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## IDENTIFYING COLOUR-RINGED OYSTERCATCHERS *HAEMATOPUS OSTRALEGUS*

by Bruno Ens

Oystercatchers on the shore,  
getting banded by the score,  
Oh how happy they would be,  
were there no ecology.

(modified from Norton-Griffiths, unpublished PhD thesis,  
University of Oxford)

Correctly identifying a colour banded Oystercatcher has become a major challenge to the twentieth century ornithologists

Ring combinations must belong to the most boring of subjects to read about, so I expect that only a few of hardline waderologists will reach the end of my article. Presumably they also contributed the bulk of the oystercatcher-sightings of which, according to Mike Pienkowski, only 10% can be tracked back to the original ringing scheme. Having observed oystercatchers from three different ringing schemes I am convinced that these inaccurate observations can no longer be blamed on the carelessness of observers, but are mainly due to the great number of extant ringing programmes and methods. The combination of all these schemes has necessitated the use of very complex types of colour-bands and has led to what the well-intentioned outsider might seem like a conspiracy to prevent him from making correct identifications. Although few of these studies are primarily concerned with migratory movements, it would seem that observations from outside the ringing area could be very helpful in elucidating the amount of interchange between populations and the types of individuals involved.

The trickiest device developed so far in the ring race was invented by Chris Mead and developed by John Goss-Custard and will be called henceforth code-ring. It consists of a tall yellow plastic ring with horizontal black stripes on three positions. These stripes can be thick, thin or absent. In conjunction with the code-ring the birds ringed in the Exe estuary wear a small-sized colourband on the same part of the leg and some birds have an additional colour band on their other leg (see Fig.1). Leo Zwarts and Piet Zegers from the Netherlands also use code-rings but they are of various colours and the colour-bands are always on a different part of the leg or on a different leg altogether. Extreme care should be taken when thus-equipped birds are observed. Slightly less tricky is the multicolour-band previously used on Shokholm where three colours are stuck on one tall ring. Also, ordinary colour rings are not as ordinary as they might seem. Up to four bands can be found below the joint on one leg and a maximum of two above the joint on one leg in some ringing schemes. Although the number of colours used per scheme usually doesn't exceed six the total number used is extraordinary: white, yellow, orange, red, dark red, pale green, green, dark green, pale blue, blue, dark blue, dark brown and black. Sometimes the metal ring or the absence of a ring is considered a colour as well. A useful clue to nationality of Oystercatchers is that Dutch birds usually wear their metal ring above the joint; most others wear it below. On occasion people have used wing tags with a combination of colours and the latest fashion seems to be leg flags combined with staining. In Table 1 a summary of the ringing schemes is given as well as the total number of oystercatchers involved.

Although mudflats are almost ideally suited for reading rings, mud-splatters can cause nonexisting stripes on code-rings and seawater causes fading in some colour rings. Sometimes the yellow coating of the Goss-Custard code-rings has chipped off, leaving random black blobs on the ring. Colour rings tend to fall off or slip down. In this respect the extreme longevity of oystercatchers is not very helpful. According to Niko Tinbergen one pair ringed more than 15 years ago by Mike Norton-Griffiths still breeds every year at Ravenglass.

Table 1. Summary of colour-ringing schemes for Oystercatchers

Ringing site	year(s)	approx. number marked to date	ringing method
Arkholme, UK	1978→	50	4 colour rings on left leg below joint (bottom colour always black), metal ring on right, as well as wing tag with various colours.
Ythan, UK.	1966-1977	500	from 1 to 3 colour rings; sometimes a triple colour. Some birds carry flags and wing tags. Rings below joint.
Skokholm, UK.	1963-1975	300 (ca 100 alive)	triple colour ring on one leg below joint and one colour ring and metal on other leg below joint.
Isle of May, UK.	1973	10	2 colours on one leg, 1 colour on other. Rings below joint.
Exe estuary, UK.	1976→	466	code-ring with colour band(s) in conjunction, sometimes additional colour ring (see Fig.1).
Exe estuary, UK.	1976→	400	single tall colour-ring (stripeless code-ring)
Plym estuary, UK.	?	40	single tall colour-ring
Camel estuary, UK	?	40	single tall colour-ring
Friesland, Neth.	1975-1978	750	from 1 to 5 colour rings; with a maximum on one leg of 2 below joint and 1 above (see Fig.1).
Friesland, Neth.	1977→	2000	code-ring and colour rings (the latter not on the same part of the same leg as the code-ring).
Ebro Delta, Spain	1979→	30	White ring above joint and metal below joint on right; blue, white or mauve ring plus in some cases a white ring on left above joint.
Viksfjord, Norway	1976-1978	178	2 colour rings + metal, all below joint; 2 on 1 leg, 1 on other.
Rogaland, Norway	?	105	up to three rings on each leg; all below joint
Tautra, Norway	?	50	no details available at the moment
Oland, Sweden	1978→	?	colour rings; no details available at the moment
Gironde, France	1979-1980	50	single red ring on left leg or single blue ring on either left or right.
Banc d'Arguin, Mauritania	1976	?	single orange ring.
Sites in NW Europe	1980→	500	temporary leg flag wrapped around metal ring (above or below joint) in combination with plumage dye.

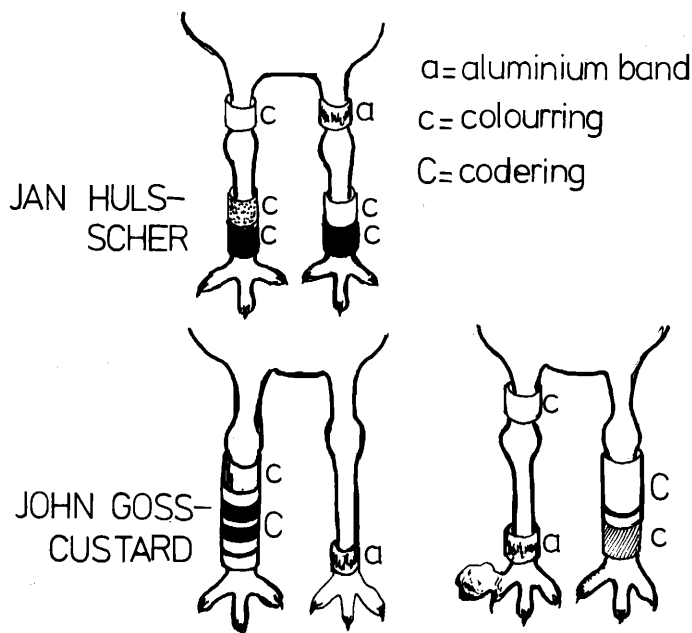


Figure 1. Types of colour-ring combinations used by Jan Hulscher and John Goss-Custard. Note that foot deformities, often caused by sheep's wool, are particularly common in some Oystercatcher populations.

At this stage it should be clear that if an identification by an experienced observer is to stand any chance of being correct he should notice as many details as possible:-

- position (above or below the joint; right leg or left leg) and type of all coloured rings.
- position of the metal band.
- in case of code rings: colour, thickness and position of stripes.

A description of age, and size of the white collar-band, can be a further check on the correctness of the observation. Finally I would guess that any information on food items taken, or social behaviour, will always be welcome.

This article was born when John Goss-Custard complained about other people's oystercatchers being mistaken for his. It would never have been written though, if it were not for my genuine concern that good opportunities to gather valuable information (thousands of colour-banded oystercatchers combined with an even greater number of enthusiastic birdwatchers) were being missed, because of the disastrous complexity of ringing schemes. Mike Pienkowski provided me with information on ringing schemes with which I was not familiar.

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