Giving details of age for Oystercatchers on BTO ringing schedules

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The Euring age codes seem ambiguous for some waders, like Oystercatchers *Haematopus ostralegus*, with distinguishable first-year and adult birds, and an amorphous group of birds probably two or three years old. The solution is the use of 'I' (meaning Immature) as a plumage indicator, in the way that 'J' (meaning Juvenile) is used. The proper codes, which should be used on British Trust for Ornithology ringing schedules, for Oystercatchers are given below.

Soft part characters *may* eventually allow the certain separation of all second and third-year birds, so that fully adult birds would be coded 8 or 10, but, as far as I know, this degree of certainty has not even been claimed by anyone. What is needed to make such determinations stick is good colour photographs of known-age birds caught through their second and third winters – pack your camera with the cannon-nets.

	To end of Dec.	From 1 Jan.
First-year (i.e. up to 1 year old)	3	5
Second year (if certain)	5	7
Fully adult	6	8
Immature	4 I	6 I

Problems with the ageing of Dunlins in autumn

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Amongst features that are used widely to differentiate juvenile and adult Dunlins *Calidris alpina* is the colour of the wing coverts. In juveniles these are fringed buff, whilst the new wing coverts of adults (after moulting) should be fringed whitish (Prater *et al.* 1977, Ferns 1981). At least some second-year birds can be identified by the presence of juvenile feathers (with buff fringes) in the inner median coverts (Holmes 1966, Prater *et al.* 1977). As a result of our work on waders at the mouth of the Vistula in Gdansk Bay (Poland), we now believe that this method of distinguishing age classes of Dunlins may be more complicated than is generally supposed, and that consequently some Dunlins may be aged wrongly on the bias of wing covert colour. We outline the reasons below.

At the mouth of Vistula, waders (mainly Dunlins) have been ringed throughout July to September in most recent years. Birds are caught in traps checked every two hours from sunrise to sunset (Gromadzka 1981). In the first half of July mainly adult Dunlins of the nominate race are caught. The few juveniles that we catch belong to the local breeding population of *schinzii* race (Gromadzka 1983). At that time adults have worn feathers. Amongst them, second-year birds (identified by buff fringes of some inner medians) have especially worn primaries, tertials, median coverts and rectrices.

In the first half of July we catch the first adult Dunlins starting to change their primaries, the earliest recorded date being 7 July. In about mid-August, we start to catch juveniles, and adults are more and more advanced in primary moult. By the end of August/September most adults have renewed all their primaries. Beginning in the second half of July, during primary moult (at a primary moult score about 15), the median wing coverts are replaced also. It is easy to see these new median covert feathers, since they look very fresh. However, not all new coverts look like typical adult winter ones (i.e. with white fringes). Most adults have a mixture of new median coverts fringed buff-brownish (similar to juveniles) and whitish. Occasionally we even catch adults with all new medians fringed buff-brownish. These could be distinguished as adults from the remnants of a black belly patch, and growing or new primaries. The buff-brownish colour of adult medians varies in intensity: in some birds it is very pale. In others it is bright rust-brown.

The catching of Dunlins during autumn migration in 1983 at the mouth of the Vistula was exceptionally successful compared with other years so we could follow changes in plumage in more detail than before. Between 20 July and 7 September, 1409 adult Dunlins were caught. 70% were

moulting, and amongst these about 20% had buff-brownish fringed new median coverts. Preliminary examination of primary moult data indicates that second-year Dunlins started to moult their primaries earlier than older birds, possibly because most second-year birds do not breed (Soikkeli 1970). Adults with some or a buff-brownish coverts likewise started primary moult earlier than adults with all new median fringed whitish. Perhaps these adults with buff-brownish fringed median coverts had not bred that year.

We were prompted to write this note after receiving reports of two Dunlins that we had ringed at Vistula mouth in autumn 1983 and adults with some buff-brownish covert fringes and which were recaptured late in the same non-breeding season. One was caught in GDR in September, three days after ringing at Vistula mouth. The other was caught in the Netherlands at the end of November, three months after ringing. Both were aged as juveniles were recaptured. This means that these birds, for the people who recaptured them, must have looked similar to juveniles, at least according to the colour of the medians. When ringed, the bird recaptured in the GDR had been moulting its primaries, and still had remnants of the black belly patch and of summer breeding plumage on the mantle, so its subsequent identification as a juvenile may have been a recording error. But how did the Dutch recaptured bird look three months after ringing? The Dutch ringers, Lida Goede and Piet Zegers, who recaptured this bird, explained as follows:

". . . we were puzzled by this bird . . . On its registration card we noted: looks like an adult, but its wing coverts have traces on light brownish fringes. At this time of year (November–December) we recognise adults by their grey wing coverts and new primaries and juveniles by their brown fringed coverts and slightly worn primaries . . . We had a similar case . . . a bird collected 22 October 1982 had new primaries and secondaries . . . had still about three-quarters of its breeding plumage and showed large black belly patch: clearly an adult. However, the same faint brownish fringes were noted on new wing coverts."

There are two main questions which arise from these observations:

1. Is the brownish colour in the median coverts of adults connected with age, or is it another kind of variability?
2. How can these adults be distinguished from juveniles when both age groups are in complete winter plumage?

As described above, mistakes in assigning age-classes may occur, but how widespread is this problem? Any such errors will usually result in adults being identified wrongly as juveniles. We think that it is essential in late autumn to look very carefully as the amount of wear on the primaries: juveniles should have primaries a little more worn than adults.

We have found no answers in European publications to these questions. However, Holmes (1966) indicated that the confusion of juvenile with adult Dunlins in western North America is possible "because some new coverts . . . of adults may have the same buffy coloration as the corresponding juvenile feathers".

Do other ringers have examples in their files of moulting adults that were subsequently recorded as juveniles? We would be most pleased if anyone who has similar observations, or can suggest solutions to the problem, would contact us.

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Ageing criteria for Dunlins

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Gromadzka & Przystupa's (1984) note poses several questions about aging criteria for Dunlins *Calidris alpina*, which the following information may help to answer.

I have one skin of a Dunlin obtained in August in Schleswig-Holstein (F.R. Germany) which was aged Euring code 5 (i.e. hatched definitely during the last calendar year). It has buff tips to the inner, unmoulted median coverts. This bird has buff fringes (as described by Gromadzka & Przystupa) on all the greater coverts and a few of the median coverts to the greater coverts. These new feathers are distinctly different from juvenile coverts, as their buff fringe grades into the grey central portion of the feather whereas juvenile coverts have a distinct buff terminal band. This fits with Gromadzka & Przystupa's suggestion that birds with