

The species totals for waders caught in the 10 days are as follows:-

Ringed Plover	79	Greenshank	20
Kentish Plover	55	Knot	15
Grey Plover	1	Little Stint	100
Turnstone	2	Temmincks Stint	1
Curlew	1	Dunlin	460
Black-tailed Godwit	15	Curlew Sandpiper	267
Bar-tailed Godwit	9	Ruff	6
Common Sandpiper	15	Black-winged Stilt	8
Redshank	90		

It is hoped that a full report of "the Expedition" will be published within the next few months.

As a footnote wader ringers may like to note that owing to a lack of available French rings of the correct size "the Expedition" used 800 British rings in Morocco ..... an incentive perhaps to send in controls promptly.

University of East Anglia Expedition to Tarfaya Province, Morocco 1972

by Mike Pionkowski

In W.S.G. Bulletins 4 and 6 I outlined the results of the 1971 work on waders in Morocco conducted by the UEA Expedition and gave reasons for return visits. This year two such expeditions took place - one led by Derek Stanyard to continue work at the excellent catching site at Sidi Moussa in North Morocco in September (which is described elsewhere in this bulletin) and the present one aimed at extending the work to Puerto Cansado, a coastal lagoon in the extreme south of Morocco (see map) near the border with Spanish Sahara (Rio de Oro).

We left England in mid-July and travelled fairly rapidly through France and Spain to arrive in Morocco on 24 July. After a brief stop at Rabat to collect rings and discuss prospects with Monsieur Thevenot and Monsieur Elkaim of the Institut Scientifique Cherifien - who were as ever most helpful and hospitable - we moved on to Sidi Moussa to arrive on 27 July, the day after the spring tide.

It was our intention to spend a few days here before moving on south to our main area of study. This would give us the opportunity of catching some of the birds already at Sidi Moussa and establish several points on, for example, the moult and weight graphs for comparison with those of the Cambridge Expedition 5 or 6 weeks later. In addition, of course, there was the possibility of retraps giving valuable weight change and moulting rate data on individual birds. For three days cannon-netting attempts were made on the tidal lagoon at the mouth of the marsh system but despite several near misses only one small catch of 1 Avocet, 2 Dunlin, 3 Greenshank and 1 Grey Plover resulted. A further 3 days were spent mist-netting on the salt pans (which were to be the Cambridge Expedition's main working area) with catches of 57, 23 and 15 respectively, the neap tide being reached on the last night and the waders then not being forced off the adjacent salt marsh. Kentish Plover, Redshank, Dunlin and Curlew Sandpiper were the main species caught but there were also a few Ringed Plover, Black-tailed Godwit, Common Sandpiper, Greenshank, Little Stint and Black-winged Stilt. An extra bonus was provided after dawn on the last morning by 2 Swallows and a Woodchat Shrike. Our catches included 2 Kentish Plover and 2 Redshank retraps from 1971 and one of the Kentish Plovers was again retrapped by Derek Stanyard's group in September.

On 4 August we headed south in the hope of reaching Puerto Cansado by the spring tide of 10 August. The road is fully made up and presents no obstacle as far as Tan Tan and slightly beyond but Puerto Cansado lies 100 miles beyond this town. The first part of the route beyond the end of the road consisted of rough desert tracks (at times existing more in name than in physical reality) but the last few miles were completely cross-country - around dunes and over sand drifts and boulder desert.

The route passed over the Oued (River) Chebeika where we had stayed for some time in 1971. Here a bank had been built across the estuary to extend the road further south. The tidal flow had thus been cut off leaving a large lake on the inland side of the bank. This, of course, has ruined the estuary for waders although a flock of several thousand Lesser Black-backed Gulls have moved in. The bank is to be cut in the near future by the building of a 150 metre long bridge which hopefully will allow tidal flow again. However, since the building of the bank and due to the lack of scouring, the sea beach has been drifted across the mouth of the river forming a second barrier. There are some doubts as to whether the full tidal nature of the estuary will be restored.

Our hopes of arriving at Puerto Cansado in time for the spring tides were dashed on the evening of 9 August when our locally employed guide lost his way and led us into a sand drift on a steep slope. Our efforts to extract the Land Rover resulted in the complete shattering of the rear differential. We were shortly joined by one of the lorry drivers who use the desert track to supply Tarfaya, a town near the Rio de Oro border. He had a similar problem having broken his prop shaft about 300 metres away at almost the same time!

Leaving all the equipment in the desert and half of the expedition members to guard it, we returned with difficulty to Tan Tan using front wheel drive only and then managed to obtain and fit a very old and dusty second hand differential. However, this procedure cost us 5 days and delayed our arrival at Puerto Cansado until 15 August, thus missing the spring tide series.

The lagoon is 21 km. long and up to 5 km. wide and is bounded on the east and south by cliffs; on the west by large sand flats backed by an extensive dune system which also spreads along the coast. The lagoon opens northwards to the Atlantic and consists of 7 km. of sand flat lagoon leading into 8 km. of salt marsh, this in turn widening out to a sebka (salt flats) 8 km. long and 4-5 km. wide. We established camp for 4 weeks near a fishing settlement Sidi El Msid 2-3 km. from the mouth and made trips to Tan Tan at about weekly intervals to collect fuel, water and supplies. During the stay studies were made of the vegetation of the lagoon and invertebrates on which the waders feed, as well as the counts and ringing of waders and some passerines.

The wader population of Puerto Cansado during our stay was estimated as a minimum of 18,000 (this compares with about 100,000 estimated in January 1964 by Blondel), consisting mainly of Oystercatchers; Ringed, Kentish and Grey Plovers; Turnstone; Curlew; Whimbrel; Bar-tailed Godwit; Redshank; Knot; Little Stint; Dunlin; Curlew Sandpiper and Sanderling. Avocets and Black-tailed Godwits on rapid through passages were also noted. Several cannon-net catches were made, totalling about 600 waders - mainly Knot, Dunlin, Curlew Sandpiper with some Ringed Plover, Grey Plover, Turnstone, Bar-tailed Godwit, Little Stint and Sanderling.

The data gathered by the expedition has not yet been analysed but several highlights are noticeable. Several of these concerned moult including the finding of suspended moult in Kentish Plover and Dunlin following last year's extensive occurrence in Ringed Plover. A Curlew Sandpiper caught twice at Puerto Cansado has also given some interesting information on the rate of its moult. During 15 days its moult score had advanced from 30 to 49.

On the recovery side, apart from the 4 birds retrapped from the 1971 expedition and 8 birds caught twice this year, there were 5 controls among this year's birds: two Dunlin both ringed as juveniles in autumn 1971 from Kent and the Dee respectively and a third from Norway; and two Curlew Sandpipers which were ringed in Holland and Tunisia.

Recoveries are also beginning to come in from the birds ringed by the 1971 Expedition. These have included 3 juvenile Redshanks shot in Jan. Feb. and March 1972 in Morocco; 2 Dunlin shot in August 1972 in France and 1 Greenshank found dead in a musk-rat trap in May 1972 in Finland! With more than 3000 waders ringed by the 3 expeditions to Morocco in the last 2 years further recoveries can be looked forward to.

During our return a couple of days were spent at Point d'Arcay in France where a flock of 10,000 waders landed tantalizingly close to our cannon nets but unfortunately only 11 birds actually entered the catching area. However, French cooking and the hospitality of French wader ringers together with superb views of almost innumerable species of migrant birds of prey on the reserve made the visit as memorable as that of last year.

SKETCH MAP OF THE WEST COAST OF MOROCCO

