

Unfortunately, measurements of Ringed Plovers are of relatively little value in confirming or refuting the above interpretation of the counts, since there is a considerable overlap in size between the various populations. All the catches (Table 1) were obtained in the west of Britain, which also limits their usefulness. The bill is so short in this species that errors of measurement become a significant factor, and the differences in wing length between populations (Fig. 4) are so small that tiny errors can again be critical. The catch from the Solway which contained the Greenland ringed bird had, on average, the smallest wings and bills, and this is consistent with their probable northern origin. The low percentage of juveniles in this catch is indicative of a breeding population. The low weights and the high proportion of males are consistent with them being part of the first phase of a migration of Greenland breeding birds (males generally arrive on the breeding grounds a few days in advance of females). However, the most striking feature of the Solway's catches as a whole, is the lack of consistency between the catches obtained on the 12 and 13 May (Table 1 and Fig. 4). On the earlier date, bill lengths, wing lengths and weights were all slightly larger, on average. This is shown most clearly in Fig. 4. The proportion of juveniles was also much higher on the 12. Variation in the composition of catches from the same site occurs quite commonly (see e.g. Pienkowski & Dick, 1976), and in this case suggests that the roosting Ringed Plover population at Waterfoot Annan was segregated in some way. It is not just that the earlier catch was diluted by juveniles, because the wing lengths in Fig. 4 refer only to adults. Clearly, the earlier catch included a residue of larger birds which might, for example, have included some late Icelandic migrants. The Morecambe Bay birds in Fig. 4 were intermediate in wing length between the two Solway catches. Coming from later in the passage period, they had an equal sex ratio. The highest weights were obtained in the last small catch of four adult females at Southport on 27 May (85g). These birds must clearly have been close to their departure weights.

These captured samples indicate the need for caution when interpreting the counts. While it is fair to talk about the general trends of migration which may be revealed by counts, it is important to bear in mind that in reality, the birds at any one site at any one moment of time consist of a complex mixture of individuals of different breeding status and geographical origin.

Future attempts to unravel the complexity of the spring migration of Ringed Plovers through Britain are unlikely to be successful unless counts are conducted at extremely frequent intervals, and such an intensity of effort is probably beyond the capacity of amateur observers with limited time. In any case, some evidence is needed before particular waves of migrants can be associated with specific breeding areas. The lack of reliable morphometric criteria for distinguishing the different breeding populations of this species is rather discouraging. However, there is one possibility that is worth exploring further. Icelandic breeders do have consistently shorter tarsi (Prater et al., 1977), and it is therefore recommended that tarsi should be measured in preference to bills in future catches obtained in Britain. Also efforts to trap *tundrae* in south-east England and obtain morphometric data would be of value and interest. This could be of considerable value in distinguishing Icelandic breeders from others during the spring migration period.

Acknowledgements

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LETTER TO THE EDITORS

Lack of sportsmanship in British wader-ringers

From Miss C. M. Lessells, Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology, South Parks Road, Oxford OX1 3PS, England.

Dear Mike, I am writing to express my deepest horror and concern at the unsporting behaviour of British wader ringers, revealed to me by your journal. I refer, of course, to the habit, alluded to in the latest Bulletin (Clark, pp2-3), of racing Dunlin and Oystercatcher, unless of course, sir, the Dunlin are given a suitable handicap.

Yours in disgust, Kate.

(The Editors are giving up racing - the risks of slipping are too great - Eds.)

