

Woodcock Research Group (IWRB)

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The exasperating Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* is a 'fringe species' amongst waders and waterfowl and woodland game, and tends to be neglected in any group study. Woodcock enthusiasts are perhaps as odd and solitary as the bird they have chosen, and the new Woodcock Research Group of IWRB is striving to flush some and induce flocking behaviour.

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It seems that the occasional Woodcock does get ringed by the WSG – a total of five was recorded for 1974 – thank you, TRG and Humber! The capture and ringing of this bird during its breeding season really separates the men from the boys, yet there is a great need for 600–700, mainly pulli or juveniles, to be ringed in the British Isles each year. It has not been met since 1935 (763 pulli) and the average yearly total, including FGs on migration, has been about 30 in recent years with pulli averaging about 8. So every young Woodcock ringed will be a help. The recovery rate is 7.9%.

Two years ago Ib Clausager (Kalø, Denmark) published a good guide to methods of determining the age-class and sex of Woodcock from external features. Even very precise

measurements of bill length and central tail feathers, expressed as a ratio, allow adult males and females to be confused: the best that can be done without dissection is to use the formula of Stronach, Harrington & Wilkins which reduces the probability of error to 28%:

$-0.2952 \times \text{bill length} + 0.1566 \times \text{central tail feather length}$:

if greater than -8.3640 = male (72% correct), and
if less than -8.3640 = female (75% correct).

Birds in their first twelve months after hatching must be excluded, and this can be done by examining the tips and proximal edges of the outer primaries (ragged outline on first years; smooth on older birds, at least until April) and the terminal lighter bar on primary coverts (broader and browner on young birds). This quick, simple method correctly classifies 95–98%. Any Woodcock ringed during migration periods or in the winter is worth such extra records in the notebook. But can anyone sex Woodcock pulli?

The value of bill lengths of museum specimens in biometric studies

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The measurement of bill, wing, or any other structure is a useful technique in the study of migration (Evans 1964). However, the technique is fraught with problems which make standardisation difficult. One of the difficulties is in the use of museum material. Standard bird text books give biometric data based on museum specimens but the application of these measurements to the field situation is problematical; e.g. it has been shown that wings of museum skins shrink (Vepsalainen 1968, Green & Williams 1973). Bill length, however, is believed to be the least variable of the biometric measurements though the possibility that the bills of museum skins shrink has not been investigated.

I have the opportunity to measure a series of freshly collected birds and to compare them with skins from various South African museums (Cape Town, Pretoria, Durban, East London). Being at the tip of Africa it is likely that the birds of a given species are drawn from the same origin and that

one does not experience such a complex situation as seen in Europe. One would therefore expect the mean bill lengths of the freshly collected birds and museum specimens to be the same. However, the table shows that in the two species investigated, Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* and Sanderling *Calidris alba*, the museum birds tend to have lower bill lengths. In the Turnstone the difference amounts to 5.4% (males) and 4.4% (females). These differences were highly significant in the Turnstone, but not in the Sanderling where the sample size is smaller (Table 1). The explanation for the difference between the two species may lie partly in the structure of the bill, for in the Turnstone the rhamphotheca (the horny sheath) extends further beyond the bone point of the bill. The Sanderling on the other hand has a rounder tip to the bone around which the rhamphotheca fits more closely (Figure 1). Shrinkage of the rhamphotheca will therefore be limited by the bone.

