

The head pattern of Black-winged Stilts

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Individual Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus* vary considerably in the amount of black patterning on their heads and necks. The range of patterns that can be seen in birds of the nominate race is shown in Figure 1. The literature concerning the significance of this variation is complex and often not entirely in agreement (Prater *et al.* 1977, Cramp & Simmons 1983, Hayman *et al.* 1986). However, it is generally accepted that there is some link between the head pattern of individual stilts and their sex. At present, the only criterion which can be used with confidence to distinguish between the sexes is the colour of the mantle: black glossed with green in males, and brown in females.

During a study of Black-winged Stilts on the Tagus estuary (Portugal), I noted the head patterns of individual members of 13 known pairs. The pairs were recognised by their behaviour during territorial disputes or as an isolated pair. The members of each pair were sexed according to the colour of the mantle. For each individual I noted the colour of the mantle, crown, hind-neck as either black, dusky or white. I then allocated each individual to one of the six patterns shown in Figure 1 on the basis of head colouration.

In each of the 13 study pairs the individuals differed in colour of the mantle. All variations in the head patterns

drawn in Figure 1, with the exception of the all white head, were observed in the 26 study individuals. Although males were generally darker than females, in only eight of the pairs did the males have darker heads than their partner; in four pairs the females had the darker heads; and in the remaining pair the head patterns were of similar colouration. The overall amount of black on the head is therefore not a reliable indicator of sex in Black-winged Stilts. Males do however tend to have rather more extreme patterns (blackish or whitish), whereas females are intermediate (dusky).

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References

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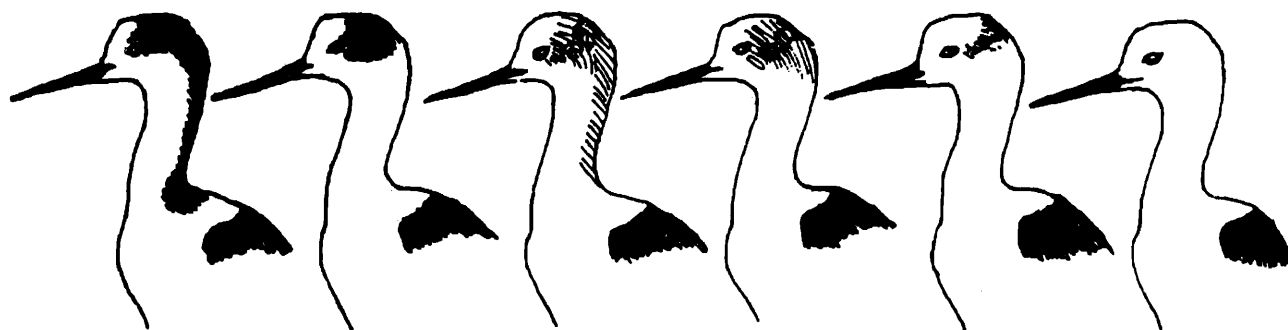


Figure 1. Most typical patterns on the heads and necks of Black-winged Stilts.

