. Most valuable information was also given by Mr. H. WILDEROM, of the research section of Rijkswaterstaat. I am highly indebted to Messrs. DE BRUIN and WILDEROM for their kind information.

II.

There is one basic difficulty in the interpretation of historical data on animal numbers. In the days of Messrs. PIKE and LEYBORNE POPHAM no attempts have been made to count or estimate the numbers of wild geese. It is clear that in those days the decrease of

nature resources had not yet reached an alarming point as to induce people to perform such counts. Moreover goose counts on the wintering grounds are far from an easy task even for the modern ornithologist (cf. BOYD 1955). The main handicap in WEBBE's study and in the present one is to assess a) the size of the former population of the Pinkfeet of the Veerse Gat estuary and b) the tempo of the decrease.

There is one "advantage": the species has been almost completely absent in recent years.

The only details of the former size of the Pinkfeet population are Mr. PIKE's statement that there were "many thousands of geese on the sandbank in a long black line perhaps 300 yards long" and Mr. LEYBORNE POPHAM's note in 1922 that "Pinkfeet..... have to a great extent left the estuary.....". Of the 1922—23 season he wrote "wild geese..... are scarce now in winter".

As to the time of the decrease the following data were obtained by means of the interviews in Veere.

1. Mrs. MINNEBOO, daughter of Mr. BLIEK mentioned in WEBBE's paper. She is some 70 years old now. Her late husband did a lot of shooting with Messrs. LEYBORNE POPHAM and PIKE. She thought the wild geese on Walcheren had decreased due to the winter drainage of Walcheren.

2. Mr. Hein VERLINDE, retired fisherman, who had had much contact with Messrs. LEYBORNE POPHAM and PIKE. His opinion was identical with that of Mrs. MINNEBOO.

3. Messrs. VAN BEVEREN Senior and Junior, who had both joined Messrs. LEYBORNE POPHAM and PIKE on many occasions. Mr. VAN BEVEREN Senior said, the decrease of the wild geese on the Veerse Gat estuary had become apparent "some 40 years ago", hence in about 1918. Mr. VAN BEVEREN Junior, who was born in 1903, said the wild geese on the estuary to have decreased when he was about 15 years old. It was most striking that both gentlemen, without knowing the subject of my interview and without knowing each others answers, came to the same year: 1918.

Apart from WEBBE's data on the numbers of Pinkfeet and the time of their decrease, his study contains two most interesting quotations from Mr. LEYBORNE POPHAM's notes.

A) Formerly "skeins of geese outlined against the sunset sky as far as the eye could see could be seen winging their way to the meadows on which they had been feeding to the roosting place on the sandbank".

B) This sandbank in the Veerse Gat was gradually becoming less suitable as a roosting place.

Ad A). The note on the "geese outlined against the sunset sky" suggests that the feeding meadows of the Pinkfeet lay to the south west of their roosting place, though this passage may have been a poetical expression rather than an exact note on the direction of the birds flight line. Anyhow, if the feeding meadows were actually

situated south west of the roosting place in the Veerse Gat, we may be sure that the birds were feeding on the low meadows in the centre of Walcheren, which used to be inundated during the winter. Formerly I had guessed that the decrease of the Pinkfeet from the Veerse Gat was a result of the permanent drainage of the lower parts of Walcheren by means of the electric pumping installations (Gemaal Boreel) since 1929. Mrs. MINNEBOO and Mr. VERLINDE expressed the same opinion. WEBBE's study and the data provided by Messrs. VAN BEVEREN, however, have shown that the Pinkfeet departed some 10 years before the permanent drainage of Walcheren had started. This drainage therefore cannot have been the cause of the departure of the Pinkfeet from their roost in the Veerse Gat.

Moreover substitutes for the loss of the Walcheren meadow areas would have been present. In the centre of Zuid-Beveland there is an extensive area of low meadows called the Poel (6×4 km), where many hundreds and often thousands of Bean Geese and Whitefronts, sometimes also Barnacle Geese, are feeding every winter. The distance from this area to the Walcheren meadow area and to the Veerse Gat is some 20 km.

Great numbers of wild geese are feeding on winter wheat and stubble fields in other parts of Zuid-Beveland and on the isle of Noord-Beveland on both sides of the Veerse Gat—Zandkreek. At first inclination one might conclude that these feeding grounds too might provide the Pinkfeet with a substitute for the loss of their Walcheren meadows. In the Netherlands, however, Pinkfeet are never seen feeding on winter wheat and stubble fields in large flocks. This also applies to other continental winter quarters of the species (WEBBE in lit.). In Britain Pinkfeet feed on winter wheat and stubble fields in great numbers. I have seen thousands of Pinkfeet in such habitat in Lincolnshire near the Wash in December 1947 and in various other parts of England in October 1954. Anyhow, winter wheat and stubble fields on Walcheren, Noord- and Zuid-Beveland are not visited by Pinkfeet.

Ad. B. First one might conclude that an environmental change at the roosting place was the main cause of the decrease of the Pinkfeet. The topography of the roost therefore is of some importance. The correct spelling of Scholleman (WEBBE) is Schotsman, the sandbank at the mouth of the Veerse Gat. There is no sandbank or other topographical feature in the region that is called Scholleman.

The situation of this sandbank has been subject to an essential change about which Mr. WILDEROM gave me the following details. About 1800 the fairway from Veere towards the open sea was east of the Schotsman. In the first part of the XIX-th century the main gully became diverted to the west of the Schotsman. Maps of the period 1855—1875 show that the former gully east of the

Schotsman was gradually silting up and in 1885 it had narrowed up to some 150 meters. In 1903—1924 it gradually disappeared. These data show that the disappearance of the Pinkfeet more or less coincided with the environmental change on their roost on the Schotsman. The general character of the change described by Mr. LEYBORNE POPHAM is somewhat different from that described by Mr. WILDEROM. The former stressed that the sandplate had become much lower, the latter stated that it lost its isolation as a result of the silting up of the eastern gully. Both changes may have taken place and may have been coherent. They may have been various aspects of one process. Anyhow, the changes may well have affected the wild geese. In my experience wild geese distinctly prefer "free" isolated sandbanks to those accessible from the main land. The changes on the Schotsman therefore may have been of importance as a factor causing the decrease of the Pinkfeet in the Veerse Gat. WEBBE seems to have been aware of one critical objection against this theory. He wrote: "It seems the Pinkfeet did not find a suitable roosting place near by.....". In recent years there have been two isolated sandbanks in the veerse Gat—Zandkreek. One of them, the Haringvreter, is 5 km to the south east of the Schotsman and about the same distance from the meadow area on Walcheren as the Schotsman.

As Mr. WILDEROM stressed that in 1909—1910 the Haringvreter was no more than a sandplate in statu nascendi, it cannot have been a substitute for the loss of the Schotsman. The second possible substitute is the Katse Plaat at the eastern end of the Zandkreek, some 20 km east of the Walcheren meadow area. It is true that several cases of greater distances than 20 km between the feeding area and the roost of wild geese in other countries are known (LEBRET 1959), but such distances are as far as I know unusual in the Netherlands. Nevertheless the Katse Plaat might have been a substitute for the Pinkfeet as it lays some 8 km from the Zuid-Beveland meadow area.

So far the result of my investigation may be summarized as follows:

1. The Pinkfeet roosting on the sandplate Schotsman in the Veerse Gat left the estuary before their feeding grounds on Walcheren were affected by permanent drainage. Moreover substitute feeding grounds are present on Zuid-Beveland.
2. The sandplate called Schotsman, where the Pinkfeet used to roost, lost its isolated position in about the years when the Pinkfeet got scarce in the Veerse Gat area.
3. There was no substitute roost nearby. A possible substitute further eastward has not been used.
4. The decrease of the Pinkfeet in the Veerse Gat area cannot be explained as a result of changes on the feeding grounds. Its explanation as a result of changes on their roost is not satisfactory. Other changes therefore may have played a role. WEBBE has pointed out that a "northward advance" of the winter range of the

Pinkfeet due to climatic amelioration may be an important factor for the decrease of the species in the Veerse Gat and in the province of Zeeland as a whole.

III.

So far I have assumed that the Pinkfeet left the whole province of Zeeland. There are, however, certain facts suggesting that a small winter population of Pinkfeet may have existed on the island of Schouwen up to 1953. Only here I have seen a flock of more than 100 Pinkfeet (January 3rd, 1951), whereas all other Pinkfeet observations in this province concern less than 25 birds. Moreover there was a most interesting "come back" of Pinkfeet and other wild geese on Walcheren in February 1953, shortly after the flood disaster of February 1st. From February 15th gradually increasing numbers were seen with a maximum of 1100 wild geese on February 24th. The flock composition was 400 Barnacles + 300 P i n k f e e t + 300 Bean + 100 Whitefronts. No doubt this come back was a result of the flood disaster, which especially ravaged the island of Schouwen and killed the vegetation of the polders so that the geese were compelled to move towards Walcheren where no damage occurred on the meadow areas. These geese were roosting on the Haringvreter in the Veerse Gat so that for some ten days, from February 15th—24th 1953 a situation comparable with that of the ancient days revived. After 1953 the numbers of Pinkfeet again fell to 1—15 birds with a maximum of some 25 on February 28th in the severe winter of 1956.

It may be assumed that the 300 Pinkfeet visiting Walcheren in February 1953 were originated from Schouwen and if the observation of some 100 Pinkfeet on Schouwen on January 3rd 1951 was representative for the situation on the latter island before the flood disaster, it may be concluded that, though the majority of the Pinkfeet had left the province of Zeeland in 1918—1922, a small number may have been present on Schouwen up to 1953. Data from Schouwen from the period 1920—1952 are not known to me. It is therefore impossible for me to discover whether both Walcheren and Schouwen have had a winter population of Pinkfeet, of which only the Schouwen flock survived until 1953. It is also possible that Schouwen has had no Pinkfeet before 1918—1922 and got them only as a result of the changes in the Veerse Gat. Anyhow, after the flood disaster of February 1st 1953 large scale drainage work was undertaken on Schouwen and the former swampy meadows near Ellemeet have been changed into arable country.

IV.

In recent years (since \pm 1955) the main Pinkfoot haunts in the Netherlands are situated in the north in the province of Friesland (cf. MÖRZER BRUIJNS, 1958; ZIJLSTRA, 1958). The present author has had the opportunity to live there in or near wildfowl sanctuaries, which are now the main Pinkfoot areas, in 1943—1944 and

1944—1945. In those days no Pinkfeet were seen there. But in 1941—1947 wild geese as well as surface feeding ducks and swans were concentrated in the Noord Oost Polder (cf. LEBRET, 1942), so that the absence of Pinkfeet is less important than it might have been otherwise. My only Pinkfoot observations in Friesland in 1943—1945 were:

October 10th 1943 8 birds in a flock of 50 Grey Lags and 150 Whitefronts in the Anjumer Kolken near the Lauwerszee; October 25th 1943 1 Pinkfoot *ibidem*.

February 24th 1944 14 Pinkfeet near the Tjeuke Meer.

March 16th 1944 3 Pinkfeet in a flock of some 400 Whitefronts near Terwispel.

Summary

1. WEBBE (1958) has published some historical data on the decrease of the winter population of Pinkfoot Geese (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) in the Veerse Gat estuary, province of Zeeland, Netherlands, where the species has been practically absent since at least 1922. The present author has been watching geese in this area since 1947.

2. From WEBBE's data combined with those of the present author it is concluded that the decrease of the Pinkfeet in the Veerse Gat cannot be due to changes on the feeding grounds. Its explanation as a result of changes on their roost is not satisfactory. This seems to support WEBBE's theory that a climatic amelioration may have caused a northward advance of the wintering range of the species, which may have been the main factor in the decrease in the Veerse Gat.

3. A small winter population of some hundreds of Pinkfeet may have been present at the island of Schouwen in the north of the province of Zeeland up to 1953. The reconstruction works on Schouwen after the flooding disaster of February 1st 1953 have destroyed the feeding grounds there.

4. In 1943—1945 the present author spent much time watching wildfowl in the province of Friesland. Only small numbers of Pinkfeet were present there in those years. Since 1955 thousands of Pinkfeet have been regularly observed in Friesland.

References.

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Samenvatting.

WEBBE (1958) vermeldt dagboekgegevens van T. M. PIKE en H. LEYBORNE POPHAM, beide Engelse waterwildjagers, die van 1892 tot 1933 jaagden op het

Veerse Gat en de Zandkreek. Aanvankelijk was de Kleine Rietgans (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) daar de talrijkste ganzensoort. Omstreeks 1920 waren deze vogels echter nagenoeg verdwenen. In 1947—1959 ontbraken zij naar mijn ervaring in dit gebied ook. Zoekend naar een mogelijke oorzaak van deze opvallende achteruitgang had ik vroeger gedacht aan de invoering van de winterbemaling op Walcheren. Mijn veronderstelling, dat de ganzen van het Veerse Gat vroeger op Walcheren hadden gegraasd, vindt wel steun in de geciteerde dagboek aantekeningen. Nu door WEBBE's artikel echter de tijd van het verdwijnen van de Kleine Rietganzen op omstreeks 1920 blijkt te moeten worden gesteld, vervalt mijn verklaring. De winterbemaling van Walcheren werd immers eerst in 1929 ingevoerd.

LEYBORNE POPHAM zelf had, zoals uit WEBBE's studie blijkt, als oorzaak van de achteruitgang van de Kleine Rietgans genoemd de veranderingen op de roestplaats van de ganzen. Deze roestten namelijk op de Schotsman, een plaat in de monding van het Veerse Gat. Inderdaad bleek deze plaats in het laatste van de vorige en in het begin van deze eeuw geleidelijk te zijn vastgegroeid aan de Noordbevelandse wal. Hierover was de heer M. H. WILDEROM te Koudekerke zo vriendelijk mij uitgebreide gegevens te verschaffen. Daar ganzen naar mijn ervaring met duidelijke voorkeur op vrij liggende zandplaten roesten, is de door LEYBORNE POPHAM gesuggereerde verklaring op het eerste gezicht wel aantrekkelijk, te meer omdat de iets ten ZO van Veere gelegen plaat de Haringvrieter in de jaren 1910—1920 nog niet zijn huidige omvang en hoogte had verkregen. Het is echter niet duidelijk waarom de Kleine Rietganzen zich niet aansloten bij de Kolganzen, Rietganzen en Brandganzen die tot de huidige dag in de Poel op Zuid-Beveland grazen en op de Katse Plaat, ook wel op de Middelplaat, beide in de Zandkreek, komen roesten. De plaatselijke veranderingen geven dus geen bevredigende verklaring voor het verdwijnen van de Kleine Rietgans uit het gebied van het Veerse Gat en de Zandkreek. WEBBE wijst erop dat er rekening mee moet worden gehouden, dat het verdwijnen van de Kleine Rietgans uit Zuidwest-Nederland samenhangt met klimaatveranderingen, waardoor de Kleine Rietganzen noordelijker dan ons land zijn gaan overwinteren.

Intussen bestaat de mogelijkheid, dat er tot de ramp van 1953 een kleine winterpopulatie van Kleine Rietganzen heeft bestaan in de omgeving van Ellemeet, in het platte van Schouwen.

In verband met het talrijk optreden van Kleine Rietganzen in Friesland sedert 1955 is het misschien van belang hier nog te vermelden, dat ik in de jaren 1943—1945, toen ik veel waarnemingen verrichtte aan de Friese Westkust en in het zogenaamde Lage Midden van Friesland, daar nimmer grote troepen van deze soort ben tegengekomen. Wel zag ik daar enige malen enkele Kleine Rietganzen tussen vrij grote troepen Kolganzen.

Waarneming van een zingend ♂ van de Kleine Vliegenvanger (*Ficedula parva*) in Nederland

door

M. J. TEKKE

Op 1 juni 1959 ontving ik telefonisch bericht van de leden. F. DE BOER en H. W. FISCHER, dat zij op 31 mei 1959 in het bos van het oude buiten „Beekhuizen“, tussen Velp en Rozendaal, gedurende 1½ uur een zingend ♂ van de Kleine Vliegenvanger hadden waargenomen.

De beschrijving van hun waarneming was zo positief, dat Mr. J. KIST en ik op 3 juni 1959 besloten ons geluk te beproeven.