WSG PROJECT ON MOVEMENTS OF WADER POPULATIONS IN WESTERN EUROPE: FIRST PROGRESS REPORT

by M.W. & Ann Pienkowski

The project has made rapid progress since its start in the spring of this year, and we are grateful to everyone who has helped in planning and organising the project, catching and marking birds, filling in forms, providing data, making observations and innumerable other ways. All of these people should already have received a fuller version of this report: if you have not please let us know. The project comprises many inter-related aspects and it is easiest to treat these separately.

Computerization of ringing information

At the time of writing about 30 ringers of groups (Fig.1) have indicated that they will use the new green WSG data forms, in most cases both for all future ringing and to rewrite all previous information. Some groups, notably those already using computer storage, have contacted us to arrange to make their information available in another easily usable way. Some have already completed the coding for the first three species we asked for: Sanderling Calidris alba, Knot C.canutus and Ringed Plover Charadrius hiaticula. Other groups, of course, have very large quantities of information and so will need more time. Several ringers have asked which are the next species for which we will request data. These will be Grey Plover Pluvialis squatarola, Bar-tailed Godwit Limosa lapponica and Dunlin Calidris alpina.

As can be seen from Fig.1, we already have a good geographical spread of co-operating ringers but we are keen that as many as possible will eventually take part. A request form for coding sheets and instructions (for both of which there is no charge!) are enclosed with this issue of the Bulletin.

Preparations earlier this year for the dye and flag-marking programme (see below) delayed work on the computer program which is intended to read, check and store the ringing information. However, this is now working satisfactorily and by the time those ringers already taking part in the scheme read this they will probably have received some of its initial output, listing their data and possibly some queries.

Ringing recoveries

Contacts have been made with Euring (the European Union for Bird Ringing), the British Trust for Ornithology and other national schemes about the use of their ringing recoveries in this project. The work is benefiting from the current transfer to computer file of some of Euring's records (another project partly funded by the EEC Environmental Programme). Because of the common interests of this programme, waders are among the species being dealt with first so as to be available for the present study.

Marking

In this first season of the study at least, we are very limited by the range of plumage dyes which are available. Indeed, we are currently testing many dyes in the hope that some suitable ones will be found in time for next season.

This season we decided to mark waders in two very important moulting areas, The Wash and the Waddenzee/Wattenmeer, from which we expected a great deal of movement to other sites after the moulting period, and possibly also later in the winter. In this way we hoped to investigate the extent of such movements; where the birds went and when. Additionally, Sanderling are being marked at the Tees estuary in NE England where previous study and geographical considerations led to a hope of further useful information on their movements. Three other studies of waders are also using dye-marking, mainly to look at movements within estuaries, but their results are also, of course, relevant to the present study and we are keeping in close contact. These studies concern a range of species on the Firth of Forth, Scotland (Fraser Symonds, Nature Conservancy Council & Edinburgh Ringing Group), Dunlin on the south side of the Severn Estuary, England (Nigel Clark, Edinburgh University), and Redshank Tringa totanus in the Clyde Estuary, Scotland (Bob Furness & Hector Galbraith, Glasgow University & Clyde Ringing Group).

An excellent start has been made to the marking. About 3500 waders were marked by the Wash Wader Ringing Group in August and September and catching attempts at the Wash will continue. Several ringers and groups working on the North Sea coasts of Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands are taking part in this work and we were fortunate to be able to visit them in August. The first cannon-netting attempts to catch waders in the Danish Vadehavet were unfortunately not successful, but the area has great promise for this work when Karsten Laursen and his colleagues at the Game Biology Station start work with their own equipment, possibly next year. To the south, in Schleswig-Holstein, Beringergemeinschaft Nordfriesisches Wattenmeer had a very successful few days of cannon-netting in August, marking 436 waders, but gale-force winds and very high tides prevented a much-hoped-for catch of Knot in the second half of the week. In the Netherlands, marking is being undertaken mainly of mist-netted birds but also on a few occasions by the remarkable 'Wilster-nets'. Several groups are taking part: Dr. Ebel Nieboer and team from the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam at Schiermonnikoog, Steltloperringgroep FFF and Piet Zegers on the coast of Friesland Province and Rob Schuckard & Ton Pieters at Balgzand near Den Helder. Approximately 350 birds had been ringed by the end of August.

Observer network

Apart from articles in the August issue of WSG Bulletin, we have invited the co-operation of observers by means of letters or circulars to previous WSG project helpers, contacts in various countries, county recorders in the UK, participants in the Birds of Estuaries Enquiry (courtesy of the British Trust for Ornithology), and many others. Notices have also been placed in several journals and newsletters and more will appear shortly. Further participation has been encouraged by informal talks during our attendances at conferences and by a broadcast on BBC Radio 4 by Peter Evans.

Further offers of help are coming in steadily; those received by mid-October are shown in Fig.2. There are at least 100 sites covered in UK (in some cases it is rather arbitary whether a location is one site or several, and some single sites, especially on mainland Europe, are very extensive), 8 in the Republic of Ireland, 2 in Finland, 1 in Sweden, 1 in Denmark, 7 in Germany, 7 in the Netherlands, 9 in France and 5 in Spain. (Several other sites may have been registered with organisers within some of these countries recently and not yet passed on to us.) We now have available (or will shortly have) instructions and forms for observers in English, German, French, Spanish, and possibly Dutch, and we thank those who have prepared the translations.

Some gaps in coverage are apparent in Figure 2. Notable ones are some of the major estuaries in Britain: more coverage of the Wash itself would be very welcome, as would more observations from Morecambe Bay, Ribble, Mersey, Dee, Solway Firth and SW Scotland around to the Clyde and NE Scotland from Tay to Moray. Further coverage of some of the coasts of continental Europe and Ireland would also be particularly welcome. However, potential observers should not be deterred from registering in areas where there appear to be several participants already, as the more frequent the coverage and the more birds checked for marks the better. A form on which to register an interest is included with this issue.

Figure 1. Ringers and groups providing data.

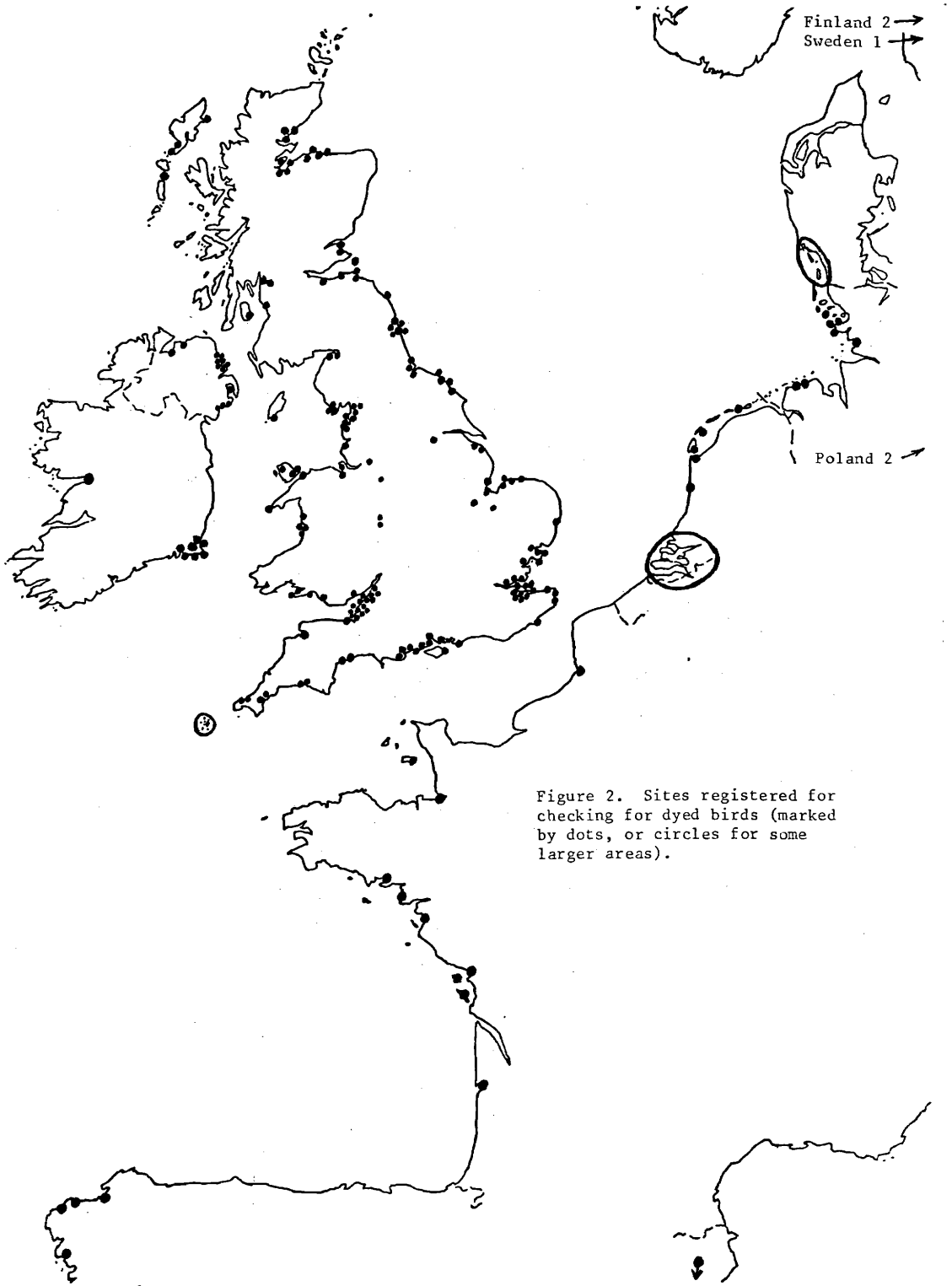

Figure 2. Sites registered for checking for dyed birds (marked by dots, or circles for some larger areas).

First results

The first results of the marking programme are already coming in. Until mid-September there were numerous sightings of birds remaining near the marking sites, but few movements: most of the latter being within the Wash or to the nearby Humber estuary. Two juvenile Oystercatchers moved from the S side of the Wash at Terrington on 26 August to the NE corner at Titchwell on 25 September. There were also sightings of a dyed Oystercatcher in Sandwich and Pegwell Bays, Kent in early September but at present we do not know if it was a Wash- or a Waddenzee-marked bird. A juvenile Redshank moved from the Wash on 2 August to Bardsey Island, N.Wales on 11 August and an adult Turnstone from Heacham at the Wash on 3 August to Whitley Bay, Tyne & Wear on 23 August (Fig.3).

In the last few days, the pattern of reports has changed markedly with (in addition to the sort of sightings described above) marked Dunlins arriving at several sites, probably as their moulting period ends (Fig.3). In the period mid-September to mid-October (the time of writing) Dunlins marked at the Wash have been seen at the Thames estuary (1), Dyfed, Wales (1), and the Severn Estuary (4). We were also particularly interested to receive 2 sightings of Dunlins, marked in August in the German Wattenmeer, at the Severn in mid-October. It is interesting to note that both Wash and Wattenmeer birds arrived there at the same time. There have also been sightings of dyed Dunlins in Dorset, and Sussex, probably from the Wash but we have not yet been able to confirm this. In some areas, the influx coincided with a normal increase in numbers but in others this did not occur, thus illustrating the value of the marking in showing up otherwise undetected turnover of the birds at a particular site. The results also stress the value of negative reports, i.e. of no dyed birds in flocks. It is because of these that we can be fairly definite about arrival dates.

Other recent reports include a juvenile Sanderling moving from the Wash in August to the Humber on 29 September and an adult to Teesmouth on 29 October and a Wash-marked adult Oystercatcher Haematopus ostralegus in Kent on 5 October and an immature at Selsey Bill, Sussex on 26 October.

The prospects for the project thus look very good. Thanks are due to an enormous number of people who are taking part in the work in the variety of ways outlined above. If you are not already one of this formidable team, why not join now?: there is a form with this issue of the Bulletin.

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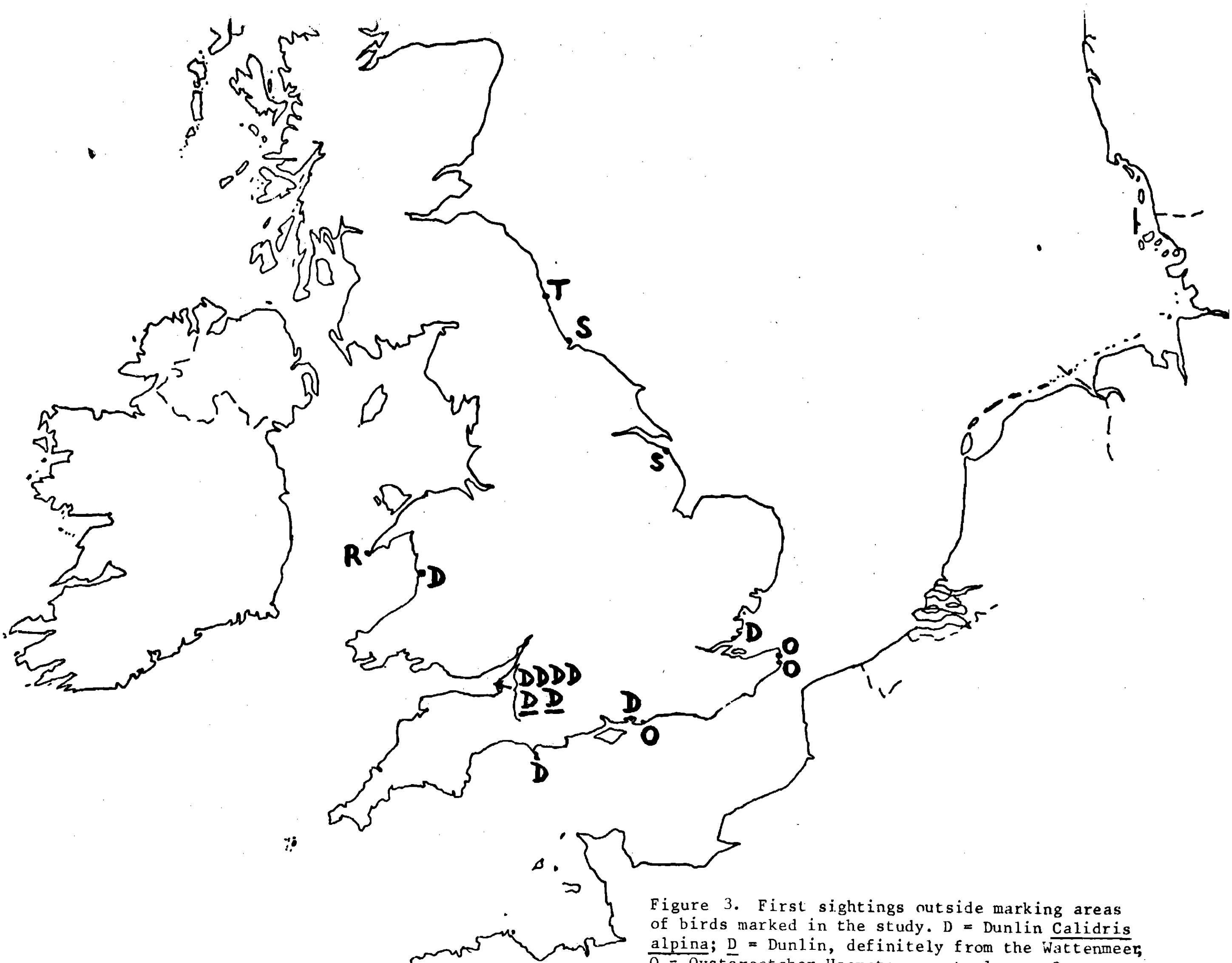

Figure 3. First sightings outside marking areas of birds marked in the study. D = Dunlin Calidris alpina; D = Dunlin, definitely from the Wattenmeer; O = Oystercatcher Haematopus ostralegus; R = Redshank Tringa totanus; S = Sanderling Calidris alba; T = Turnstone Arenaria interpres.