The ephemeral shorebird
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Acknowledgements
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The Median isn’t the Message

‘Five studies operationally defined chronic fatigue syndrome in adults and found that < 10% of subjects return to pre-morbid levels of functioning, and the majority remain significantly impaired’ (Joyce et al. 1997)

‘Variation is the hard reality, not a set of imperfect measures for a central tendency. I had to place myself amidst the variation’ (S.J. Gould 1992)

The lesson on statistics by Stephen Jay Gould in his essay Median isn’t the Message was of great help to me in difficult times. The essay is an account on his personal intersection of life. It made me realize that I could have the favourable profile to be in the good part of the distribution given by Joyce et al. (1997). Still, it took a long time, a loving family and good friends to recover. Especially Petra, Popko and Lida guided me through the difficult years and without them I would never have started my work on ruffs. Petra, you helped me stay in touch with the shorebird community and as soon as I could work a little, you dragged me out the field. This thesis would not have been here without you. The last years our relationship has changed a lot as I was going through an ‘adolescent’ phase trying to grow into a scientist. Thanks to you, I hope I grew into a better person. I’m super proud that you are my paranimf.

Theunis has been my supervisor since the biologist in me was born. You taught me every bit there is to learn about ecology. Actually, I only really turned into a biologist after I started working with you on Texel, in the early 90ties. My mother saw that very sharply. When first meeting you, only a few months after I started my work on waders, she accused you of ‘steeling her daughter’. You have given me much, both professionally and personally. The very best gift was the chance to do this PhD; I’m very happy that you trusted the ruff project in my hands. You gave me much freedom and you made me take off from under your wings by allowing me to spend a lot of my time in Allan Bakers’ lab in the Royal Ontario Museum.

Allan Baker has been my major teacher and mentor in the last years. You took on the task of teaching me a whole new field (of population genetics) which required endless discussions in the lunchroom, and a lot of patience from your side. You taught me with care and warmth, although you often tried to hide this with a ‘this is bullshit’ remark. Thank you for investing so much in me!

Jos Hooijmeijer is the beating heart (logistic manager) of the ruff project. You always organized everything perfectly, of course. But your strength is that you are much more than a field assistant. Without you I would not have enjoyed the fieldwork, and actually the whole ruff project, as much. On top of that, you always made time to contribute to my manuscripts, and improved them with your ecological and nature-historical insights. Thanks for your friendship and for being my paranimf!

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Eldar Rakhimberdiev brought light in the darkness (of statistical analyses). Eldar, your first email to me, which was a slightly amused reaction on my ‘houtje-touwtje’ analysis of the Arctic database (forwarded to you by Mikhael Soloviev), started of a fruitful collaboration. I am glad that you were willing to not only help with the analyses, you wrote the whole chapter. Actually, your statistical skills and your knowledge about the Arctic have improved more chapters in this thesis. Your and Julia’s visit(s) to Groningen were the most productive weeks of thesis writing. Thanks for teaching me so much. You initiated Russian ruff projects and, right now, you are working on more extensive analyses to test our ‘flexible migration hypothesis’. I am very much looking forward to continue on!

Leo and Corine kicked my bud that one evening in 2004 in the Hobbemestraat and insisted that I would take on the chance and do this. Thanks so much for that! Then you went to South Africa and I to Toronto. Five years later we picked up the fun chats and shared many glasses of wine. You had time for me whenever I needed to escape from writing and the self-imposed isolation in 2009. Popko, you taught me to think more carefully and took me on many birding trips. Thanks for sharing so much with me. Esther and Boen, thanks for your support (no need for ‘dutjes’ anymore!).

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The ruff field work was as labour-intensive as any other demographic study on marked individuals: there are never enough hours for resightings. Jan Wijmenga was the first student to help out and became so devoted that he spent two years of his life with the ruffs. Every Wednesday-night meeting Jan would tell us that we needed to invest more in resightings. Only in 2009, the final data analyses showed that he was right; we could not use the estimates of the first year due to low resighting rates. Jan,
next to the field time and making colour rings, you invested many hours in setting up
the ruff database with Jos, you entered two years of data and prepared the survival
analyses. And you were the perfect Frisian guy to introduce me to the wilsterflappers
(who assumed that I was your assistant). Thanks for everything!

In 2006 we recruited more observers, or better: Job ten Horn joined the team. From
then on the resighting rates went sky rocket. In the following years we recruited teams
of volunteers to help with colour-ringing and resightings. Francisco Encinas was the
only volunteer we did not have to recruit. He decided that we needed him. Thanks
Fran, for all the hard work, and yes, in later years I warned new volunteers for the
Dutch weather. In the next years (in order of appearance) Angela Medina, Claudia
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there were more ruffs left in Fryslân; hopefully your analyses will provide ever more
insight in what is going on.

In the weekend we often needed extra help with colour ringing as all the wilster-
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These acknowledgments were written on Brockambridge beach in Delaware Bay while waiting for a catch of red knots (that did not happen). Kevin Kalasz, Jean Woods, and Nigel and Jacquie Clark, thank you for allowing me to edit print proofs while other volunteers were out doing resightings. It is wonderful to finally experience the famous co-existence of shorebirds and horseshoe crabs; if I was not so hooked on shorebirds, I would start studying horseshoe crab biology. Right now, the horseshoe crabs are spawning. The beaches are flushed green with eggs, and the red
knots look round and full. Hopefully this is a sign that the bay ecosystem is recovering from the overharvest in the last century, and hopefully it will result in a recovery of the red knot population along this flyway. That would be a great success. It would reward the joint scientific effort and wildlife protection efforts caring for this bay. Evermore I realize that ruffs are no exception, everywhere in the world shorebirds are declining, but I hope that this thesis will contribute to the awareness that human activities can be altered and save populations.

Delaware Bay, 27 May 2010