

Joint Biological Expedition to N.E. Greenland 1974

Mike Pienkowski (8 July)

The Expedition which includes the Wader Study Group party and a group from Dundee University led by Jeremy Greenwood and studying other biological topics, flew into Mestersvig Air Station, NE Greenland on 25th June. We had been delayed 2 days in Iceland while the advance party were still trying to find all the food and equipment which had been lost by the British shipping agents. Through the co-operation of the Icelandic Shipping Company, who specially docked a ship for us, we were able to search two vessels and find parts of our cargo in each.

Despite the delay, we found that snow still covered 70-80% of the ground in the Mestersvig area, the season being 2-3 weeks late in this particular locality. Relatively few waders seemed to have started nesting but some Barnacle and Pink-footed Geese, Gyr Falcons and Snow Buntings already have young. The late season is beneficial in that we are able to investigate the birds as they start breeding but there may also be disadvantages, such as if some species breed in smaller numbers than in most years. In the Mestersvig area many Ringed Plover territories are well established but no Sanderling or Dunlin nests have yet been found.

Following the shipping troubles, the Expedition's second misfortune occurred on the second day here when Guy Morrison was unfortunate enough to develop appendicitis. He and Angela Morrison had to be flown out to Iceland but we were pleased to hear that he is recovering well. For the first 11 days all the other 8 members of the wader study team were based here at Mestersvig catching birds, finding territories and conducting census work and other studies on the waders in this area. During this period 38 birds were ringed, including 14 Ringed Plovers, 6 Sanderlings, 3 Glaucous Gulls, 5 Long-tailed Skuas and 10 Snow Buntings. All waders were caught individually at the nest or at feeding sites and, as expected, no flocks have been seen. The first cannon-netted catch in Greenland resulted in the ringing of the 3 Glaucous Gulls, at least some members of the team feeling quite at home on the station's rubbish tip.

Because the only practical ways to catch waders on these breeding grounds are at the nest and catching pulli, it is planned to cover as large an area as possible by distributing the group in teams of two over a fairly large section of the coast (about 75 km). This was achieved by helicopter on July 6th.

Tony Williams and Stuart Brown are on Traill Island (about 80 km long by 25 km wide), 25 km across King Oscar Fjord from here. By radio they told me last night that the season is more advanced on the south facing slope there with less than 10% snow cover. They had caught their first bird, a Ringed Plover, within 12 hours of arriving. Harry Green, the leader of the expedition, and Clare Lloyd are 25 km south along the mainland coast from here in Antartics Havn (a valley 20 km by 2 km) while Peter Ferns and Greg Mudge are in Orsteds Dal, the next very large valley (6 km. by more than 30 km long) south of there. These teams will be in those areas ringing and censusing for the next 5 weeks by which time we hope that the fjord ice will have melted so that they can be collected by boat. Dave North and I remain here at Mestersvig to continue the detailed census work, ringing and other studies started by the whole party. The census work has started very well and ringing prospects look promising. We hope that all wader ringers and watchers in U.K. and elsewhere will look out for colour-ringed and -dyed waders. Please report any seen with details of colour, place, date, etc. to Tony Prater at the B.T.O. or directly to Harry Green, Windy Ridge, Little

Comberton, Pershore, Worcs. People reporting such birds will, of course, be informed of ringing details. One of the Ringed Plovers colour ringed here by Harry Green and Tony Williams in 1972 has again been sighted breeding in this area and we are hopeful of further results by this method.

P.S. Jim and Margaret Wilson are to join the team from their home base in Iceland, to make the Expedition up to full strength. Guy and Angela Morrison are now back at the base camp helping out with lighter duties! (A.J.P.)

The timing of wing moult in some Palaearctic waders
wintering in East Africa

David Pearson

Palaearctic waders which winter at temperate latitudes usually complete their main annual wing moult in late summer or early autumn, either near the breeding grounds or shortly after the completion of autumn migration. In either case, moult is a rapid process involving extensive feather replacement and high energy requirements over a period of a few weeks, and birds are usually fully moulted well before the winter months. The young of such species retain their juvenile flight feathers throughout their first year and undergo their first moult when about a year old, only shortly before the moult period of older birds. With species which migrate to tropical wintering areas the situation is very different. Adult wing moult is partly or wholly delayed until after autumn migration and may begin as late as October or even November, persisting commonly into December, January and in some cases March. The young of a number of smaller tropical wintering species undergo a complete moult of their flight feathers during their first winter, thus fitting in an extra moult as compared with similar species wintering at higher latitudes.

Since 1967 some 13,000 Palaearctic waders have been netted at the rift valley lakes of southern Kenya, many of which were in moult. Primary moult data have been recorded for most birds caught, and in many species it has recently been possible to age first winter birds with confidence. Observations relating to the timing of primary moult in the main species handled are summarised below. They serve to underline the basic differences between tropical and temperate wintering populations, and to emphasise some of the difficulties involved in interpreting moult in Africa. They should provide material with which data from other tropical areas, particularly in south and west Africa, could be usefully compared. Information has been collected mainly at Lake Nakuru, where 8,000 birds, principally Little Stints, Ruffs and Marsh Sandpipers, were ringed between 1967 and 1972, and Lake Magadi, where 3,000 birds, mainly Little Stints with smaller numbers of Curlew Sandpipers, were ringed during 1972/73 and 1973/74. Observations from Lake Hannington, Lake Naivasha and Nairobi are also included.

In addition to their complete wing and tail moult, many waders which winter in East Africa renew most of all of their innermost secondaries, tail feathers and inner wing coverts between January and April in the course of their prenuptial moult. Whereas the primaries and the outer ten secondaries are usually replaced only once a year, the inner five secondaries (subsequently referred to as the *tertials*) are usually moulted twice. However, the timing of the partial prenuptial moult is not dealt with further here.