

Leg 'flags': temporary colour rings

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During recent feeding studies on Dunlins *Calidris alpina* on the Tees estuary, north-east England, polyvinyl chloride (PVC) tape was attached as a leg flag around the metal ring, to enable us to identify adults and juveniles in the field.

The tape is available in several colours from any hardware shop. It was cut into strips the width of the ring and applied as shown in figure 1. Flags were easily visible in the field even when the birds were feeding in very soft substrate and did not appear to hinder feeding. On average the flags lasted about eight weeks but we know from retraps that some were lost in a shorter time. However, one individual was observed

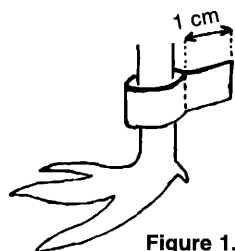


Figure 1.

with its flag as long as 12 weeks after marking.

We have found this to be a very useful and successful method of colour marking birds. It appears to be an ideal technique for short term studies where the use of more permanent markings is both undesirable and unnecessary. It must be stressed, however, that in common with other colour-marking methods, this technique should not be used indiscriminately or results of all projects may be jeopardised. Prospective users should contact the [WSG Colour-mark Register] and their national ringing schemes before embarking on a project using this method.

Although, as noted above, the main purpose of this marking at Teesmouth concerns the detailed studies there, we would, of course, welcome any sightings of these birds elsewhere. The method has been used, to date, on Dunlins and Knots *Calidris canutus*.

Permanent leg flags

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As part of current studies of Dunlin *Calidris alpina* on the Somerset and Avon coast, England, 150 birds have been marked using leg flags placed above the 'knee'. The flags, made from 'Darvic' PVC sheet 0.75 mm thick – 0.5 mm would probably be better for Dunlin – are 1 cm high and project 1 cm from the leg. They are made by folding a strip of 'Darvic' around a metal bar in boiling water and pinching the two flaps together with pliers. When cold the two flaps spring together. In use the flag is opened just enough to get it round the bird's leg and the two flaps glued together.

Flags made this way have the advantage over conventional colour-rings, that they can be seen at 600 m, even in poor light. I have not marked birds with different codes for each individual. However, it would probably be possible to use two smaller flags without significantly reducing visibility. The flags have a very long life and, therefore, should not

be used if a conventional colour-ring or temporary flag would be adequate. Temporary flags have been used with success on the Tees Estuary (Goodyer *et al.* 1979).

Reference

Goodyer, L.R., Symonds, F. & Evans, P.R. 1979. Leg 'flags': temporary colour rings. *Wader Study Group Bull.* 25: 12.

NOTE: Because widespread use of permanent leg-flags would greatly reduce the potential usefulness and applicability of temporary leg-flags, we strongly discourage the use of permanent flags, especially if conventional colour-rings or temporary leg-flags would be adequate for any intended study. – The Editors.

