

## Mammals, big mammals and statistics

The title of this editorial may look oddly familiar. That's because it riffs on the famous phrase "lies, damned lies and statistics," a quote of slightly uncertain origin (Mark Twain is one of the options, as seems frequently the case). It's often used to describe the persuasive power of statistics to bolster a weak argument. Weak arguments abound in today's media landscape, and reports on the state of biodiversity are no exception. The debate on it is often fierce and polarized, and accusations of either uncalled-for alarmism or opportunistic dismissiveness fly back and forth in the public debate. Statistics get thrown around with reckless abandon and there is something for every taste to be found for whoever is willing to do some cherry-picking. Since this is Lutra, let's take a look at the case for mammals.

Take the article on the Our World in Data website called "Wild mammals are making a comeback in Europe thanks to conservation efforts", republished in updated form in September 2022. As the title suggests, it presents genuinely good news: many populations of large mammals are on the rebound from the earlier effects of hunting and habitat loss. This was picked up by some to support the argument that there is no such thing as a biodiversity crisis, even though the article is very clear: this is about large mammals and the fact that they're doing better is actually proof that protective measures can be highly effective.

More recently, Statistics Netherlands (CBS) published data for the 1995–2022 period on numbers of mammals in the Netherlands. Again, the overall trend looks good, showing a nearly 50% average increase since 1995. And again there's a more nuanced message for anyone who reads beyond the headline. The trend is based on 35 species for which suitable data is available, 18 of which increased, five of those sharply so, and that's great news. However, populations of twelve species actually dropped, five of those are mouse species. Another four species were stable and data for the one remaining species (common vole) showed an unclear confidence interval due to strong fluctuations. Of the five species that showed the most marked increase, two (beaver and otter) are reintroduced species while the population growth of one (hamster) is due to yearly releases of captive bred animals. In other words, conservation measures that have proven to be effective. Five declining species are covered by the Habitat Directive: root vole, serotine bat, whiskered bat, brown long-eared bat and hazel dormouse. The latter three species were still increasing until 2011. The Netherlands has a special responsibility for the root vole, as it is a distinct subspecies (*Alexandromys oeconomus arenicola*) that's endemic to the Netherlands. The serotine bat is vulnerable to effects of cavity wall insulation, a measure the Dutch government wants to be taken in two million homes by 2030 to counteract climate change.

So yes, there really is good news when it comes to the state of mammals in the wild. But it's essential to look beyond the headlines, beyond the infographics that lump data for species with wildly varying trends and certainly beyond the (social) media one-liners.

This issue of *Lutra* does exactly that. The pine marten (*Martes martes*) is one of those species that has seen a marked increase in its distribution and population. They have been increasing for several decades in wooded parts of the Netherlands, but it was only in the twenty-first century that they gradually gained ground in the west of the country. Heemskerk here present the results of a four-year study of a population in a dune area that only began to establish itself from 2006 on. The author was able to monitor individual pine martens for long periods of time and gain insights into their population structure and spatial use of the area.

In a neighbouring dune area, the population of the introduced fallow deer (*Dama dama*) has also increased, but in this case it is not particularly favourable to the area's biodiversity. From the late 1990s on, the number of deer in the area exploded and along with it the grazing pressure, which resulted in negative effects on the area's flora and fauna. In his review, Van der Spek summarizes a number of studies on the subject, which mostly justify the control measures taken by the authorities.

Keijl et al.'s overview of stranded cetaceans on Dutch coasts in 2020-2023 comprises 14 species. By far the most commonly stranded species was (once again) harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*), and the authors discuss the population dynamics of the stranded animals and their causes of death.

The sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*), which is also on Keijl et al.'s list, only irregularly strands on the Dutch coast. Historical stranding records are an important source for assessing their population dynamics and distribution in former times, which in the case of sperm whales have largely been impacted by whaling and its subsequent cessation and, probably, by climate change in more recent times. Kinze reviews such a list of 16th Century North Sea sperm whale strandings, and reveals three more strandings of this species on the East Frisian coast of Germany.

Another rare mammal in the Netherlands is the parti-coloured bat (*Vespertilio murinus*). Modderman et al., after a thorough search in the north-easternmost part of the country, rediscovered several roosts of the species. Maternity roosts are now known from two areas in the Netherlands.

The smallest mammals in the Netherlands, shrews and true mice, are represented in this issue by a study of Bekker, who dives into the hypothesis of the variability in size among shrews being smaller than among true mice. The author presents a method to quantify these differences and discusses possible explanations for this phenomenon.

The last paper in this issue, by Mostert & Bekker, describes the occurrence of the noctule (*Nyctalus noctula*) in the west of the Netherlands. Figures show that rising populations and the expansion of this tree-dwelling bat over the last decades has especially been apparent in that part of the country.

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