



Project specie fact sheet

Baltic dunlin *Calidris alpina*

[Niidurüdi – Engryle – Sydlig Kärrsnäppa – Alpenstrandläufer]

The Baltic dunlin is one of the smallest and most vulnerable shorebird (wader) populations in Europe. The latest population estimate is from the late 1990s and was at 3-4,000 individuals. Since then there has been significant declines in most breeding areas, and a 2007 total may be as low as 1,500-2,000 birds.

The Baltic dunlin breeds primarily in temperate shore meadows and pastures around the Baltic Sea, in Denmark and at the Wadden Sea, whereas small numbers are found in lowland bogs in Estonia. In the past, the Baltic dunlins were also found breeding fairly widespread in river valley and lakeside grasslands in temperate continental northern Europe. Other much more numerous dunlin populations are found in the North Atlantic in particular in Iceland, Scotland and Ireland, and in the arctic of both Eurasia and North America.

The birds spend around three months only at their breeding sites. Another two to three months are spent at migration staging sites on wind flats and along the shores in the Baltic and in the large estuaries in NW and W Europe. The remaining six months of the year are spent in the winter quarters in large estuaries in N and NW Africa and SW Europe, where the Baltic dunlins are supposed to join the much larger numbers of other small-sized dunlins, but relative little is known about their life in the winter quarters due to difficulties with identification of Baltic dunlins from other dunlins at this time of the year. Total numbers of dunlins in the European and N and NW African estuaries are fluctuating but rather stable, and it is therefore unlikely that the declining trends in the number of Baltic dunlins are related to conditions away from the breeding grounds. Baltic dunlin conservation should consequently focus on conditions at their breeding sites.

Breeding habitat: Except from the small numbers found in bogs, breeding Baltic dunlins are confined to short grazed cattle pastures or hayfields with aftergrazing in coastal meadows. The birds are dependent of a slow vegetation growth and the presence of short grass well into June, and therefore the species is very vulnerable to drainage and fertilization. A fairly high cattle grazing density in the summer period provides a suitable vegetation height and structure, but on the other hand early release of cattle affects breeding success significantly by causing destruction by trampling of a large proportion of the nests. The nesting season of Baltic dunlins is protracted from late April into early July, and cattle release in May means that there will be a long time of overlap between incubation and cattle grazing inducing a high risk of trampling of the eggs.

Threats: This delicate balance between the demands of wet natural unimproved meadows, fairly intensive grazing but on the other hand a high vulnerability towards grazing in the nesting period means that land use/management very easily becomes either too extensive or too intensive. Historical use of meadows until tractors replaced horses in the middle of the 20th century included large areas with wet meadows used for late haymaking in late July or early August followed by aftergrazing, and other large areas of wet pastures in the lowermost grasslands fringing

ing the shores. In the 'golden age' for meadowbirds in the late 19th century and the early 20th century there might have been as many as 100,000 pairs of Baltic dunlins in total. Today profitable farming does not allow such land use, and during the last two to three decades breeding Baltic dunlins are found only in areas with a nature conservation management directed at such very demanding species like Baltic dunlins and ruffs.

Ole Thorup

More about Baltic dunlins:

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