

An Ageing Character of the Ruff

by Tony Tree

Tony Tree is ringing a large number of waders at Grahamstown, near Port Elizabeth, South Africa. In the course of ringing he has handled a large number of waders which are not frequently ringed in Britain. Among the many aspects which he is studying are moult and ageing. This short account is of a possible method of ageing Ruff which needs to be looked at by many more ringers before definitely coming to a conclusion. In case ringers are surprised at the low percentage of adult Ruff handled it should be added that Tony Tree believes that most adults winter much further north than South Africa but many immatures go down to the south. (Eds.)

Juvenile and first winter birds have greenish/grey-green/yellow-green legs. In April, or so, the leg colour starts to change in some birds; sometimes this change does not start until October. The legs take on a mottled appearance of greenish and the final colour in the orange/vermillion/pink range. How long this transition period covers I do not know as Ruff are very rarely retrapped. However, some birds have completed the transition by about January or February (when 1 year and 7 or 8 months old - very approximately). Others may still be changing colour when 2 years old and may be for two or three months over that time. By the time they are 2½ years old they should have the complete adult leg colouring.

My own records of three retrapped birds are

Ringed 29.9.68	2Y f. Green with less than 50% pink.
8.12.68	Pink with only a trace of green.
Ringed 29.9.68	2Y f. Flesh with less than 50% green.
16.12.68	Flesh with very little green.
Ringed 14.12.67	2Y f. Flesh with less than 50% green.
16.12.68	Completely flesh.

From this very small sample it looks as though the transition period could be from 6 to 8 months.

Using this method of rough ageing I then find that the percentage of birds with full adult leg colouring is 15.4% (out of 345 ringed). Of these many could be in their 3rd year as appears to be the case with the last of the retraps mentioned above. Only one male caught showed the other adult characteristic of pink on the basal portion of the bill. I have handled a fair spread of birds in each month of the year with the exception of May.

So I would suggest that all ringers handling Ruff should take note of leg colours, in detail, giving the percentages of the colours in the transition period. This is a problem that needs to be untangled.