

Celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Waterbird Research Group KULING

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Enthusiastic beginnings and happy today

The story of KULING has its roots back in July 1981. It was then that two Gdansk University students, Włodek Meissner and Bogdan Brewka, saw walk-in traps for the first time in their lives. That was in Silesia, southern Poland, where ornithologists from Wrocław University were running ringing camps for waders and passerines. After a couple of days at the camp, these students came to the conclusion that waders are the most interesting group of birds. They returned to the Baltic coast with the idea of organizing a wader ringing camp in the mouth of the river Reda. At Gdansk University they found there were many other like-minded students who were enthusiastic about their idea. The Waterbird Research Group KULING was eventually established in 1983 by a group of four students who became known as the Founding Fathers of KULING: Włodek Meissner, Bogdan Brewka, Michał Skakuj and Arek Sikora.

We decided to call the group ‘Kuling’ after the name used by the Kashubs, the native people of the Puck Bay area, for large waders. The Kashubs recognize only two kinds of waders: small ones that they call ‘bigus’, and large ones that they call ‘kuling’. It sounds similar to ‘kulik’ – the Polish language name of the Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*. ‘Kuling’ seemed to us a better name than ‘bigus’, so we adopted it as the name of our group. Possibly that has something to do with the fact that for many years we totally failed to catch curlew! It was not until our tenth ringing camp in 1992 that we caught our first.

KULING started out as an informal group dealing with the autumn migration of water birds and waders in the Gulf of Gdansk, but we had no clear scientific ideas. However, thanks to a friend of a friend, Cees Rappoldt, we obtained a number of papers dealing with waders. It is worth noting that all these papers bore the signature “Theunis Piersma”. So it was that, indirectly, Theunis became a major inspiration for the Founding Fathers of KULING. Soon it was realised that wader studies involve rather more than just putting rings on birds’ legs. As KULING grew and evolved, there were good times and setbacks, there were great achievements, a lot of hard work and a huge amount of fun. The full story of the 25 years of KULING would be enough to fill a thick book. Who knows, maybe we will produce such a book for the 30th anniversary of KULING and it will become a bestseller!

From the beginning, we had the feeling that our group was special, and this was not just because KULING had four fathers and no mother! It was due to the marvellous atmosphere among the members which included students and young people of school age as well as amateur and professional ornithologists. Everyone worked enthusiastically together in the field and shared ideas during social meetings. After the first year, KULING’s field activities became focused on two main topics: studies of wader migration around Puck Bay and monitoring waterbirds by regular counts in the west-

ern part of the Gulf of Gdansk in the non-breeding season. In the 1980s, KULING became recognised in Poland for providing many interesting ornithological records. One of the milestones in our history was organising the International Wader Study Group Conference at Gdansk in 1987. It was then that we first saw the *Wader Study Group Bulletin* and realised that waderologists are a big, worldwide family. In 1996, we were formally registered as a non-governmental organization in Poland. Nowadays KULING members are professional and amateur ornithologists, students, and others who are over 16 and have taken part in at least one of our field activities. Membership fluctuates around 50, but the core leadership remains the same (Fig. 1); it is only some of their beards that have grown longer! KULING is led by a democratically elected Board comprising five members. From 1996 to 2004, the Chairman was Włodek Meissner. Now a younger KULING generation has taken over, and Szymon Bzoma has become Chairman.

Since the beginning, KULING has been closely connected with the Department of Vertebrate Ecology and Zoology of the University of Gdansk and was partly formed out of the Students’ Scientific Ornithological Group of the Gdansk University. Several KULING members later joined the staff or became PhD students of the Department and the University has provided organizational support for most of the Group’s projects. KULING has become more formally bound to the University of Gdansk since 2003 when the Group was responsible for forming the University’s Avian Ecophysiology Unit. Sometimes it is hard for us to tell where the thin boundary lies between KULING and the University. Since the 1990s, we have also received support from the Warmia and Masuria University at Olsztyn in NE Poland, where a strong group of KULING members is based. These days, from a financial and organizational point of view, the Wader Research Group KULING is a sort of amalgamation of a non-government organization and two university departments.

Wader and waterbird research

Between 1983 and 2007 the KULING team ringed more than 58,000 waders (Table 1) of which the vast majority were caught at temporary ringing stations (Fig. 2). Our ringing stations are organized according to the requirements of particular scientific projects. After several years studying coastal waders in the Puck Bay region, we moved inland to focus on the migration of Wood Sandpipers *Tringa glareola* and Common Sandpipers *Actitis hypoleucos*. At our inland sites we have also carried out research on the feeding ecology of Wood Sandpipers, Little Ringed Plovers *Charadrius dubius* and Ringed Plovers *Charadrius hiaticula*.

One of the largest wader projects in which we have been involved is the international study of Wood Sandpiper migration *Tringa glareola 2000*, which began in 1997 under the auspices of the International Wader Study Group and has been



Table 1. Waders ringed by the Waterbird Research Group KULING during 1983–2007.

Species	Total
Dunlin <i>Calidris alpina</i>	32,152
Wood Sandpiper <i>Tringa glareola</i>	5,477
Common Sandpiper <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	4,149
Common Snipe <i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	2,958
Curlew Sandpiper <i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	2,325
Red Knot <i>Calidris canutus</i>	2,182
Redshank <i>Tringa totanus</i>	1,629
Ruff <i>Philomachus pugnax</i>	1,492
Little Stint <i>Calidris minuta</i>	1,462
Ringed Plover <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	949
Little Ringed Plover <i>Charadrius dubius</i>	631
Ruddy Turnstone <i>Arenaria interpres</i>	515
Grey Plover <i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	511
Bar-tailed Godwit <i>Limosa lapponica</i>	396
Temminck's Stint <i>Calidris temminckii</i>	374
Sanderling <i>Calidris alba</i>	307
Eurasian Curlew <i>Numenius arquata</i>	159
Broad-billed Sandpiper <i>Limicola falcinellus</i>	156
Green Sandpiper <i>Tringa ochropus</i>	155
Greenshank <i>Tringa nebularia</i>	96
Spotted Redshank <i>Tringa erythropus</i>	94
Eurasian Oystercatcher <i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	78
Northern Lapwing <i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	68
Whimbrel <i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	62
Jack Snipe <i>Lymnocyptes minimus</i>	45
Eurasian Golden Plover <i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	28
Red-necked Phalarope <i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>	15
Great Snipe <i>Gallinago media</i>	7
Black-tailed Godwit <i>Limosa limosa</i>	6
Marsh Sandpiper <i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>	2
Semipalmated Sandpiper <i>Calidris pusilla</i>	1
Terek Sandpiper <i>Xenus cinereus</i>	1
Total	58,482

led by Magda Remisiewicz. This project has brought together a team of wader enthusiasts from 26 countries in Europe and Africa who have recently started preparing the monograph on Wood Sandpiper movements.

Since 1984, we have recorded numbers and distribution of wildfowl during the non-breeding season in the western part of the Gulf of Gdansk. We have combined these counts with monitoring of petro-chemical water pollution, based on numbers of dead birds found on the beach.

In 2006, we started a programme of intensive ringing of the Mallards *Anas platyrhynchos* that winter in cities, to study site-fidelity of males and females within and between seasons and to investigate the hypothesis that there are biometric differences between Mallards wintering in different

Table 2. Total number of birds of different groups ringed by Waterbird Research Group KULING during 1983–2007.

Group	Total
Waders	58,482
Gulls and terns (fledged)	6,414
Gulls and terns (chicks)	4,939
Other waterbirds	2,904
Pipits and wagtails	7,008
Others	2,131
Total	81,878

**Fig. 1.** VIPs of the Waterbird Research Group KULING by Cezary Wójcik.

parts of Poland. Other smaller projects have focused on gulls, and these have resulted in an increase of the number of gulls ringed by our team during the last 10 years.

Overall the number of birds ringed by KULING exceeds 81,000 (Table 2) and we take pride in the fact that we are one of the most effective ringing teams in Poland. At present our ringing team consists of 22 people (19 male, 3 female).

Other KULING activities in Poland and worldwide

Every two to three years since 1998, we have organized 'Polish Seminars on Wader Research'. This provides a forum for presenting the results of wader studies, for taking an overview of wader research, and for sharing experiences. Follow-up materials are often published in the ornithological journal *The Ring*. Since 1997, a KULING delegation has regularly taken part in the annual conference of the International Wader Study Group. We had the honour to organize the IWSG Meeting in 2002 in Jurata, followed in 2003 by the Seventh International Gull Meeting. In 2008, we will again have the pleasure of hosting members and supporters of the International Wader Study Group at the annual conference in Jastrzębia Góra.

In the 1990s, we provided organizational and financial support to colleagues from Lviv, Ukraine, to launch the first wader ringing station in western Ukraine at Chologynii, which is still a most successful ongoing venture. More recently the project *Tringa glareola 2000* has led to really productive contacts between KULING and many other wader ringing teams worldwide. Today, we run research projects in close cooperation with the Institute of Zoology of the Belarussian



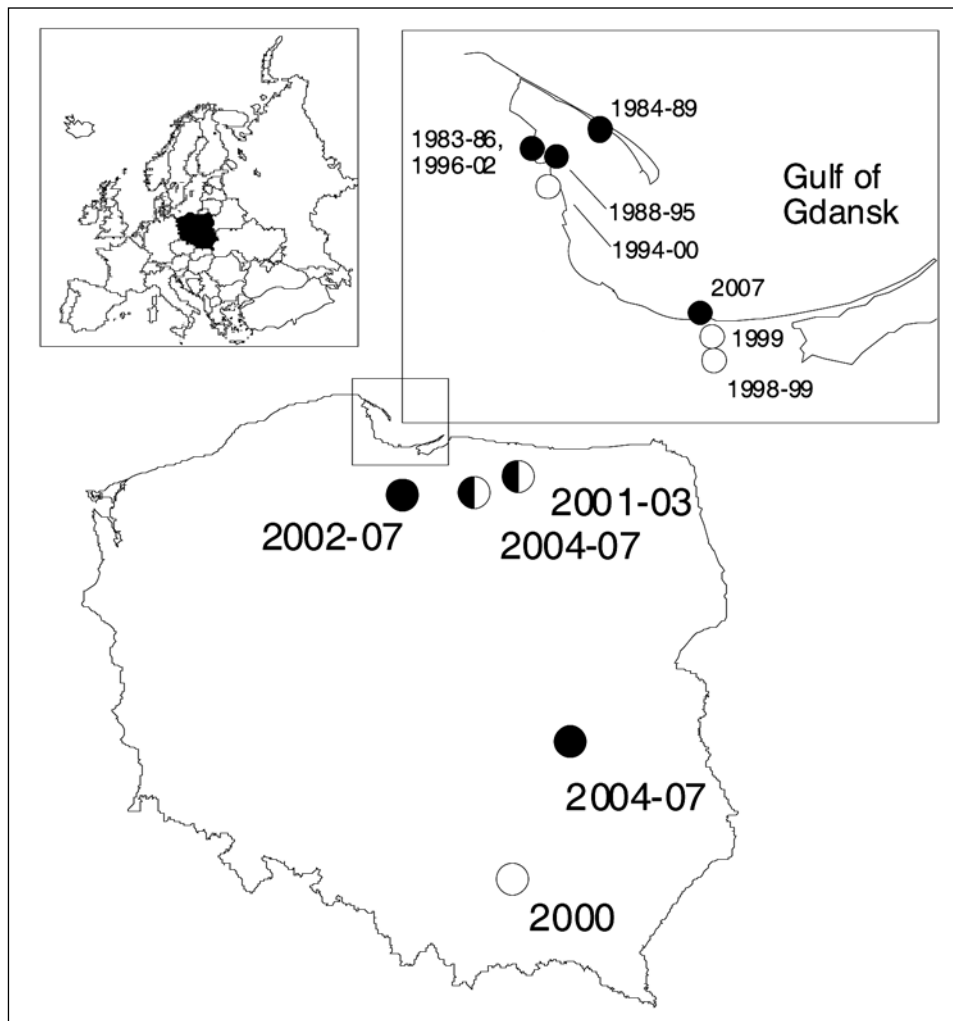


Fig. 2. Ringing stations operated by the Waterbird Research Group KULING during spring (white circles), autumn (black circles) and both migration periods (black & white circles). Years of ringing at each station are given.

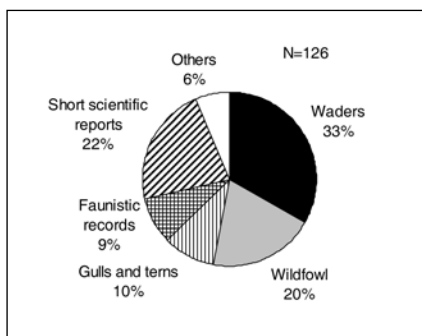


Fig. 3. Composition of scientific publications of the Waterbird Research Group KULING.

Academy of Sciences, with the Animal Demography Unit of the University of Cape Town in South Africa, and with virologists taking part in the European project INN-FLU, which is focused mainly on the spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza viruses.

Thanks to launching the Avian Ecophysiology Unit at the University of Gdansk, we can host researchers and students from other countries. Do not hesitate to contact us if you have any ideas for future cooperation!

Publications, educational activities and campaigns

The archive of publications noted as “a publication of Wader Research Group KULING” consists of 126 scientific papers of which the majority are about wader migration (Fig. 3). We are also involved in educational activities along the Polish coast. As a part of this, we have written a book on the natural features of two nature reserves, as well as several tourist and educational guides to the most attractive sites on the coast. In 2006, KULING organized and was successful in a campaign against renovation of the Gdynia harbour breakwater, where about 140 pairs of Sandwich Tern were nesting. The renovation was delayed allowing the chicks to fledge.

KULING social life

All members receive a yearly report (Fig. 4) that summarises the results of ringing, but what is of equal importance is that it describes various events which happened during the fieldwork. Each ringing station has a ‘volunteers log book’ in which participants can describe the events of the day or write their reflections about KULING activities.

When you meet a member of KULING, you can assess his or her involvement in the Group’s activities according



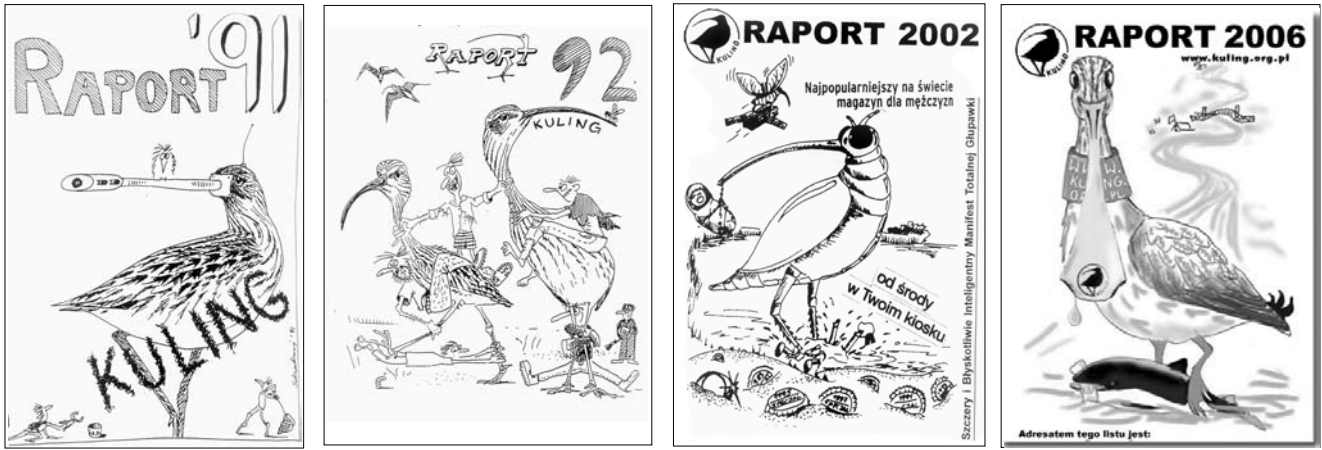


Fig. 4. Examples of the front covers of KULING's annual reports.

the colour of the badge he or she is wearing. On becoming a new member, you receive the brown badge with KULING's Curlew logo. The blue badge is worn by trained bird observers who count waterbirds in the harsh conditions of the Baltic coast. The silver badge marks a KULING ringer who is fully trained in handling and measuring birds. The gold badge is given to those who have ringed with KULING for more than 10 years and/or have made a major contribution to the Group's development. It is given only rarely and to date only eight gold badges have been awarded.

Every five years we organize special anniversary meetings. This is an opportunity to award wooden Curlew statuettes to the members of the Group who have been the most active over the past five years (Fig. 5). It is also a great time for people from different KULING generations to meet and spend 2-3 days together in an exceptional atmosphere recalling events and stories from the past and watching historical pictures. During these meetings, Traditional Non-Olympic KULING Games are organized (Fig. 6). More than 70 people took part

in 25th anniversary meeting held at Sobieszewo near Gdansk in October 2007.

Acknowledgements

The Kuling Group could not exist without the enthusiastic support of so many people who spend their free time at ringing camps or walking thousands of kilometers counting waterfowl in the Gulf of Gdansk. Professor Stefan Strawiński has been a great help too with his ideas and advice. Now, after 25 years none of us can imagine a winter without counting in the Gulf of Gdansk or a summer without a wader ringing camp. Therefore we are going to carry on, bearing in mind that an excessive seriousness kills slowly, and that without a sense of humour the science becomes only the science.

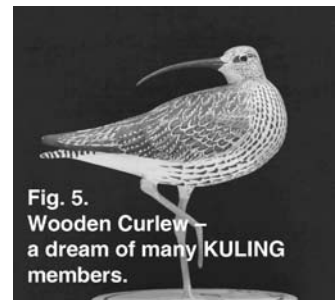


Fig. 5. Wooden Curlew – a dream of many KULING members.



Fig. 6. Some pictures from the Traditional Non-Olympic KULING Games and the 25th anniversary birthday cake.