

Book Reviews

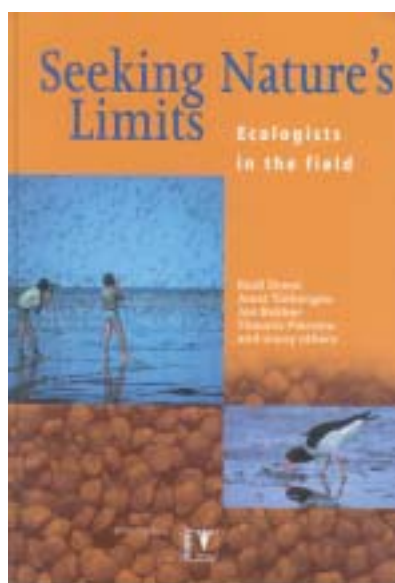
Seeking Nature's Limits: Ecologists in the Field

by Rudi Drent, Joost Tinbergen, Jan Bakker, Theunis Piersma and many others. 2006. KNNV Publishers, Utrecht, the Netherlands. 314 pp., hardback, extensively illustrated with graphs, colour photographs, maps and tables. ISBN: 90-5011-221-8. €24.95 (Can be purchased online from www.knnvpublishing.nl).

This book is the outcome of a rather fortunate Dutch academic custom that when a professor retires he presents a farewell discourse. In this case, the professor is Rudi Drent who for 25 years led the Centre for Ecological and Evolutionary Studies at the University of Groningen. That was a period in which great strides were taken in the development of the concepts of behavioural ecology with its foundation in evolutionary theory and the principle of optimality.

Seeking Nature's Limits focuses on the decisions animals make in the light of the fact that their choices are proscribed by the limits set by nature, by their physiology and by their environment. It is written by Rudi Drent and 35 of his past and present students and colleagues. It starts with Rudi Drent's wide-ranging introductory chapter, *Working in nature's laboratory*, which is followed by five sections: *Carrying capacity: animals and their food resources* (six chapters), *Food: eat or be eaten* (six chapters), *Individual choices and constraints* (sixteen chapters), *From individuals to populations* (six chapters) and *Ecologists and the science of conservation* (six chapters). The book concludes with a short philosophical discussion by Koos van Zomeren on *Seeing people while watching animals*.

The best science writing is concise and clear, avoiding long-windedness, repetition and obfuscation. *Seeking Nature's Limits* is a model of brevity and clarity. The original Dutch text was translated by Rudi Drent and then edited by Suzanne Moore. Between them, they did a good job. At an average of only seven pages, the 40 chapters are short and each is



profusely illustrated with photographs and the delightful and lucid graphics of Dick Visser.

Seeking Nature's Limits presents a cross-section of the work of the Groningen group, much of which is based at the university's island field station on Schiermonnikoog in the Wadden Sea. That is one of the reasons why waders figure highly with chapters on *Energy-saving flights* (Red Knots) by Theunis Piersma, *Siphon-nibblers help hungry waders* by Leo Zwarts, *Monogamy pays* (Eurasian Oystercatchers) by Dik Heg, *The social prisoner* (oystercatchers again) by Bruno Ens and Marcel Kersten, *Winter hazards for waders: cold snaps and mortality peaks* (more oystercatchers) by Jan Hulscher, *From individual to population and back again* (barnacles and oystercatchers) by Jaap van der Meer, and *Do waders breeding on agricultural land have a future?* by Albert Beintema. Though waders are not the subject of the remaining 33 chapters, these contain much to interest the waderologist, especially those relating to arctic geese that undergo similar migrations and face similar breeding conditions to arctic waders. Moreover 32 of the 40 chapters relate to birds of some kind. The remaining eight are on elephant seals, bivalves, human sex-ratios, buffalos, African woodlands, fish in Lake Victoria, beavers in the Netherlands and the effects of grazing on vegetation structure.

Seeking Nature's Limits is certainly authoritative and instructive; it is also readable and above all it is a book to be enjoyed. At €24.95 it is very good value for money. I recommend it.

Humphrey Sitters



Ecologische Atlas van de Paarse Strandloper en de Steenloper aan de Vlaamse kust 1947–2005

(An ecological atlas of the Purple Sandpiper and the Turnstone on the Flemish coast 1947–2005)
by Marc Becuwe, Paul Lingier, Raymond Deman, Georges de Putter, Koen Devos, Guido Rappé & Peter Sys. 2006. Flanders Marine Institute (<http://www.vliz.be>). 183 pp., softback, extensively illustrated with photographs, maps, graphs and tables. €22.50 (Can be purchased from Natuurpunt: winkel@natuurpunt.be).

This book is written in Dutch, and my Dutch does not extend beyond knowing that strandloper and steenloper are sandpiper and turnstone respectively. However, the many nice pictures, figures and maps with English captions and the English summary make this book reasonably accessible to all.

The book's sub-title is "Numbers, habitat use, activity system and behaviour of the Purple Sandpiper and the Turnstone on the Flemish coast", and I think it is fair to say that it covers these topics, in considerable detail.

There are twelve chapters: an introduction followed by chapters on bill morphology and anatomy, food and habitat preferences and annual and seasonal abundance patterns. The remaining six chapters provide detailed descriptions of the factors determining the distribution and abundance patterns of both species in different geographical areas of the Flemish coast, particularly in relation to the changes in man-made coastal defence structures that occurred over the 58 years of the study. The large number of maps at the back of the book illustrates these distribution patterns in some detail. It ends with both a Dutch and English summary.

This is a very specialised text, but I would recommend it to anyone with a fascination (or obsession!!) for Purple Sandpipers or Turnstone or for waderologists interested in how a human-induced changing coastal environment affects the distribution and habitat-use of waders. This book would also hold appeal for anyone interested in the Flemish coast.



Jennifer Smart