

Waders diving and swimming underwater as a means of escape: editorial note

Clive Minton's note on this subject in the December 2001 issue of the *Bulletin* (96: 86) stimulated several people either to provide details of their own observations or to draw attention to similar behaviour recorded in the literature.

Apart from the short communications by Tom Dougall and Derek Yalden below, the following have also written:

Dik Heg (Behavioural Ecology, Zoology Department, University of Bern, Wohlenstrasse 50a, CH-3032 Hinterkappelen, Switzerland; e-mail: dik.heg@esh.unibe.ch) reported observations that Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* chicks will resort to underwater swimming when under severe threat. On three occasions during his PhD project from 1990–1998 (see *Wader Study Group Bull.* 96: 34–36), when he was trying to catch oystercatcher chicks on the mudflats of Schiermonnikoog, The Netherlands, the chicks tried to escape by plunging into flooded channels and swimming with their wings underwater for several metres. In each case, the chicks were 25–35 days old (i.e. 1–5 days before they would be able to fly properly). No young chicks were recorded behaving in this way, probably because their down made them too buoyant. They would swim on the surface; older young would fly.

Gerard Beyersbergen (Canadian Wildlife Service, Rm 200, 4999 – 98 Avenue Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6B 2X3; e-mail: gerard.beyersbergen@ec.gc.ca) reported an instance on 13 August 1997 when a lone full-grown Solitary Sandpiper *Tringa solitaria* dived when approached by an airboat. This occurred during operations to collect birds that were dead or dying as a result of a botulism outbreak at Pakowki Lake, southeast Alberta, Canada. It is likely that the bird was sick because it did not fly away as other waders had done on the same occasion. It swam about 15 cm below the surface, propelled by its partly closed wings. After about two metres, it surfaced, dived again and repeated the procedure three times. Eventually it stepped out of the water onto a mat of floating vegetation. Possibly the bird's health prevented it from swimming further under water, but it nevertheless travelled a fair distance altogether.

Joe Strauch (44 Taconic Ave, Lenox, MA 01240-2351, USA, e-mail: strauch@vgernet.net) and **Tex Sordahl** (Dept. of Biology, Luther College, 700 College Drive, Decorah, Iowa 52101-1045, USA, e-mail: sordahl@luther.edu) drew attention to the following literature which include references to underwater swimming by Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularia*, Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*, American Avocet *Recurvirostra americana* and Black-necked Stilt *Himantopus himantopus mexicanus*.

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Martin, L.M. & T.Z. Atkeson. 1958. Escape diving by a Spotted Sandpiper. *Wilson Bull.* 70:281.

Meinertzhagen, R. 1959. *Pirates and predators*. pp. 95 & 125, Oliver & Boyd, London.

Miller, L. 1918. A surprising trait in the Black-necked Stilt. *Condor* 20: 126.

Murie, A. 1934. Spotted Sandpiper eludes Eastern Kingbird by diving. *Auk* 51: 231.

Nethersole-Thompson, D. & M. 1979. *Greenshanks*. p. 182, Poyser, Berkhamsted.

Osgood, W.H. 1909. Biological investigations in Alaska and Yukon Territory. *North Am. Fauna* 30: 1–96 (p. 36).

Pettingill, O.S. Jr. 1976. Observed acts of predation on birds in northern lower Michigan. *Living Bird* 15: 33–41 (p. 39).

Sordahl, T.A. 1982. Antipredator behavior of American Avocet and Black-necked Stilt chicks. *J. Field Orn.* 53(4): 315–325.

Stone, W. 1925. Diving of the Spotted Sandpiper. *Auk* 42: 581.

Sumner, F.L. Jr. 1931. Some observations on bird behaviour. *Condor* 33: 80–101.

Sutton, G.M. 1925. Swimming and diving activity of the Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularia*). *Auk* 42: 580–581.

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Common Sandpipers also dive to escape danger: in Scotland

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In response to Clive Minton's interesting note on the above subject (Minton 2001), I can confirm that chicks of the Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* regularly take to water as a means of escape when threatened, possibly because the species is closely tied to riparian habitats, at least during the breeding season.

My experiences of this escape behaviour suggest that it occurs principally when a chick (and it is usually a well-grown one) is taken by surprise, for example by a ringer suddenly appearing from behind a bush or embankment! Normally, predator escape would be by concealment, rely-

ing on cover or crypsis. I have observed chicks from half-grown to almost-fledged jump into streams and swim underwater for distances up to 20–25 m. My impression, from waiting downstream to retrieve chicks, is that older ones seem to use their wings as a means of propulsion underwater. Chicks underwater invariably head downstream, but I do not know if this is done out of choice, or as a consequence of the force of the water. Surprisingly, when birds are lifted out of the water, they appear to feel quite dry!

I have details of only one instance of an adult Common Sandpiper swimming underwater: on 6 July 1994, while I

