

Creating Long-Term Value: Natural History is the Basis

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Creating long-term value: Natural history is the basis

Ornithology has grown from a pastime of clerics and soldiers into a full-fledged science. In just one century, the content of ornithological journals has changed tremendously. By virtue of their scientific tractability, birds have become a favourite kind of organism on which to test hypotheses. At the same time, much hypothesis-driven bird research is now published in ecology and evolution journals (with the underlying implication that 'good' research should not be wasted in low-impact ornithological journals). This change in focus has led to an 'Umwertung aller Werte' in the scientific ornithological world and an increasing number of ornithological journals (for example: *Auk*, *Condor*, *Ibis*, *Journal of Avian Biology*, *Ornis Fennica*) have recently said farewell to natural history in favour of novel hypothesis-driven research.

In the slipstream of the centennial of our ornithological journal *Ardea*, the old and new members of the editorial team, in close communication with the driving forces at our publisher, the Netherlands' Ornithological Union (NOU), have debated the aims and scope, editorial structure, and possibility of finding a commercial publishing house for *Ardea*. These discussions have raised the question: do we follow the lead of our respected sister ornithological journals, as well as the ecology and evolution journals, and encourage compact articles reporting 'novel' research driven by – what may later seem rather narrow – hypotheses? Or is there a niche for something we risk losing in ornithological publishing: in-depth analyses of detailed or long-term natural history observations? And what about studies that properly replicate previous experimental work? This consideration is particularly relevant as, contrary to common belief, the alternatives for publishing good old natural history are not widely available. That is to say: natural history studies are still being published, but mostly in local or regional journals that cannot be accessed by digital retrieval systems, and often in languages other than English. Very few of these data-rich studies thus ever reach the scientific audience they deserve. The same holds true for proper experimental replications: who wants to repeat other people's work in this competitive world, where everybody is striving for immortality by doing 'novel' research?

Raising a question often comes close to answering it. With our new team of three Editors-in-Chief and a cadre of enthusiastic professional ornithologists as Editors, we aim to develop *Ardea* into the international journal where 'descriptive ornithology' gets pride of place next to studies covering its original scope, i.e. those about ecology, life history and evolution. Descriptive studies should be based on high-quality and replicated observations, if possible addressing solid questions about, and embedded within descriptions of, ecological context. There will be no page limits (although authors of long papers may be asked to help defray publication costs), yet there will be no space for the 'overselling' of apparent novelty. In fact, we encourage replicate studies of published work and honest discussions of the study's limitations or encountered problems. We will emphasize the importance of careful description, good writing, historical backgrounds, succinct and clear statistics, and the use of photos where it helps the reader understand the system or issues. Manuscripts will be judged by the extent to which they contain careful and consistent natural history. Also, the presentation should be such that anyone can replicate the study using the data provided (if necessary, full data can be provided in a supplement). We are motivated by the conviction that, whereas solid data and interpretations will always remain valuable, a quick test of an *en vogue* hypothesis may not.

In the service of these ambitions, beginning in 2014, regular issues of *Ardea* will be published three times a year. Articles will be made available online immediately after acceptance. We will continue to benefit from the art-work of Jos Zwartz (bird vignettes on the opening pages) and Dick Visser (figures and general lay-out). We are deeply grateful to Jouke Prop for his hard work as Managing Editor over the past decade and welcome Popko Wiersma as his successor.

Rob Bijlsma
Bart Kempenaers
Theunis Piersma
Editors-in-Chief

