COLOUR FLAGS

Dunlin Calidris alpina

Somerset & Avon (N.A.Clark, Department of Zoology, University of Edinburgh, West Mains Road, Edinburgh). The use of these more permanent leg flags is described elsewhere in this issue. Because widespread use of this method would reduce the great potential usefulness of the temporary flags described in the last issue, we strongly discourage the use of permanent flags, especially if conventional colour-rings or temporary leg-flags would be adequate for any intended study.

SPRING PASSAGE OF DUNLINS, SANDERLINGS, RINGED PLOVERS AND TURNSTONE THROUGH BRITAIN - PROGRESS REPORT.

by P.N. Ferns

Coverage for this Wader Study Group Project looks like being first class (Fig 1). Over 40 sites should be involved, some for catching, some for counting, and in many cases both. A complete list of participants has already been sent to contributors and will appear in a future edition of the Wader Study Group Bulletin. Not everyone on the list will necessarily be able to conduct large numbers of ounts, but I hope something will be done at most sites. In addition, there are a few areas which were included in the survey too late to be shown in Fig. 1. Number 43 refers to counts which are being conducted at a number of coastal sites in the Republic of Ireland - organised by Patrick J. Smiddy through the Irish Wildbird Conservancy's Wetlands Enquiry.

The spring passage seems to have been a little later than normal this year, though numbers have been quite high. For example, a record count of 850 Ringed Plovers Charadrius hiaticula was made at our site in the Severn Estuary (no. 24 in Fig.1.) on 13 May, which is a little later than usual. Sanderling Calidris alba numbers at this site were distinctly higher than in previous years, with 100 present during early May, even though this area does not provide ideal feeding conditions for this species. The passage of Whimbrel Numenius phaeopus (not included in the WSG project) was also delayed, with a peak of 247 on 13 May, whereas the average peak date between 1973 and 1978 was 3 May (Ferns, Green & Round, in press).

Some observers have had difficulty in detecting migration departures, and while this may simply be that few birds were leaving in early May, it is also possible that departing flocks may be difficult to spot on north facing shores if they leave well before high tide and head straight out to sea. We had a particularly good day for departures on 12 May in the Severn (Table 1). This was the first fine day following a period of heavy rain and strong winds. It appears that birds had been awaiting fine weather before leaving since we recorded more departures than on any previous day of observations for a number of years. 12 May was also notable for the first mass arrival of Swifts Apus apus in South Wales. High tide occurred at 2040 and the wind was WSW force 4.

The first departures on 12 May took place three hours before high tide, but the majority took place between 20 minutes and two hours before high water. None at all occurred after high water (birds can usually be heard leaving after dark, though of course it is very difficult to estimate numbers). A total of 801 Dunlin Calidris alpina and 80 Ringed Plovers thus migrated, and most left directly from the tide edge, though a few roosted for a short while first. The average corrected compass bearing was 329° which would take them approximately over Belfast towards Iceland and Greenland. There was some alteration in the direction of flight during the first few minutes in the air, but after that they appeared to settle down and climb out of sight on a steadycourse. The average bearing of 3897 Dunlin leaving Langstone Harbour in April and May during the years 1953-1972 was 332° (Steventon 1977). This is very close to the figure from the Severn, though there was a lot more variation in direction at Langstone Harbour.

Catching has unfortunately not gone as well as had been hoped. We have had a total failure on the Severn, due to a combination of bad weather and unpredictable tides - so there will be very few colour-dyed birds about. The same weather has also affected other sites and has interfered with both cannon-netting and mist-netting. Another problem for many wader catchers who have not previously tried to catch so late in the season, is the enormous numbers of people (holiday-makers) who descend on the coast in May, making many beach sites impossible to use. However, the North Solway Ringing Group with the help of flying visits from the Wash Wader Ringing Group, have had some notable successes and have obtained good samples of Dunlin, Ringed Plover and Turnstone Arenaria interpres.

Another bright spot has been Morecambe Bay, where Chris Clapham reports catches of about 75 Sanderling, 100 Turnstone, 150 Ringed Plover and 1200 Dunlin. Ringed Plover and Sanderling passage appear to be a bit later than usual in the Bay, but good numbers of Calidris alpina schinzii passed through earlier than normal.

References

Ferns,P.N., Green,G.H. & Round,P.D. 1979. Significance of the Somerset and Gwent Levels in Britain as feeding areas for migrant Whimbrels (Numenius phaeopus). Biol. Cons. (in press).

Steventon,D.J. 1977. Dunlin in Portsmouth, Langstone and Chichester Harbours. Ringing and Migration. 1: 141 - 147

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Postscript (26 May 1979): As if to prove the idea of a late spring passage incorrect (and the idea of an early schinzii passage right), about 2000 Dunlins left our site on the Severn on 23 May, leaving us with only 200 Dunlins and 200 Ringed Plovers.

Table 1. Departures of Dunlins and Ringed Plovers observed on 12 May in South Wales.

Time	Number of birds leaving in each flock		Compass bearing
	Dunlin	Ringed Plover	
1740	20	20	341
1803	41		340
1830	75		341
1835	65		339
1841	45		340
1854	145		325
1910	90	20	335
1915	25		335
1945	100	10	335
2020	150	30	335
2020	45		335

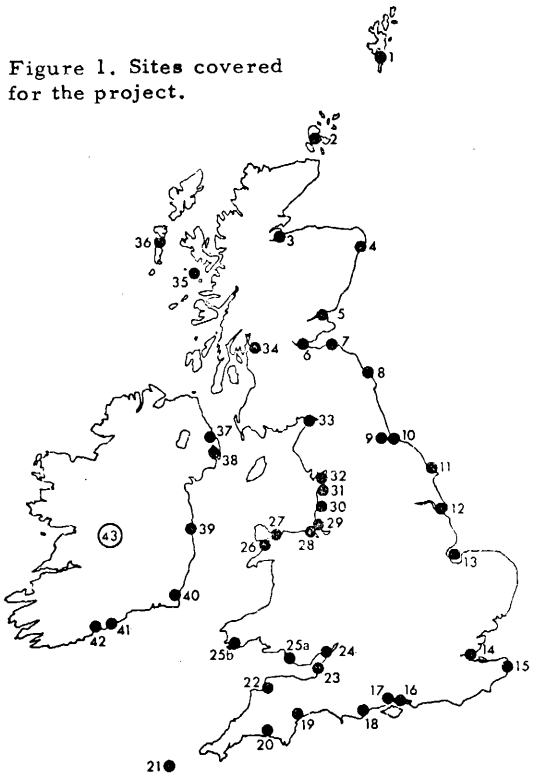

Figure 1. Sites covered for the project.

SPRING PASSAGE OF SIBERIAN KNOT - INTERIM REPORT

by William J.A. Dick

The excellent response to the notices announcing the project in the last two Bulletins was most encouraging, and at least 40 people in 15 countries have agreed to participate. The project is intended to investigate the spring migration of Knot Calidris canutus from wintering grounds in Africa on passage through Europe, by means of counting, ringing and colour-dyeing.

At the time of writing (11 June) the Knot should be reaching their arctic breeding grounds and it is too early to say how successful the project has been. Observers have been requested to return recording forms by 30 June so that the results can be analysed rapidly, for presentation at the autumn meeting at Nottingham University, and for publication. However some comments are possible already, based on field work in South Africa, France and Germany.

In South Africa the Cape Wader Group monitored the departure of Knot from their wintering grounds and also managed to catch over 200. Fifty-four were adults of an age to move north, and were dyed with picric acid. Having such good information on dates of, and weights at, departure will allow much more complete interpretation of the passage further north.

In the Vendée, Olivier Fournier and his team carried out regular counting throughout the spring at the Baie d'Aiguillon, the most important staging post in France for Knot. The comprehensive Vendée counts show a rapid passage concentrated into a few days in mid May. Flocks were seen departing on migration. Catching was carried out in two separate weeks in April and May, two teams from England visiting Olivier, and some 200 Knots were dyed with a dark blue dye on the undersides. The birds were very obvious in the field and could be seen in flocks at a distance, although we do not know how well the dye lasted. The Knot proved much more difficult to catch in 1979 than in 1978 mainly due to very adverse weather conditions. A larger sample of dyed birds would obviously have given a better chance of observations further north, but the sample was large enough to establish, from the bill lengths, that the Knot were clearly Siberian. One South African ringed bird was recaptured and one Danish.

In the Nordfriesische Wattenmeer in Germany a research team from Kiel University have been carrying out an intensive research programme at the Nordstrander Bucht, an area under immediate threat of reclamation. Regular counting of certain fixed areas has been carried out throughout the spring, and three aerial surveys of the entire Wattenmeer undertaken. In addition to studies on Brent Branta bernicla and Barnacle Geese B.leucopsis, nearly 900 waders were caught between March and May, including 115 Knot. It is already clear that both Greenland and Siberian populations use the Wattenmeer as a major fattening ground, and some very high weights were recorded. In one catch of 14 Knot, one Knot had been ringed in Mauritania in 1973 and one in Sweden!

It is probable that the project may pose more questions about the migration system than it answers. For example, do Knot from wintering areas in West and South Africa tend to use particular sites on the European coastline? How much mixing occurs between Greenland and Siberian populations? At present we know very little indeed of the complexities of the migration system but this spring's data will certainly provide many answers.

The project is also having other "spin off", for example, in providing information on other species, in increasing contacts between members of the WSG in different countries, and in providing hard data which will be used immediately to present the case for conservation of proposed reclamation areas in Germany. I would like to thank everyone who participated, and hope you enjoyed the field-work as much as we did!

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