

# IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT : NEW REGULATIONS AND ARRANGEMENTS FOR COLOUR-MARKING WADERS

by D.J. Townshend

## Introduction

Colour-marking has proved an extremely useful tool in wader research, facilitating the study of the behaviour, movements and survival of individuals or cohorts within a population or geographical area. The technique is popular amongst amateur and professional workers alike. Unfortunately, it is this very popularity that has generated the problems that now beset wader colour-marking. In recent years the Wader Study Group has reduced overlap between potential marking schemes, but many problems remain. The sheer number of current schemes and the never-ending stream of requests for new ones make it increasingly difficult to devise further, non-overlapping, colour-marking schemes. The problem is particularly great for certain species, as a glance at Bruno Ens' 1981 review of current Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* colour-marking schemes (Wader Study Group Bulletin 31: 28-29) amply demonstrates. (What is more, a further three new schemes for marking Oystercatchers have been started since the publication of that article.) An essential feature of colour-marking schemes is that each does not overlap with any current scheme for that species, or indeed with any now discontinued scheme from which colour-marked birds are still alive. The problem of avoiding overlap is greatly exacerbated by those colour-marking schemes past and present for which no details have been supplied to the WSG colour-marking register, and even worse where the markers now have no record of what marks (particularly colour-ring combinations) have, in the past, been used.

In addition to the devising of new schemes, this plethora of colour-marking projects generates a large number of reports of marked birds. All such reports must be acknowledged and, if possible, the birds identified. Thus letters must be sent to the reporter and to one or more possible ringers to obtain details of the bird involved. Subsequently, further correspondence may be required to clarify details or pass on information. This administration is unavoidable as all reports of marked birds must be dealt with, even if the original marker is not interested in the reports. This matter cannot be stressed too strongly. Dealing with the paperwork involved is both costly and time-consuming. If colour-marking schemes are not registered fully, and adhered to, the tracing of marked birds becomes impossible. Although some markers are not interested in sightings of birds away from their research site, the WSG register must have full details of all colour-marking schemes so that reported birds can be identified. Only in this way can good public relations be maintained for those projects which depend upon the general public for much of their information.

Thus there are two problems; devising new non-overlapping schemes for colour-marking, and administering the sightings of marked birds. These problems, which are common to all birds, not just to waders, have led the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) to revise the regulations covering all forms of colour-marking of birds in Britain. The new regulations are announced in the new edition of the BTO Ringers' Manual, which will be distributed to British ringers this autumn, and a preliminary notice has appeared in Ringers' Bulletin 6:30 (June 1983). Below, I explain how these regulations will affect Wader Study Group members (and other wader researchers).

## New regulations for all ringers in Britain, and others using BTO rings

The changes in the regulations cover two major aspects: control of colour-marking and payment of administrative costs.

(1) Control of colour-marking. Stricter control of colour-marking has become unavoidable because of the large number of birds already colour-marked and the demand for the rapidly-diminishing remaining combinations. With immediate effect, NCC and BTO require all new proposals for colour-marking schemes to be justified scientifically. They will be permitted to go ahead only if they are considered likely to produce results that add significantly to our knowledge of the species. It must be stressed that approval of an application to colour-mark birds is no longer automatic.

NCC and BTO have requested that WSG act on their behalf in scrutinizing all applications for future colour-marking projects for waders in Britain. This applies to colour-markers licenced directly by NCC and not using BTO rings, as well as to BTO ringers. WSG is required to consider potential practicability and results as well as compatibility with other marking schemes. In addition, WSG will, of course, continue in its role of co-ordinating marking schemes for waders throughout Europe. Ringers will note that under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1980 (which replaces the Protection of Birds Act) their ringing permit also includes the function of a licence. Failure to obtain prior approval for a colour-marking project would infringe the conditions of the permit and may place their activities outside the law.

(2) Administrative costs. It is becoming increasingly difficult to cover the administrative costs inherent in the WSG colour-marking register. These costs include photocopying, production of forms, stationery and postage. Although I provide the (skilled!) manpower services at present, the WSG, as a voluntary organisation, is unable to continue financing the register. Similar administrative costs are burdening other BTO-delegated organisers. These costs are unavoidable because all reports of marked birds must be serviced, even if the original marker is not interested in the reports (as explained above).

Consequently the new BTO Ringers' Manual will introduce an "Annual Servicing Fee". The Manual states: "Every person registering a colour-ringing or marking scheme must therefore be prepared to pay an annual servicing fee

for each calendar year in which they are actively colour-marking birds. The fee will also be levied from persons licensed by the NCC to use colour marks..... The imposition of such fees has been approved by the NCC and is authorised by the Wildlife and Countryside Act Part 1, 1b, (5)." Thus, any person receiving the go-ahead for his/her colour-marking scheme will be required to pay a fee to cover administrative costs. This fee must be paid for each year in which it is planned to mark birds. Furthermore, all existing schemes will be required to pay a servicing fee annually. The level of the annual servicing fee for wader colour-marking schemes has yet to be decided, but is likely to be of the order of £10 per species per year for most schemes. This note should be taken as notice to existing schemes to be prepared to pay a fee of this order at the start of 1984 if their scheme is to continue.

These new regulations may be greeted with some dismay by current and prospective colour-markers. However, it must be stressed that they have been introduced only because of the increasing difficulty in devising new colour-marking schemes, and the ever-rising costs of administration. It is felt that these costs should be borne by the ringers concerned, rather than the general WSG and/or BTO membership.

On the positive side, colour-markers may like to note that we are taking the opportunity of these rearrangements to continue to simplify registration procedures as much as possible; all applications for colour-marking of waders in Britain may be directed to WSG (rather than BTO, NCC or any combination of these). The completion of the new arrangements should also allow us more time for the actual handling of sightings. Do not, however, expect a totally efficient service: the registration fees are set to cover expenses, not the substantial amounts of time required of the people operating the register.

#### What happens next?

Registration forms and other documents are currently being revised to allow for the change. The actual procedure for collecting your money is still to be finalized. New projects will probably be charged for the first time as soon as their projects are approved. Existing projects will probably receive notification later in the year of the amount due if marking is to continue in 1984. Note that the new arrangements apply to all types of colour-marking, not just colour-ringing. All forms of temporary marking, however, already need re-registration each year: if anyone planning to use temporary marks in winter 1983-84 or summer 1984 has not already contacted WSG, they should do so immediately. They may already be too late to obtain approval.

#### Outside Britain

NCC and BTO have no powers to apply these new regulations in countries other than Great Britain (except to ringers operating elsewhere within the BTO scheme). However WSG members will appreciate the importance of continued international co-operation in studying this highly migratory group of birds. It is sincerely hoped, therefore, that ringers in other countries will consider very fully whether their proposals for colour-marking will meet the requirements set out above. We also hope that national ringing organisers will bear in mind the controls soon to be introduced over British ringers. (We know that several other national authorities operate strict controls, often in consultation with WSG - which has also been asked by Euring to operate the register on its behalf.) Furthermore, as the administrative costs of dealing with sightings of marked birds apply as much to birds marked outside Britain as within, WSG proposes the following: that all colour-marking projects from outside Britain, whether new or already registered with WSG, are requested to donate an annual fee equal to that required from British ringers. Such donations will serve to continue and strengthen the ideas of co-operation and goodwill so amply demonstrated in other WSG activities. We know that in several countries, currency control regulations prevent such payments; perhaps operators of marking projects there would be prepared to assist in other ways, such as by translating letters in languages outside the ability of the register co-ordinators. These arrangements relate to the Old World (particularly Europe and N.Africa) and not, at present, to America.

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## WSG SURVEY TO DETERMINE THE NUMBER AND DISTRIBUTION OF WADERS BREEDING ON THE WESTERN SEABOARD OF THE OUTER HEBRIDES, SCOTLAND

by G.H. Green

Casual observations and more detailed studies (Fuller 1981, Wilson 1978) have shown the low-lying western seaboard of the islands of North Uist, Benbecula and South Uist in the Outer Hebrides to be important breeding grounds for six species of wader: Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*, Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*, Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*, Dunlin *Calidris alpina*, Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* and Redshank *Tringa totanus*. The urge to estimate the size and distribution of these populations has been with us for at least ten years. Recent developments such as the EEC funded Integrated Development Programme (IDP) have changed this urge from one of biological curiosity to conservation necessity. Many conservationists have expressed concern for the fate of Hebridean waders in the face of proposed EEC funded agricultural changes. It has become important to determine factual details of the wader population's size and distribution as quickly as possible. This view arose more or less independently amongst WSG officers and members (WSG Bull. 31:2, 32: 29-33, 35:5, 37: 1-2), the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) and others. Hence a joint project between WSG and NCC was planned for 1983 with the aim of determining present distribution and numbers of waders and to prepare plans for future investigations, based on the 1983 results, of the effects of agricultural and other changes. The purpose of this note is to inform WSG members of progress and to give some preliminary results. Analysis of the survey data should be complete in a few months and a fuller report of methodology, results and future plans will be published in the December 1983 WSG Bulletin.

The most appropriate survey method for a project of this size and scope was thought to be one based on transects traversed on foot through selected areas. The method used in the field was developed in discussions with NCC and based on practical Hebridean experience (R. Fuller, J. Wilson pers. comm.) and transect methods used by NCC to assess wader numbers breeding in upland Britain (see for example Reed, Langslow & Symonds 1983). A compromise had to be sought between a detailed time-consuming survey and a reasonably comprehensive survey which could be completed within one breeding season.