

# Methods: Data

## Contents

Study species	1
Study site	3
Goose observations	4
Observations of marked geese . . . . .	4
Flock counts . . . . .	5
Flight activity . . . . .	5
Satellite telemetry . . . . .	6
Data filtering	6
Observations of marked geese . . . . .	6
Flock counts . . . . .	7
Flight activity . . . . .	8
Satellite telemetry . . . . .	8
Summer breeding success	9
References	11

## Study species

Greater White-fronted geese (*Anser albifrons*), or whitefronts, are grey geese similar in size but somewhat smaller than the Greylag goose (*A. anser*). They are

named for the distinctive patch of white feathers at the base of the bill and beginning of the forehead. Adults are also identified by the black tiger-stripe markings on the chest. First winter birds lack the white front, the black chest stripes, and the neck grooves common to adults of many *Anser* species.

Madsen and Cracknell (1999) have compiled some of the most comprehensive information on the ecology of this species in their book on *Goose Populations of the Western Palearctic*. Whitefronts have a circumpolar distribution, and breed in the tundra between the 10°C and 4°C July isotherms. The Palearctic populations winter across Europe and Asia, with one of the largest combined ranges among the geese. The Eurasian breeding range is now exclusively within Russia (Alphéraky 1904), and stretches from the Kanin Peninsula (45°E) to the Kolyma river (155°E) in the Russian far-east. The Western Palearctic population which winters in Europe breeds between the Kanin Peninsula the Khatanga river (104°E). This population is further divided into five main wintering groups based on the flyways they use (Philippona 1972). Geese reaching western Europe and Britain from Russia take the Baltic - North Sea flyway. Johan H Mooij et al. (1996) summarises some decades of leg-ring and neckband recoveries, and while the species shows high site fidelity during winter (Wilson et al. 1991), but populations from the different flyways have been found to mix. Overall, the western European wintering population has increased dramatically since the 1970s, while there have been corresponding decreases in populations wintering in Croatia (Pannonic) and Turkey (Pontic) (Johan H Mooij et al. 1996).

Adults form life-long pair bonds, and migrate, feed and roost together. Family bonds between parents and juveniles, and between siblings, are strong and long-lasting. Families regroup successfully after capture and subsequent individual release in both wintering (Miller and Dzubin 1965) and breeding areas [*pers.obs*] Juveniles follow parents on their first autumn migration, and are almost always seen with them or with siblings during their first winter. In a study of the Greenland subspecies (*A. albifrons flavirostris*), it was found that around 40% of juveniles are still with their parents in the second winter, 30% in the third, and 20% in the fourth (Warren et al. 1993). Alloparental care, or nest attendance and anti-predator defence on the breeding grounds is a likely benefit and has been sporadically reported in the Greenland (D. A. Stroud 1982) and Pacific subspecies (Ely 1979), while being better studied and confirmed in the Canadian Arctic breeding population (FOX, BOYD, and BROMLEY 1995). In a number of species of geese - Snow geese (*A. caeruleus*), Dark-bellied Brent geese (*Branta b. bernicla*), and Barnacle geese (*B. leucopsis*) - larger families are also more

dominant in contests with con- and heterospecifics within wintering flocks than smaller ones or pairs (Jónsson and Afton 2008, Poisbleau et al. (2006), Jeffrey M. Black and Owen (1989), Loonen et al. (1999)). This may be assumed to hold for whitefronts as well, promoting the maintenance of family bonds. Additionally, when in dispersed family groups, families may accrue the benefits of flocking while sharing the costs only with related individuals (Warren et al. 1993).

## Study site

The main wintering grounds of the North Sea whitefronts have undergone a shift since the 1970s, when they were concentrated in northwestern Germany along the River Elbe ( $\sim 9.2^\circ\text{E}$ ) and in the Dollart at the mouth of the River Ems in East Frisia, to the Lower Rhine area between the German Ruhr Valley and the River IJssel in the Netherlands (Johan H. Mooij 1991). We used a combination of this historical and contemporary winter distribution, and the locations of observations of whitefronts reported from north-western continental Europe to define a spatial extent for our study area. This is bounded by the  $0^\circ\text{E}$  and  $10^\circ\text{E}$  longitudes and the  $50^\circ\text{N}$  and  $54^\circ\text{N}$  latitudes.

The climate is continental, and snow is common away from the coasts during winter. The topography is largely flat and part of the North European Plain. The major rivers are the Rhine, Meuse, IJssel, Ems and Elbe (Poulsen and East 2017). The landscape is human dominated, with urban centres surrounded by agricultural land. Freshly planted winter crops and harvest remains serve as dense, high energy food sources for up to 2.5 million individuals of five main species of migratory geese (Koffijberg et al. 2017, Anthony D. Fox and Abraham (2017)). The presence of wind turbines may once have made parts of the landscape unavailable for migrating geese, but this avoidance has largely disappeared as geese in general appear to have become habituated to them (Madsen and Boertmann 2008).

The population of whitefronts has stabilised at around 1.4 million from historic lows in the 1960s, following several years of conservation-enabled and crop-feeding boosted exponential growth (Anthony D Fox et al. 2010, Anthony D. Fox and Madsen (2017)). Whitefronts also make up a larger proportion of wintering *Anser* geese than they used to in most parts of the study area, and this trend has largely been at the cost of the once dominant and now decreasing Bean geese

(*A. fabalis*) (Anthony D Fox et al. 2010, J. Mooij (1982), Ballasus (2008)). While forming largely homogeneous flocks sometimes thousands strong, whitefronts are also to be seen in mixed flocks in which another species – Barnacle geese near coasts, Pink-footed geese (*A. brachyrhynchus*) in Frisia, and Greylag geese (*A. anser*) in the Rhinelands – form a significant proportion.

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## Goose observations

### Observations of marked geese

Geese have long been observed on their wintering grounds within the study area, and these observations have focused on different levels of goose organisation. At the level of the individual, this takes the form of records of individually marked geese. (Kruckenberg et al. 2008) provide references to a number of studies and expeditions in which whitefronts have been fitted with coloured plastic neckbands bearing alphanumeric codes. This has largely taken place in Russia at various summer moulting/breeding sites. This mark-resight method has been used in other species of geese as well, for example, to estimate populations of Svalbard breeding Pink-footed geese (Ganter and Madsen 2001), and the technique is well developed.

The neckbands provide a point of focus for birdwatchers observing goose flocks, and are easily reported and displayed on the purpose-built website [geese.org](http://geese.org). Observers report the neckband code of the bird, the number of associated first-winter juveniles if any, the identity of the partner if present, the nearest settlement, habitat type, and the numbers of individuals of each anserine species in the flock. The geographic coordinates of the observation are geocoded and displayed on a map from the name of the reported nearest settlement, and prior to final entry, they can be changed via a drag-and-drop map marker if found to be incorrectly located. Observers are volunteers, and most observations are made *ad hoc*. Geese in their wintering grounds appear to be accustomed to human presence, and regularly allow observers to approach within a hundred metres, a marked difference from their breeding grounds [*pers. obs.*]. Geese with numbered neckbands have been observed since the first records in 1998, with greater numbers of neckbands being deployed since 2000.

## Flock counts

Counts of goose flocks in order to monitor populations have taken place regularly in the countries and sub-national administrative regions of the study area since the 1960s (Koffijberg et al. 2017), but the effort has been consistent only since the 2000s. Observers count goose flocks at a number of sites, which may be either fixed census sites used as part of the annual waterbird census, or *ad hoc* sites where geese are observed. When flocks are too large to be counted completely in the field, observers are encouraged to divide the flock into simple fractions and to sample one or more of these subsets of the flock. Care is taken to sample the flock representatively. In the case of elliptical flocks, this involves sampling a ‘slice’ of the flock, which should ideally include the various regions (edge, periphery, centre), which are expected to have different compositions of age and dominance groups (Jeffrey M Black et al. 1992). Flock size and age-ratio are then extrapolated from the number of geese sampled.

The information noted in the flock counts is similar to that reported on [geese.org](http://geese.org) for marked individuals, but with the addition of the flock’s percentage of first winter juveniles. This age-ratio data is valuable as an indicator of breeding success, and 0.3 has been considered to be the long-term mean proportion of first winter birds in flocks (Van Impe 1996). Alongside the flock’s age ratio, a number of observers ( $n = 19$ ) also record the frequencies of families of different sizes, with families considered to be one or more first winter birds associated with one or more adults. This system of classification excludes unsuccessful pairs, ie, those with no juveniles, from the ambit of family-size frequency counts.

## Flight activity

Goose populations on the wintering grounds are seasonal, increasing after the start of autumn migration, and decreasing towards the end of the spring migration. The start of goose arrivals *en masse* in autumn, and the end of goose departures during spring bookend the stay of geese in the wintering grounds. The timing of each is fairly representative of the geese’s perception of winter. Goose flight activity is recorded by ground based observers at Trektellen [[trektellen.org](http://trektellen.org)] sites across the Netherlands. Whitefronts are more readily identified in flight than other grey geese due to the black chest stripes, as well as their distinctive

call. Observers at these sites ( $n$  spring = 84,  $n$  autumn = 180,  $n$  both = 72) count the number of whitefronts seen flying in the different cardinal directions. These data are helpful in quantifying when geese arrive and leave on the autumn and spring migrations. One drawback to these data is that they do not always differentiate between long distance migratory flights and daily flights between night roosts and foraging areas.

## Satellite telemetry

The only families for which trends in size and position could be studied with certainty were those which had been fitted with GPS position logger/transmitters during the winters of 2013 ( $n = 3$ ), 2014 ( $n = 4$ ), and 2016 ( $n = 6$ ). Position loggers in 2013 and 2014 were backpacks (e-obs GmbH, Grünwald, Germany), and in 2016 were numbered neckband loggers supplied by Theo Gerrits (made-bytheo, Netherlands). These loggers were set to record a baseline sampling interval 30 minutes, but the actual fix frequency depended on the mode in which the remotely programmable device was then operating. Data from these loggers were uploaded remotely to the animal tracking database Movebank. Movebank data were retrieved using either the functions in the move package (Kranstauber and Smolla 2016) or manually.

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## Data filtering

Table 1 provides an overview of the data and their spatial extent.

## Observations of marked geese

We obtained the data described above from the volunteers involved ( $n = 75$ ) across western and central Europe ( $n = 8764$ ). From the observations of marked geese, we removed the following types of records: those in which a goose was seen with neither juveniles nor a social partner, one of the two records in which two birds of a pair had been reported separately when seen together, and those in which the bird was less than two years old at the time of observation, since

whitefronts are not expected to breed before their second winter. We also excluded records which lay outside the spatial extent of the study area. We chose to match the temporal extents of the data we acquired so as to make comparisons possible, and filtered these data to exclude records made before 2000. 10,635 records remained, reported from 8,416 unique coordinate pairs. While the individual observations were expected to hold information on the number of flock members and habitat type, we could not easily obtain these and had to make do without.

## Flock counts

Prior to filtering the flock count data, we substituted the 6% of flock sizes which were missing with the related (and in 31% of cases, identical) number of geese sampled, or, if that value was also missing ( $n = 28$ ), as the sum of the number of adults and juveniles. In cases where the percentage of first winter birds was missing ( $n = 50$ ), it was calculated from the number of juveniles and the flock size. We then filtered the data temporally, removing the records made before autumn 2000 ( $\sim 7\%$ ). In order to facilitate downstream analyses, we checked whether each record had a complete date (year, month, day), and in cases where the day was missing ( $n = 32$ ), we assigned it to the 15th. We use ‘year’ to refer to the goose breeding year, which begins in June.

Nearly all ( $> 99\%$ ) flock counts had associated site names, with flocks recorded at 1567 sites. These were geocoded using the Google Maps Geocoding API accessed by the function `geocode` from the package `ggmap` (Kahle and Wickham 2013) using one of 123 unique look-up names associated with the site names. Exclusion of sites without geocoded coordinates, and from outside the study area left 7149 records of flocks, in 1884 of which family sizes and frequencies were also known. Family level data were then extracted from each flock to get variables for each family ( $n$  families = 51,037). Each record was assigned one of the zones, “East Frisia”, “IJsselmeer”, “Rhinelands”, and “Southwest”, based on the province in the Netherlands, or the district in Germany, in which it was made. Zones cover areas in or around the names given. The Rhinelands zone had almost as many records as the other zones combined.

## Flight activity

We filtered *Trektellen* flight activity data to exclude sites that lay close to goose night roosts so as to avoid noise in the data from daily, rather than migratory, movements. Data were further filtered to exclude flights that did not match the direction appropriate to migration in that season: south and west in spring, north and east in autumn. We then calculated the first date in each autumn (ending December) and the last date in each spring (ending July) on which the number of geese flying per hour of observation time was at or above the 90th percentile of within-breeding year season-specific activity. This excluded unusually early arrivals and stragglers. We took these dates to represent the beginning of goose arrival from the autumn migration, and the end of goose departure on the spring migration, respectively, for each breeding year. By our method, whitefronts usually began to arrive between September 26 and October 30, and the last geese likely left between March 03 and April 01. We added these dates to the individual, flock, and family level data, matching them by breeding year, and then calculated the number of days between each observation and the two extremes of goose migration.

## Satellite telemetry

Logger data were filtered to fit within the spatial extents of the study area. Data collected after March 31, the upper limit of the end of goose departures on spring migration, were excluded. A major component of the remaining data were ‘flight bursts’, high fix frequency (0.5 or 1 Hz) records triggered by takeoff as measured by on-board accelerometers. These bursts were removed, and only data with the baseline sampling interval retained. Fixes where the logger position error was estimated to be above the 90th percentile of errors were also removed. To better account for irregularities in sampling interval introduced by the logger not functioning as ideal, the remaining data were averaged over every half hour so as to obtain a regular timeseries of data.

The adult in each family with the greater number of logged positions was set to be the ‘reference’. In doing so, we hoped to obtain a longer sequence of reference-to-individual distances, which might also result in capturing more family dynamics. We then matched the records of all individuals to the reference by the timestamp. The distance between the reference and all other individuals in the



family was calculated using the Vincenty ellipsoid method for geographic coordinates (Vincenty 1975) implemented by the geosphere package in R (Hijmans 2016). These distances were used to determine the number of family members within a 250m radius of the reference, and the family size per day was obtained as the maximum number of members within that radius during a day. Due to an accretion of errors at the level of the logger and in rounding and averaging the data, the sizes of some families as calculated above fluctuated drastically over time. We then considered the family size on each day to be maximum of the family sizes on all days between that one and the final day. We did not differentiate cases in which the adult pair of the family split from other types of family size decrease, which in our data included juvenile independence, juvenile death, and logger malfunction.

Table 1: Datasets of goose observations in winter.

Data type	Records	Unique sites	Spatial extent	Temporal extent
Flock count	7,149	123	4.1 – 8.9, 51.2 – 53.4	2000 – 2016
Family frequency	1,884	65	4.8 – 7.3, 51.2 – 53.4	“
Family size	51,037	65	4.8 – 7.3, 51.2 – 53.4	“
GPS telemetry	1013/13	1013	3.9 – 7.4, 51.3 – 53.2	2013, 2014, 2016
Flight activity	6,266	118	3.4 – 7.2, 50.8 – 53.5	2000 – 2016

## Summer breeding success

The number of geese observed on the wintering grounds is a function of the breeding success of the species in the Arctic. This in turn is thought to be linked to the abundance of Arctic rodents, primarily lemmings (*Lemmus spp.* and *Dicrostonyx spp.*). This shows a cyclical pattern with a 3 – 4 year period, with a ‘lemming peak’ year followed immediately by a ‘crash’ year, with abundance rising until the next peak. The factors underlying that are thought to be largely intrinsic, but may also be related to the form of precipitation and its effect on the availability of vegetation to lemmings (Hansen et al. 2013).

Summers and Underhill (1987) hypothesised that goose breeding success is high

in ‘lemming peak’ years, since Arctic predators switch from their preferred lemming prey to goose eggs and young when lemmings are scarce. Dhondt (1987) amended this alternate prey hypothesis (AHP) to reflect that predator populations are linked to, but also lag behind, lemming abundance. Goose breeding success is thus predicted to be lowest in the years immediately following lemming peaks, when a dearth of lemmings and a surfeit of predators combine to produce predation pressure on goose young that’s higher than the mean. This logic has been found to explain winter estimates of breeding success of both geese and waders wintering in Scandinavia (Blomqvist et al. 2002), and of Dark-bellied Brent geese (*Branta b. bernicla*) wintering along the North Sea coast (Nolet et al. 2013).

Within this context, we sought to calculate an index for the summer predation pressure on our population, following the method presented earlier in Blomqvist et al. (2002), Nolet et al. (2013), and Koffijberg (2010). The breeding grounds of our population lie above the Arctic Circle (66.5°N), and between the Kanin Peninsula (45°E) and the River Yenisei (85°E) (Madsen and Cracknell 1999) in the Nenets and Yamal regions of Russia. Around 30% of the North Sea population of whitefronts spends the summer on the Barents Sea island of Kolguyev, which is thought to represent the core breeding area of the Palearctic population of the species (Kruckenberg et al. 2008). We could not assess rodent abundance for this area from the literature, which focuses largely on lemming abundance from the Taimyr Peninsula (98°E) (Y. Kokorev and Kuksov 2002, used in Blomqvist et al. (2002), and in Nolet et al. (2013)). While it is suggested that lemming cycles in some regions of Scandinavia (Angerbjörn, Tannerfeldt, and Lundberg 2001), and in the high Arctic of Svalbard (Hansen et al. 2013) may be synchronised, we did not expect lemming cycles in the Nenets and Yamal regions to be synchronised with those of Taimyr. Further, Kruckenberg et al. (2008) report that while most breeding whitefronts remain on Kolguyev, birds seen on Taimyr are mostly failed breeders that arrive there from the Nenets area. We decided not to use lemming data from Taimyr to calculate the predation index.

We obtained rodent abundance indices for the relevant region from the website *Arctic Birds* [www.arcticbirds.net], an initiative of the International Breeding Conditions Survey on Arctic Birds. Nolet et al. (2013) previously used the same approach to fill in gaps in the dataset they used. Sites on *Arctic Birds* are marked on a map and binned into four classes: “Unclear”, “Low or absent”, “Average”, and “High”. The same sites are not present in each year. We graded these sites

on a 0 – 3 scale, with 0 for “Unclear, and 3 for”High“. The distinction between sites graded 0 and 1 was itself unclear. Both 0 and 1 were used in different years to mark the island of Kolguyev, which is well known to have no lemming cycle. We took 0 to indicate a near or full absence of lemmings rather than an unsurveyed site, and also included an entry of 0 for Kolguyev in each year. Breeding birds form the major prey base for the island’s predators, as well as the majority of geese on the island (Kondratyev and Zaynagutdinova 2008, Kruckenberg et al. (2008)), lending inclusion of the predation index for Kolguyev quite some value.

We averaged the lemming index across the sites in each year, and then for each year  $t$ , we calculated a predation index ( $P_t$ ).

$$P_t = \frac{L_{t-1} - L_t + 3}{2} \quad (1)$$


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