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REVIEWS

Wash Wader Ringing Group Report 1977-78

Edited by N.J.B.A.Branson. 1979. Pp68; 30 x 21cm. Copies available from: Dr.N.J.B.A.Branson, Trinity College, Cambridge, England. Price (including postage): £2.00 in United Kingdom; £3.00 elsewhere. (Payment in sterling should accompany order.)

The most striking thing about the Wash Wader Ringing Group is the sheer scale of its operations. This Report, covering the calendar years 1977 and 1978, accounts for 18,005 newly ringed waders and 4,218 retraps/controls of 26 species, and details 306 foreign recoveries. The list of Group members runs to 142 names (do they recognise one another, one wonders, or do they have to wear name badges?). Almost equally impressive is the ability to incorporate a lot of the resulting data in a 68 page report published within a few months of the end of the period it covers. For those who wondered whether the departure of the LEADER OF THE GROUP (capitalised in the original) for distant parts would lead to the decline of the WWRG, the answer is clearly No.

The Report contains an introductory review, an itemised breakdown of catches, and a full list of recoveries over the last two years, with maps showing all WWRG recoveries since the Group started. A long list of publications, completed and in preparation, shows that the data is being fully analysed and disseminated, and is an essential place for other workers starting to write up results to check for related work in progress. Finally, and perhaps most usefully of all, there are thumbnail summaries of the main migratory patterns for each species revealed by work on the Wash, and weight graphs for the ten main species. Though obviously these patterns should not be assumed to hold outside the Wash - and the differences from the picture on the west coast of Britain are often quite as striking as the similarities - they provide an invaluable published starting point for comparison with sites elsewhere.

One useful set of data which are not provided would be the Estuaries Enquiry counts for numbers of each species on the Wash throughout the year. These are all the more important in showing the pattern of wader populations on the Wash in that it is very clear that catch data provide no guide to comparative numbers at different times of year. It would be unfair to describe the WWRG as a summer holiday group, but fully 72% of the total for these two years were caught in July and August, most of them during the 'Wash Weeks', and a further 7% in September, leaving only 14% of the catch for the first half of the year and 7% for the last quarter. To what extent is this early autumn bias due to differences in populations present, to what extent simply to differences in catchability? There is a certain evidence of dedicated efforts to fill up the numbers at other times. My heart bleeds for the team which set 30 mistnets for a catch of 2 birds at Wolferton in February, though the firing of five full cannon-nets for a catch of 5 birds (all retraps) at Heacham in December hints of the triger-happy!

Sadly, I must deplore the use in the recoveries section of an imprecise and outdated age terminology - Ad, FG, 2Y, Imm and the rest of them. Whatever the deficiencies of the numerical age code for tropical and antarctic species, it makes entirely clear just how old a bird born during the northern summer is deemed to be. But here, is a 2Y Oystercatcher (Friskney, 22 July 74) judged to have been born the same year as a 1S one (Friskney, 21 August 1974), or the year before? Does a 2Y Oystercatcher caught in December (Holme, 6 December 75) become a 3Y one if caught in February (Heacham, 20 February 72) or does it stay 2Y until the following June? If some Oystercatchers are 3Y, does that mean that an Ad is definitely older than 3Y? Or could it even be 2Y? Does Ad for an Oystercatcher cover the same range of years as Ad for a Dunlin? This quite unnecessary vagueness mars what is generally an admirable Report.

Christopher Clapham.