Acknowledgements
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 ‘stealing 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.

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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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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-ring 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 Burger, Kathryn Hine, Monika Parsons, Scott Davies, Emily Morris, Robbie Watts, and Lucie Schmaltz joined the ruff project. Thank you all for the hard work and the fun times in Gaast. Some of you stayed in Groningen for your own PhD project. Lucie, I must admit that I found it hard to leave the ruff project in someone else’s hands. But you are the best: you like to think for yourself; that’s a great skill, keep going. If only there were more ruffs left in Fryslân; hopefully your analyses will provide ever more insight in what is going on.

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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