

In Memoriam Luit Buurma

door Arie Dekker

uitgesproken op de "North American Bird Strike Conference" in september 2023 in Kelowna (Canada) en is opgenomen in de proceedings van die gezamenlijke conference van Bird Strike Committee USA & Bird Strike Association Canada.

On August 9th, barely a month after his 75th birthday , Luit Buurma died. Although retired for 10 years, Luit will still be remembered by many of you. And those of you who haven't met him in person will have heard of him or in one way or another, direct or indirect, will use some of the insights in bird strike prevention he developed and shared.

Ever since I heard the tragic news, kaleidoscopic images are flashing through my mind. Images of many joined projects, many recalls of the frequent conversations we had and last but not least the visions Luit shared. Visions, not only of how proper bird control should look like, but more often about the state of nature and how to prevent it from further deteriorating.

During 1974-1975 Luit was conscripted in the Royal Netherlands Air Force (RNLAf) as an ornithologist, tasked with working out a strategy to reduce the ever-increasing bird strikes. After his military service in 1975, he was appointed as a civil servant to set up and educate a team of bird controllers. By accident, he came across radar screen footage used to evaluate pilot training. The film showed a lot of unidentified small echoes. Having seen radar images of bird migration at a guest lecture of David Lack, Luit knew they were birds. This film sparked Luit's imagination and curiosity and was the start of his career as a radar ornithologist. The RNLAf enabled him to do many projects in cooperation with the Dutch research institute TNO, resulting in better understanding of the radar images, and ultimately, in the development of a system of operational bird migration warnings for pilots, based on radar information. Eventually this led to the formation of the start-up company ROBIN Radar in 2010, now one of the top three innovative companies in the Netherlands.

But Luit was so much more than a radar ornithologist. Above all, he considered himself to be a scientist and field ornithologist. He was the driving force behind the development of a key for the microscopic identification of feather remains at the University of Amsterdam. This technique was used for over 25 years around the world, until DNA analysis became available at ever more competitive prices. He also saw the potential of modelling techniques, and in cooperation with Prof. Willem Bouten and Dr. Judy Shamoun of the University of Amsterdam, many years of bird counts of airbases were used in the BAMBAS project to better understand the dynamics of bird presence on airbases. In the FlySafe project, initiated by the European Space Agency and working with many

more parties, RNLAf radar data from several years were used together with weather data from the Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute to develop a bird migration warning model. This system has been operational for over 10 years now, providing information on bird migration to pilots, 3 days in advance.

In hindsight I am now wondering how he got things done; his charm, perseverance and charisma helped a lot of course. In the 1980's there were educational/research weeks on the island of Vlieland, including a mobile radar station, with the whole team of bird controllers. We went to Dyabakir in Eastern Turkey with a team of 6 bird controllers to deter a Starling roost of about a million birds on an USA early warning radar station. He had a professor from Wageningen Agricultural University in a helicopter and within a day had a quick scan on how to improve grassland management on 7 airfields. These, and many, many more exceptional activities were possible with Luit.

Cooperation with colleagues from other organisations and countries was very important for Luit. He used to say that he 'owed so much to the Bird Strike Committee Europe', which in 1996 adapted its name to the reality that more attendees were coming from non-European countries, becoming the International Bird Strike Committee (IBSC). Luit was the inspiring chairman of IBSC for some years and became a founding member of the World Bird Strike Association (WBA), when it was established in 2012. He considered the international conferences as town squares where information and ideas were shared. It was an unwritten rule in our office that you only could only go to a conference if you also presented some results. He emphasised that we all stand on the shoulders of our predecessors. In his case he often mentioned Hans Blokpoel, author of the standard work, 'Bird Hazards to Aircraft', and the Swiss radar ornithologist, Dr. Bruno Bruderer.

Above all, Luit was a nature conservationist. He was one of the founders of SOVON, the Dutch organisation of voluntary bird counters. He was also secretary of Bird Life Netherlands (Vogelbescherming Nederland) for 7 years. After his retirement in 2013 he remained active and at the time of his sudden passing, was undertaking a PhD focusing on his fascination with the flight behaviour of swifts.

Luit has left his mark on many bird strike prevention programs all over the world. He will be greatly missed.