PARTIAL PRIMARY MOULT IN FIRST-SPRING/SUMMER COMMON SANDPIPERS *ACTITIS HYPOLEUCOS*

by M. Nicoll and P. Kemp

This note is intended to draw the attention of wader catchers to the need for careful examination of the primaries of Common Sandpipers Actitis hypoleucos, and other waders, for partial primary wing moult. This is thought to be a diagnostic feature of waders in their first spring and summer (Tree 1974).

While members of the Tay Ringing Group were mist-netting in Angus, Scotland, during early May 1980, a Common Sandpiper died accidentally. This bird was examined and measured, noted as an adult, and then stored frozen until it was skinned, 'sexed', and the gut contents removed for analysis. Only during skinning did we notice that the outer primaries were fresh and unworn in comparison to the faded and abraded inner primaries. The moult on both wings was uniform, with the five outer primaries having been replaced, i.e. a moult score of $0^{5}5^{5}$ (Figure 1). In addition, the tenth secondary and first tertial had been replaced. The contrast between the old and new feathers in the primaries was easy to see, but was less obvious in the secondaries and especially the tertials, as occurs also with Semipalmated Sandpipers Calidris pusilla that have partial moult (Gratto and Morrison 1981).

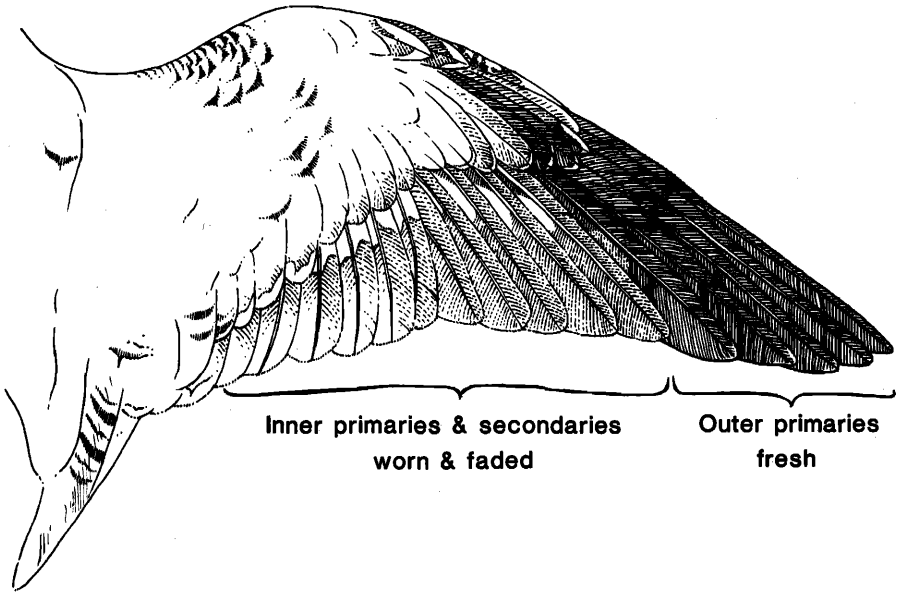

Figure 1. The wing of a Common Sandpiper, showing partial primary moult ($0^{5}5^{5}$).

Prater, Marchant and Vuorinen (1977) state that in first-winter Common Sandpipers in the tropics and southern hemisphere "a small percentage moult outer primaries only". However, after examining the original sources, we feel that Prater et al. have greatly under-estimated the occurrence of partial moult in first-year birds. In Kenya, first-winter birds renew most of their flight feathers between January and March. The moult usually proceeds outwards from the fourth or fifth primary, and the old inner feathers are often retained (Pearson 1974). Similarly, in Zimbabwe, first-year Common Sandpipers replace the outer five to seven primaries between December and April (Tree 1974). It thus seems normal for first-spring/summer Common Sandpipers wintering in east and southern Africa to show a contrast between new outer and old inner primaries. There is no information for birds wintering further north. However, there may be differences in moult strategy between wintering areas, since 3 of 23 juvenile Common Sandpipers caught during autumn in Morocco had well-advanced primary moult (Pienkowski et al. 1976). These birds were moulting normally, and so may have completed a full primary moult during their first winter (M.W.Pienkowski pers. comm.).

Do first-summer Common Sandpipers regularly return to the breeding grounds? Holland et al. (1982) recorded four birds, ringed as chicks, which bred successfully during their first summer. Delayed recruitment in this population was considered unlikely. The bird from Angus (Figure 1) was a male, and its testis size suggested that it was capable of breeding. During the 1982 breeding season, 3(19%) of 16 Common Sandpipers that we caught in Glen Lethnot, Angus, showed partial primary moult, their moult patterns being $0^{4}5^{6}$, $0^{5}0^{5}$, and $0^{6}5^{4}$. So some Common Sandpipers do return to breed in their first summer, and at least some have partial primary moult.

We can find no other reports of Common Sandpipers showing partial primary moult on the breeding grounds, or on spring or autumn passage. However, it seems probable that it is a feature that is being missed by ringers. For example, Brown (1973) mentioned no examples of partial primary moult amongst about 200 adult Common Sandpipers mainly from Britain that had been examined for moult. Also, the bird we examined would have been released as an adult, if it had not died. We feel that with more vigilance, ringers will find partial primary moult to be common in first-year Common Sandpipers on the breeding grounds. Indeed, partial primary moult may be widespread amongst first-year waders, since it has been found also in Curlew Sandpipers Calidris ferruginea, Ruffs Philomachus pugnax, Marsh Sandpipers Tringa stagnatilis, Greenshanks Tringa nebularia and Wood Sandpipers Tringa glareola wintering in Zimbabwe (Tree 1974). In Hardangervidda, Norway, in June 1982, members of the Joint Tay/Grampian Expedition nest-trapped a female Ruff showing partial primary moult ($0^{7}5^{3}$), and a Dotterel Charadrius morinellus with a primary moult pattern of $0^{7}5^{2}0^{1}$ on both wings. All the old feathers on this latter bird appeared the same age.

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IWRB MEETING ON WEST AFRICAN WETLANDS

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From 8 to 15 December 1982 about 40 scientists, nature-conservationists and governmental representatives, came together in Nouadhibou, Mauritania for the 'Second technical regional meeting on West African Wetlands'. The meeting was held under the patronage of the International Waterfowl Research Bureau (IWRB) and local organisation was by the staff of the 'Parc National du Banc d'Arguin'. This conference was a follow up of a successful first meeting, held at St. Louis in Senegal in January 1980. Although (or perhaps, because) the meeting had a heavy political character, it was nevertheless an extremely interesting one from a 'wader point of view', not at least because of the four-day excursion, during the conference, to that ultimate wader resort, the Banc d'Arguin. As a Contributor Organization of IWRB, the Wader Study Group was represented alongside other international orgaisations, like the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), and ten countries (Algeria, France, Guinée-Bissau, Mali, Morocco, Mauritania, Niger, Netherlands, Senegal and Tunisia).

During six discussion sessions, which were energetically and cunningly chaired by IWRB's Assistant Director (Conservation), Michael Smart , scores of subjects passed in review. Reports from countries as diverse as coastal Guinée-Bissau and inland Niger recalled the urgent need for more information on their wetlands, most of which will have to be provided by visiting foreign experts. The training of qualified personnel for the establishment and management of reserves is one of the big problems in the West African countries. The meeting appealed therefore to future (biological) expeditions to associate with local workers, so that this will be part of their education. Occasionally we were reminded how important it is to publish at least part of expedition results in the French language, in order to reach this mainly French-speaking part of the world. We heard about forthcoming research work in the region, of which the WWF/IUCN project on wintering Black-tailed Godwits Limosa limosa is one concerned with waders. National and international bodies were encouraged to provide the funds for future studies. For instance, further studies on the migration and ecology of the waders on the Banc d'Arguin and in the Bijagos Archipel in Guinée-Bissau and on the waders in the Sfax region in Tunisia, were strongly recommended by the meeting.

Expedition feelings were revived during our 4-day trip to the Banc d'Arguin. This immense area is very remote, accessible from Nouadhibou by Land Rover, boat or light aircraft. A small plane transported three participants from Nouadhibou in one hour. Two parties in Land Rovers arrived after a 7-hour, bone-shaking, dust-enveloped journey. Three fishing boats took the rest (including those of us who have spent more than enough time bouncing around the Sahara in Land Rovers). After 12 hours at sea we had found ways of wedging ourselves into odd corners of the craft to prevent being thrown overboard, and had become accustomed (or resigned) to the salt-spray, sun-burn, wind, and rather basic toilet facilities - but we had been delighted by sights of dolphins, Royal and Caspian Terns, etc. However, traditions of IWRB- and WSG-sponsored meetings have to be upheld (see WSG Bull. 32:10): when night fell very quickly while we were some kilometres from Iouik, all three boats ran aground, at one time or another, on the mud banks exposed by the falling tide. The manoeuvres of the crew to free the boats; turning, shunting, backwards, forwards in the dark, completely disorientated us, and while we (and the crew) were convinced that we would never reach Iouik that night, suddenly there were lights of Land Rovers, and we had arrived.

Housing about sixty people in the two buildings that form the scientific station of the Parc National du Banc d'Arguin at Iouik was clearly an historical event. How the staff from the hotel in Nouadhibou managed to provide food for us all, with no water other than which we had brought with us, and in the tiniest of kitchens, must surely be classed as a minor miracle. For those of us normally north-temperate inhabitants who elected to sleep under the stars, the "lying on its side" moon, strange constellations and magnificent sunrises were all part of the adventure. The two days we spent in boats touring the islands at the north end of the Banc were unforgettable, and left us with the impression that we had only seen the tip of the ice-berg, to use a very inappropriate comparison. Attending the discussions on West African wetland conservation by tired people with saltbitten and sunburned faces in such a setting, with flickering lighting as the generators at the station faltered, was a memorable experience as well.

The Banc is a sensitive area of great importance to breeding birds of many species including Spoonbills, Pelicans, cormorants and terns as well as to wintering waders, and is protected largely by its remoteness. The government of Mauritania is to be congratulated on the designation of the area as a national park, assisted by the WWF and the IUCN, and should be given every encouragement to maintain protection of the area, to develop a wardening service, and to foster research relevant to conservation. The meeting produced, apart from many very useful contacts, a short work-report and a thorough set of recommendations, which will be published in the IWRB Bulletin, as well as being sent to the appropriate governments and organisations. It is to be hoped that they will have the impact they merit.

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