Western Sandpiper Research Group News

The Western Sandpiper Group (WSG, not to be confused with the Wader Study Group, WSG) is a loosely affiliated network of researchers studying diverse aspects of Western Sandpipers *Calidris mauri* throughout their annual cycle and geographic range. The CWS/NSERC Wildlife Ecology Chair at Simon Fraser University organised the group's third annual workshop at the Victoria Conference Centre on 8 November 1995, just preceding the joint Colonial Waterbirds/Pacific Seabirds Group meeting at the centre. In addition to the core group from Vancouver, participants included enthusiasts from Peru, Mexico, California, Oregon, Nevada, Washington; eastern Canadian "foreigners" such as Guy Morrison and Raymond McNeil; and Bruno Ens, the obligatory Dutch representative.

The group covered issues in breeding, migration, and non-breeding season biology. After Rob Butler tried to kick-start the meeting by raising heretical notions in migration issues, the meeting ran itself smoothly with minimal structure and intervention from the organisers. There was a general feeling that the group was maturing into something more coherent, relative to the more 'show and tell' feeling at the workshops held the previous two years.

The topics were diverse, but the participants drew relationships among them. Christine Hitchcock presented a general demographic analysis using standard matric techniques, using data on Semipalmated Sandpipers *Calidris pusilla* for which more of the breeding season demography is known. Brett Sandercock's continuing study on the breeding grounds near Nome, Alaska, will permit a parallel analysis on Western Sandpipers in a few years. Chris is also taking the initiative to compile and analyse information on non-breeding season sex and age ratios of Western Sandpipers. Anyone having or knowing of relevant data sets is encourage to get in touch with her at CWS, 5421 Robertson Road, RR1, Delta, British Columbia V4K 3N2, Canada, or via email, at hitchcoc@sfu.ca.

Rob Butler promoted the concept of thinking of Western Sandpipers as wind-limited migrants, especially in spring. Rob's suggestion is that these waders are opportunists that carry sufficient fat reserves to move whenever winds are favourable. Active collaborative radio-tacking studies of spring migrants by Nils Warnock, Mary Ann Bishop and collaborators are providing data which may be used to test this paradigm.

Eric Taylor, from Environment Canada, demonstrated a computer program which retrospectively plots the course a floating object released in the atmosphere at various heights would have travelled. This provides a powerful tool for quantifying the environmental variability faced by migrants.

Tony Williams described the physiological studies with both captive birds and those collected throughout the annual cycle. These include the annual cycle of body composition and organ allocation, and exploring the potential for stimulating migratory physiology in the laboratory by measuring maximal rates of fat deposition and 'migratory' stress by fasting birds. A welcome addition to the meeting were reports from two Mexican graduate students on body composition and use of space during the non-breeding season in northern Baja California.

Bruno Ens argued that the greatest weakness for comprehensive studies of Western Sandpipers was in quantifying diet, and that the greatest strengths of the group were its geographical spread, intellectual diversity, and that it is focusing on a species that is stupid and easy to catch.

Colin Clark closed the meeting with cautionary tales about the utility of research with respect to conservation issues in the absence of information on the behavioural flexibility and, indeed, the evolutionary adaptability, of the species.

Anyone interested in further contact with the group would contact Dov Lank, Department of Biology, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, V5A 1S6, Canada; or Rob Butler, Canadian Wildlife Service, 5421 Robertson Road, RR1, Delta, British Columbia V4K 3N2, Canada.

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