

## Pink-footed Goose in Flanders (BE)

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UNEP AEWA



AEWA European Goose  
Management Platform

# Wintering PfG in Belgium

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- Area
- Numbers
- Conflicts with agriculture
- Social value, ecological value
- Concerns
- Opportunities





PfG reach their most southern wintering grounds in Flanders.



Traditionally the wintering grounds are limited to a restricted area in the east-coast polders.

~ 20.000 ha suitable habitat

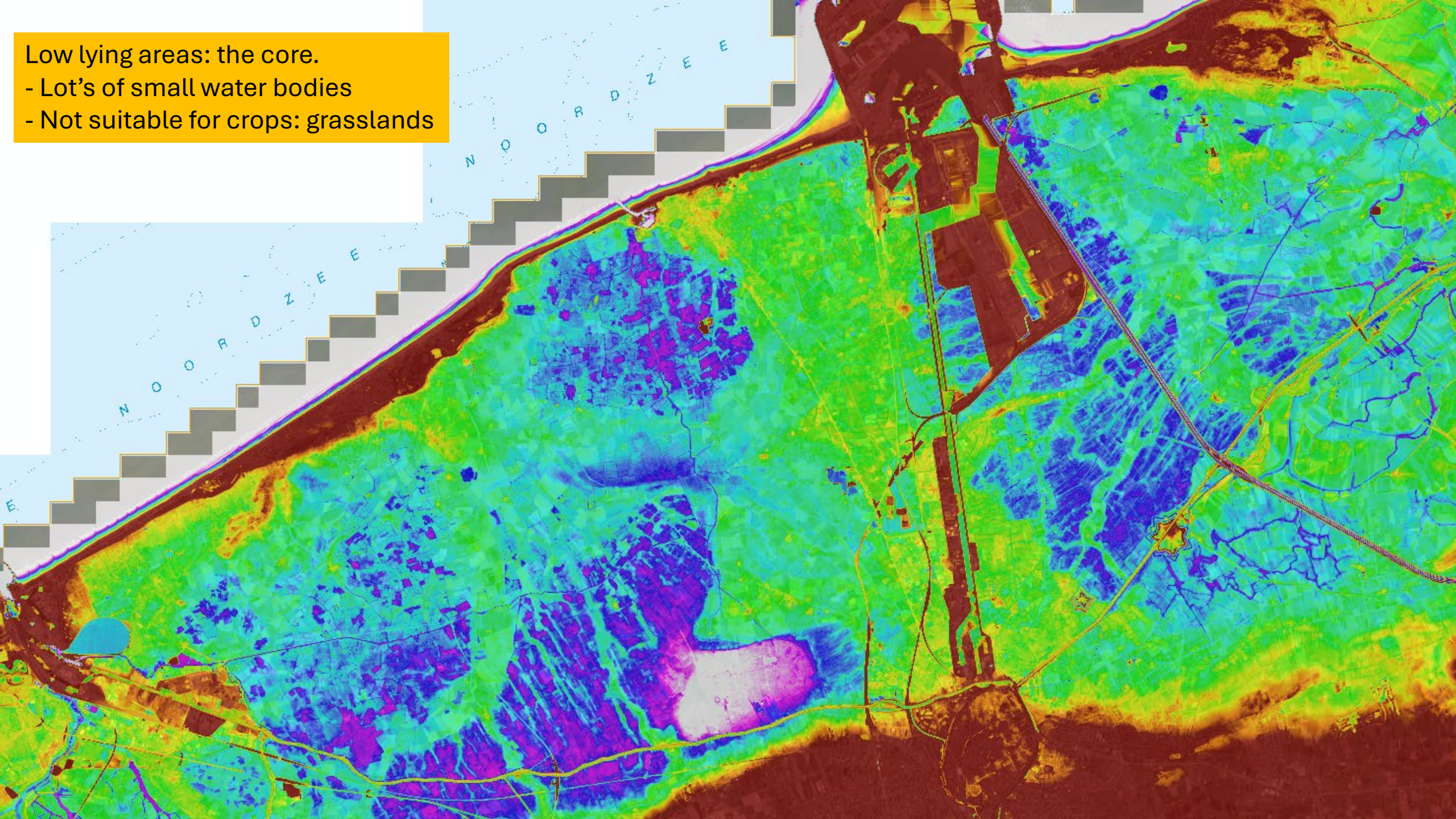


~ 30,000 ha  
~ 20,000 ha suitable

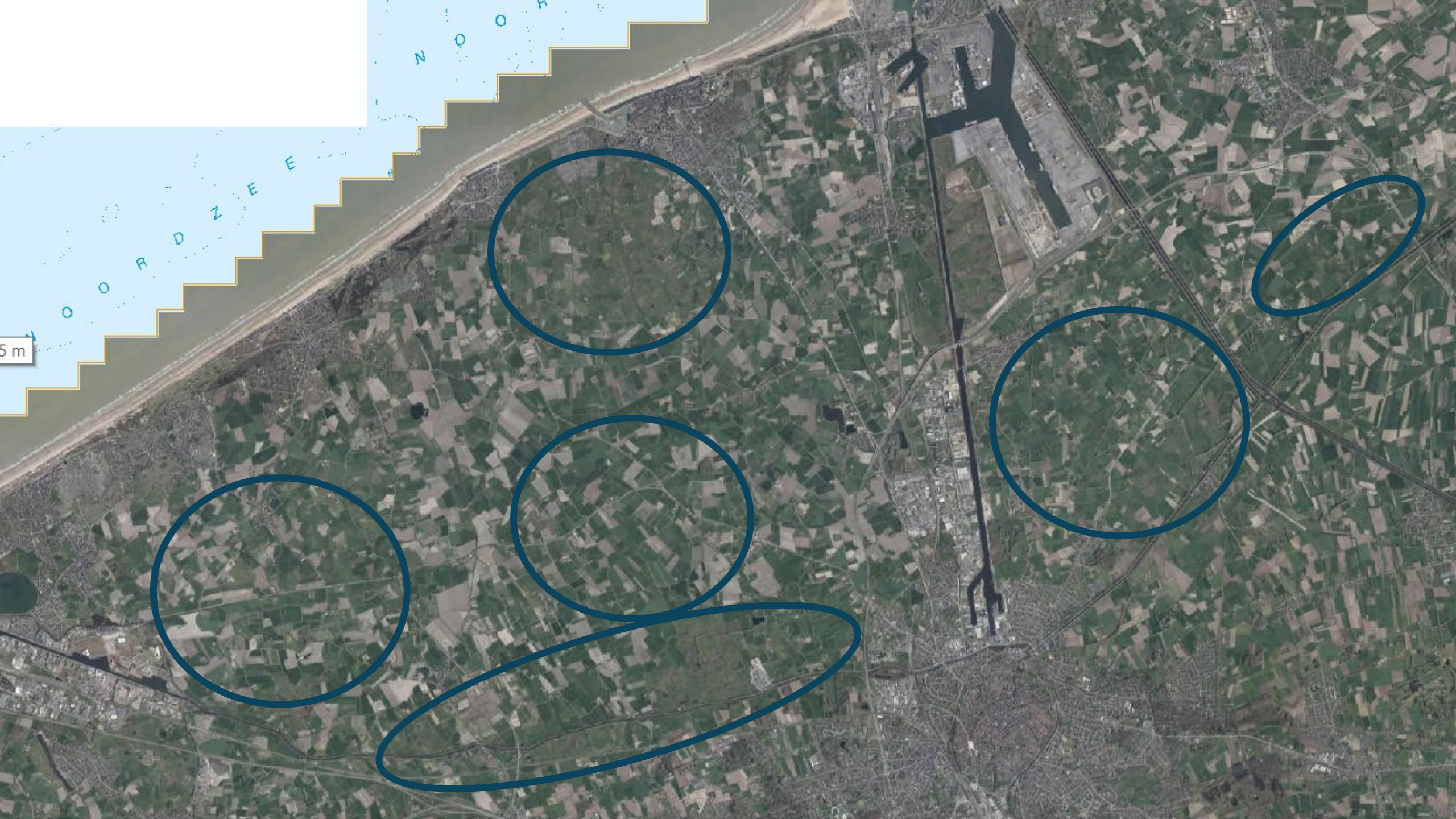




Low lying areas: the core.  
- Lot's of small water bodies  
- Not suitable for crops: grasslands



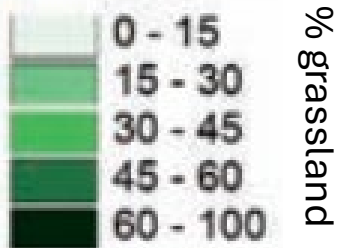




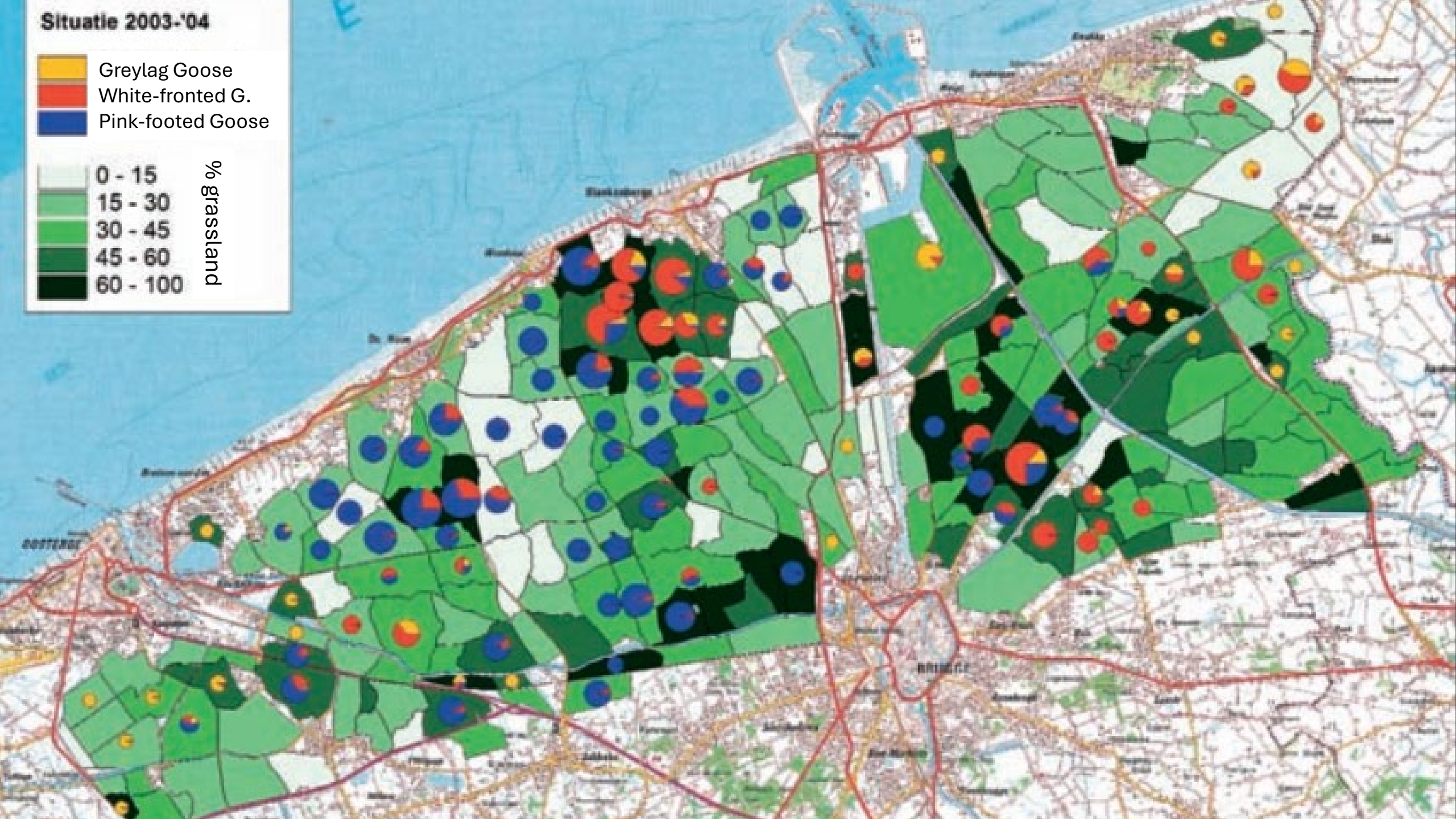


# Situatie 2003-'04

- Greylag Goose
- White-fronted G.
- Pink-footed Goose



% grassland







Preferred habitat are semi-natural wet grasslands





More recent increasing visits to adjacent areas to feed on maize stubble

Core areas remain the base for sleeping, resting, foraging, ...





# Numbers

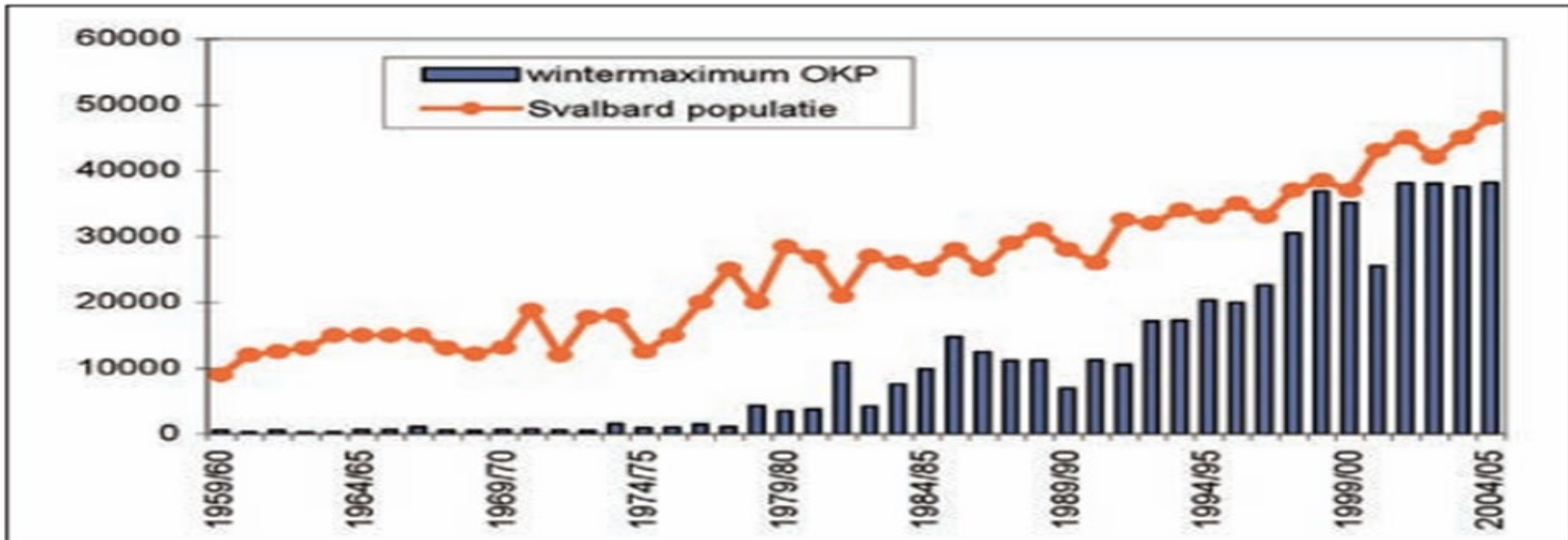
- Since the discovery of wintering PFG in 1958 initiatives were taken to protect the habitat of wintering geese from disturbance.
- Numbers, range and habitat use were monitored in detail since.





## Numbers

- PfG numbers increased in 2nd half of 20th century, and gradually reached up to 80% of the Svalbard population.
- Making the polder grasslands an international important waterbird site (SPA) and the PfG in particular a symbol for nature conservation in the area.

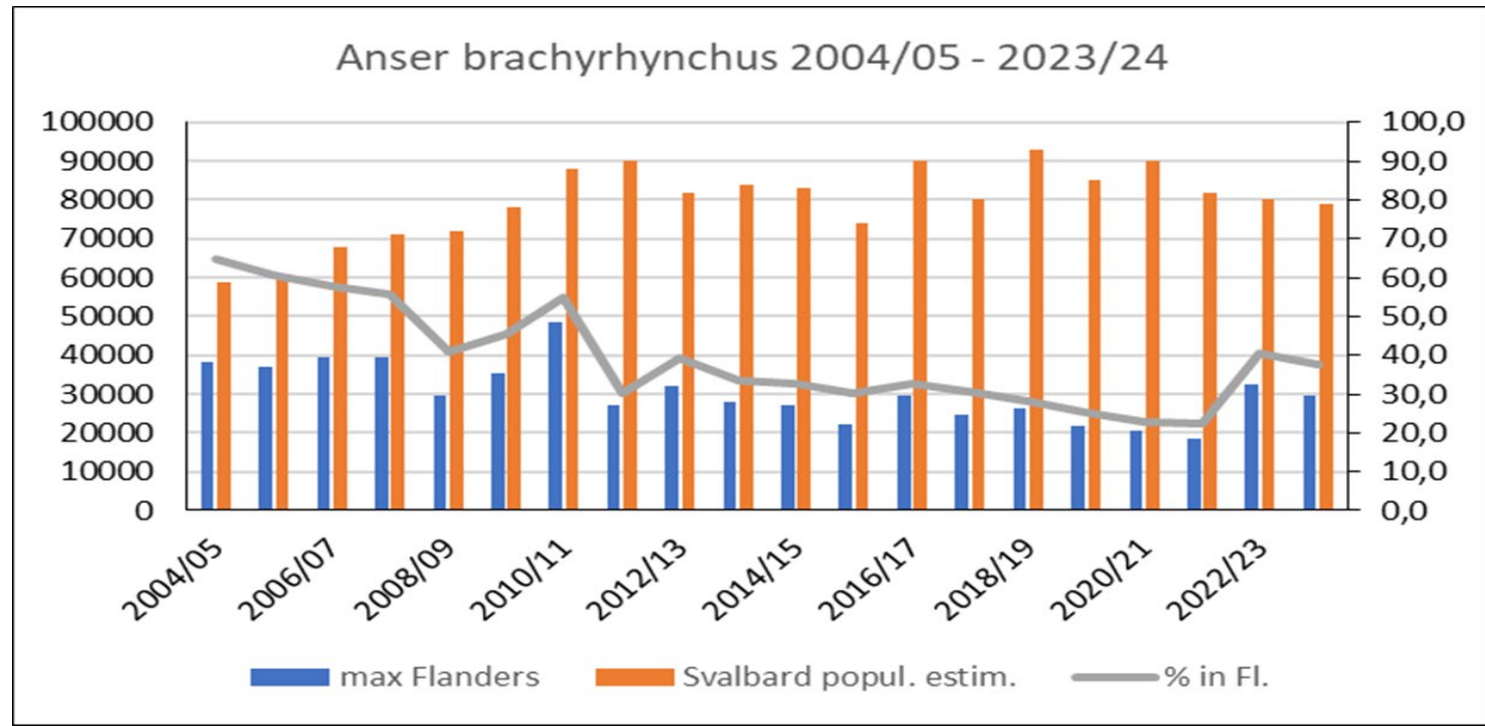




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## Numbers

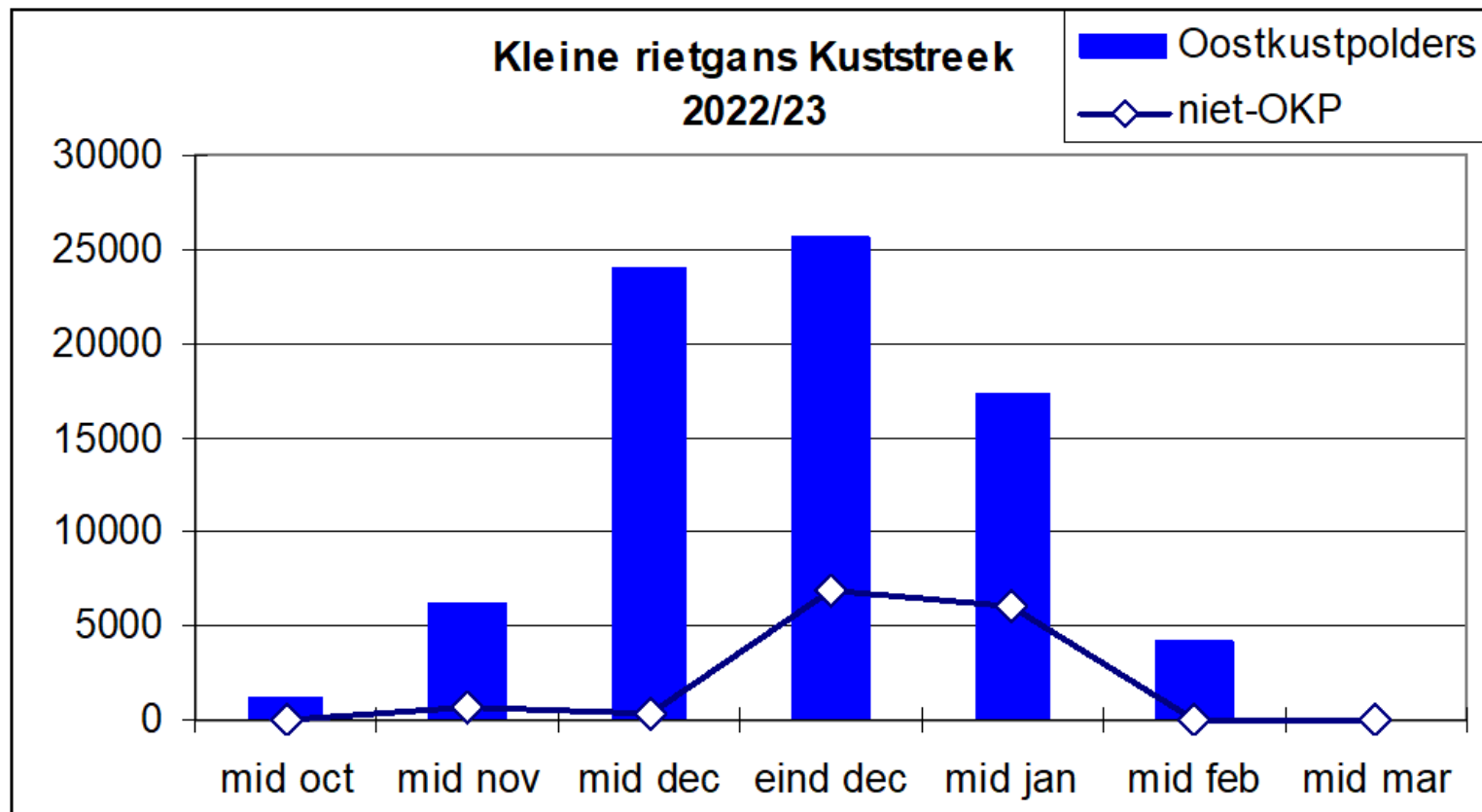
- Max. counts are ± constant since the late 1990's.
  - As total population grew, proportion dropped to around 20-30%.
  - As population was reduced by the ISSMP, no changes observed on the max count or seasonal average  
(~10.000 – 12.000 ind.)





## Numbers

- Short visit: arrival generally from mid-november, peak in the end of December. Departure by the end of January.





## Agricultural impact

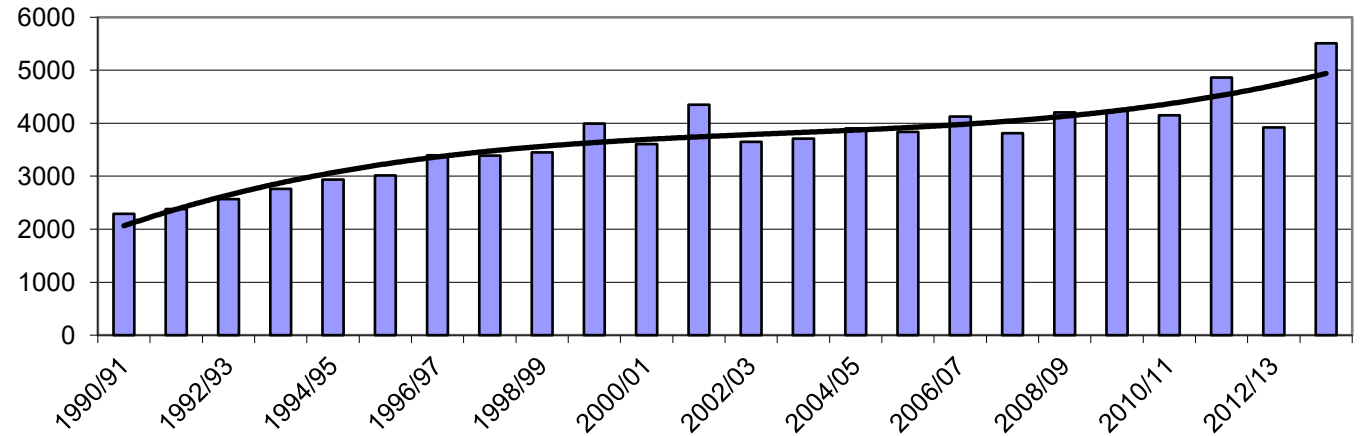
- PfG is present in BE outside of the growing season.
- No or very limited impact of grazing, on grasslands as well as on cereals.
- Damage by PfG is mainly due to trampling in rainy periods
  - Especially on parcels that used to be grassland but were turned into arable fields
    - In particular former microrelief depressions in fields create vulnerable spots in wet winters.
  - When crop residues (sugarbeet, potatoe, ...) are still present and winter cereals were sown through → increased risk.
- Agricultural damage is rather determined by meteorological conditions than to the number of PfG or the number of goose-days.



# Agricultural impact

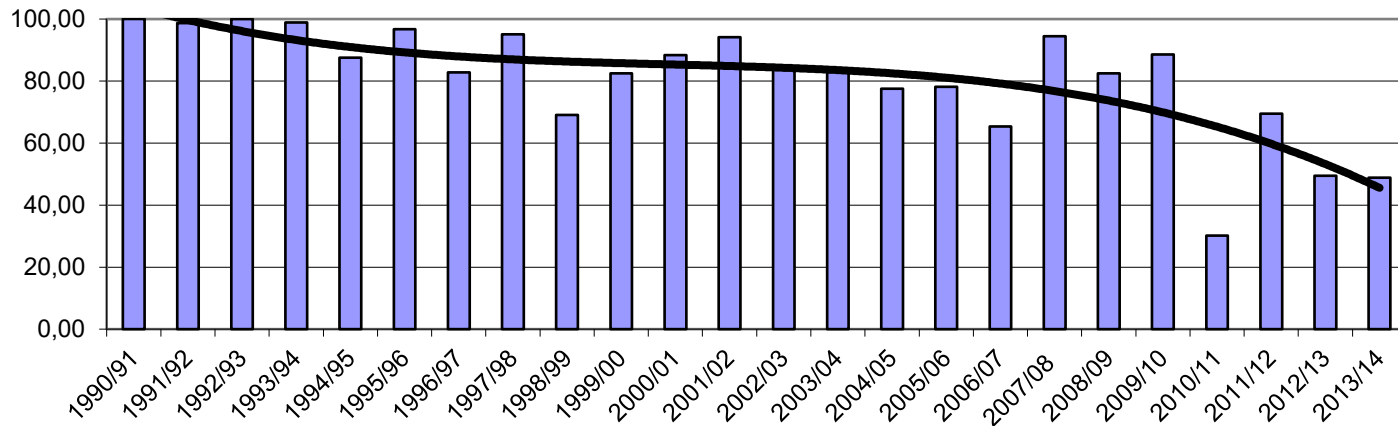
Increasing area of crops  
Decreasing area of grasslands

Higher susceptibility for damage  
More conflicts



### Oostkustpolders 1990-2013 (n=22) % Pinkfeet on grassland

R<sup>2</sup> = 0,6062



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# Agricultural impact









## PfG damage

- Crop damage is estimated at the time of harvest, farmers get a compensation of the estimated loss in terms of market prices.
- Yearly compensation for damage attributed to PfG
  - Stable at around 100.000€ (but with uncertainty due to mixed flocks)
- Crop damage is at a '*reasonable*' level, farmers are satisfied with the compensation scheme.



## Social values of the geese

- No historical tradition of large numbers of wintering geese, so no historical tradition of hunting on wintering geese, no hunting interests.
- The large numbers of wintering geese are seen as a success story for nature conservation.
- Large numbers of birders-volunteers have contributed over the past decades for counting and protecting the geese and their habitat.
- Large numbers of birders and the great public, come and enjoy the wintering geese in the area. PfG have become part of the winter and polder identity.

## Ecological values of the geese

- PfG wintering habitat is also very valuable for declining wet meadow breeding birds as Blacktailed Godwitt, Shoveller, Redshank, ...
- PfG grazing benefits habitat suitability for wintering and migrating waders (golden plover, ruff, ...) and breeding meadow birds in spring.
- The wintering habitat has come under pressure of more intensive farming practices: levelling fields, conversion of grasslands into croplands.
- Degradation of the traditional semi-natural polder grasslands increased agricultural conflicts, with the PfG in the eye of the storm.
- As such PfG has become the ambassador of nature conservation in the east coast polders.



## Concerns – conservation concerns

- In Flanders, for all habitats and species of EU-conservation concern (HabDir, BirdsDir) conservation goals have been set by Decree of 23 July 2010 of the Flemish Government.
- As the BE wintering grounds are of international importance for this species (>1%), also for PfG:
  - Conservation of a wintering population of at least 12.000 ind. (season average)
  - Conservation of the wintering habitat (grassland) area and improve the quality
  - Ensure sufficient wintering habitat
- Concern: investment in habitat conservation and improvement aim to support/reach target population. Concern that actions in other countries might counteract these efforts.

## Concerns – conservation concerns

- The PfG is seen as a species of conservation concern. As a stand-alone species, but also as an ambassador of its habitat, supporting also habitat suitability for other species of conservation concern.
- Flanders is the most southern wintering site. In harsh winters it forms a safe haven for even larger numbers arctic geese. It is important to keep this safe haven as an active part of the flyway to be able to support bigger proportions of the population during extreme winter events.



## Concerns – social acceptance

- Monitoring PfG is carried out by a large number of volunteers with nature conservation background and for nature conservation purposes in (site monitoring).
  - The use of ‘their’ data for species-management, rather than for nature conservation purposes, has caused some displeasure esp. when ‘harvest’ is mentioned as key instrument.
  - Need for good and clear motivation and communication of the goals.
  - Science-based, but also understandable.
- Crop damage is at a reasonable level, farmers are satisfied with the compensation scheme – important to keep this.
  - This supports greatly co-existence of nature conservation and farming.
  - The existence of a plan assures farmers damage is taken seriously.
- Adaptive harvest requires processing of data, what comes at a cost. With the experiences of the ending ISSMP, and models already built, can costs be reduced?

## Opportunities

- Support for maintaining and restoring suitable and optimal (semi-) natural wintering habitat for the PfG.
- Encourage- and share knowledge on non-lethal measures to prevent important damage.
- Encourage to enlarge national observers networks for monitoring (counts and distribution).
- Research efforts esp. increase number of transmitters on both flyways.



## Acknowledgments

- Great thanks to Eckhart Kuijken & Christine Verscheure for the use of data, graphs & figures from their database and publications.
- Many thanks to all volunteers for their commitment in collecting the field-data.
- References:
  - *Kuijken, E., Meire, P. & C. Verscheure 2005: Geese in the Oostkuspolders: 45 years evolution of numbers and distribution (in Dutch with summ.) Natuur.oriolus 71(bijlage): 21-42,*
  - *Kuijken, E. & C. Verscheure 2023: Long-term trends in occurrence and behaviour of wintering Arctic Geese in the Coastal Region of Flanders (in Dutch with summ.) Natuur.oriolus 2023 (4) :141-154*