

There was nothing exceptional about the birds on the Bay this spring; the only unusual thing was that, for once, almost everything went right, and time after time we caught them. We may never do so well again, least of all next spring when the WSG is mounting its collaborative project (see elsewhere in this Bulletin). However we keep on trying, at least fortnightly throughout the year from late July to the end of May, and as a group suffers far more from a shortage of people than from a shortage of birds, we are always keen to welcome new members. If anyone is interested in joining us, please get in touch with the group secretary at the address below, and I will be delighted to send details.

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LEG PARALYSIS IN CAPTURED WADERS

by G.H. Green

A recent note by J. van Heerden (his address 108 Pretorius Street, Hatfield, Pretoria 0083, South Africa), 'Leg paralysis in birds' Ostrich, 48:118-119, 1977, is of interest to wader ringers. He describes leg paralysis following excessive chasing, over exertion, unnecessary disturbance, excessive handling, fear and shock which may lead to death and he calls the whole syndrome 'stress myopathy' or 'over straining disease'. Wader ringers may well have experienced problems with long legged waders 'going off their legs' after capture and the species most seriously affected in UK is the Curlew Numenius arquata but similar problems occasionally arise with Bar-tailed Godwits Limosa lapponica, Whimbrels Numenius phaeopus and even Redshanks Tringa totanus. Curlews may be affected very quickly so that netted birds may be unable to stand very soon after capture and some may die although there are no obvious injuries. In view of van Heerden's paper they may well be suffering from stress myopathy caused by the birds straining their leg muscles by pushing against the net in which they are captured: a leg motion entirely different from their usual movements. This once again lends emphasis to the view that captured Curlews must be dealt with quickly and released again as soon as possible after capture. Whenever possible they should be taken from mist nets immediately they are caught.

Van Heerden also mentions leg paralysis and death in long legged Flamingos Phoenicopterus ruber, P. roseus and P. minor which had been chased, were exhausted on capture and then transported with their legs in a folded position. Histological lesions were found in the leg muscles which suggested that their blood supply had been impaired when the legs were 'folded' thus leading to muscle death and leg paralysis. It seems likely that waders which are unable to stand after being confined in a low roofed keeping cage may be suffering from a similar condition. It is always noticeable that small waders run about in keeping cages which are 30-35 cm high whereas taller species are quiescent and crouch on folded legs. They may be unable to walk after quite short periods in this position although not all individuals are affected. To alleviate this problem Bainbridge, (WSG Bulletin No 16, November 1975), described a tall hessian cage about 90 cm high which reduced the incidence of leg cramp in captured curlews. It can be concluded that if capture of Curlews is expected his advice should be followed; if capture is unexpected the birds should be released again as rapidly as possible and this may require special efforts on the part of the ringer.

Birds with leg paralysis may recover. In the short term wader ringers could try suspending the bird in a sling so that the feet are on the ground in a normal position - the suspended bird being kept in a tall, darkened and undisturbed place. It is better to try this than do nothing. In the long term specialist treatment may be required - vitamin injections, forced feeding, quiet and solitude for perhaps ten days and minimal handling. This requires the co-operation of people used to keeping birds in captivity and probably a vet. This may be beyond the resources of most ringers who must therefore aim at prevention by rapid working and the use of tall cages.

Finally a personal observation - captured waders occasionally suffer from wing strain, or wing droop and cannot fly when they are released. Providing they have no obvious injuries such birds should be left in peace on undisturbed coast where they can feed. They will probably recover. Once released they should not be chased or harassed in any way.

If anyone has any further observations on these matters we should be pleased to hear from them.

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