

WSG PROJECT ON MOVEMENTS OF WADER POPULATIONS IN WESTERN EUROPE:

FOURTH PROGRESS REPORT

by Ann and M.W. Pienkowski

This report will be fairly brief, not because little is happening, but just the opposite. So much has been occurring in the past few weeks that it has been difficult to find time to write this report!

Colour-marking

This autumn, waders of various species have been marked in Denmark (Vildbiologisk Station, Kalø), Schleswig-Holstein, W. Germany (Beringergemeinschaft Nordfriesisches Wattenmeer), the Dutch Waddenzee (Steltioperringgroep FFF; Vrije Universitet Amsterdam), the Zeeland Delta area of the Netherlands (Rijkswaterstaat, Deltadienst, Hoofdafdeling milieu en inrichting; Laboratorium voor Oecologie der Dieren (RUG), Gent), Baie du Mont St Michel, France (CRBPO, GEFLA, Universities of Durham and of Rennes, IWRB), the Ribble estuary in NW England (S.W. Lancashire Ringing Group and Liverpool Polytechnic), the Wash, W. England (Wash Wader Ringing Group) and the Tees estuary, NE England (Durham University). Further marking will take place at some of these sites and in the Moray Firth, NE Scotland (Highland Ringing Group and Nature Conservancy Council). To date (1/12/81), approximately 5,500 birds have been marked, despite the usual difficulties. These include gales and exceptionally high tides in many parts of the Waddenzee, and the new experience for those of us at Baie du Mont St. Michel of working in a site with a tidal range of 15m, the largest in Europe. Here, estimating the high water mark of the next tide may mean allowing for a difference of 0.5m between tides, if the conditions remain the same - which they often do not, of course!

Many readers will know of the difficulties in finding suitable long-lasting dyes for shorebirds. The majority of the new dyes have lasted as well as our tests suggested. One dye is giving some problems and tests of replacements are under way.

Observer network and sightings

It has been very encouraging to see how many of the observers have re-registered to cover sites for the second season of this project. More are joining all the time, and are very welcome. Further coverage of some of the large estuaries, especially where marking is taking place, such as the Wash, would be very welcome. Checks here allow full use of the marking work, by quantifying the numbers of birds staying in the same area, to compare with the number moving elsewhere. Also, reliable information on movements within an estuary can be obtained. More coverage on the mainland coast of Europe would also be particularly welcome but we would be grateful for further offers of help anywhere.

Can we remind both regular and "casual" observers of the points to look out for on marked birds:

Colour of dye, its position on the bird (in front of, or behind the legs),
Colour of leg flag the position of this (above or below the "knee"; which leg)

Dyes being used include yellow/orange, red, green, light blue and dark or mauve-blue. Leg flags may be red, yellow, white, green, blue or black. The next point may seem a little silly to some people but confusions have occurred: when describing left or right (e.g. on which leg a flag is seen) please use the bird's left or right, as the observer's depends on which way the bird is facing when seen!

Participants in the project will know that we are not aiming to discover spectacular movements in terms of distance, but rather to measure the ways in which our various estuaries are used by the various wader populations each year - quite a spectacular phenomenon in itself. However, to produce these results takes time and a great deal of analysis. Therefore, perhaps we can allow ourselves, in this progress report, to mention a few of the most remarkable reports received this autumn.

Perhaps two of the most notable to us involved two catches in Schleswig-Holstein in September. Fifteen Grey Plovers Pluvialis squatarola caught there included an individually colour-ringed bird with a long history of observations in Dave Townshend's detailed study at Teesmouth. One of 13 Dunlins Calidris alpina marked a few days earlier in Schleswig-Holstein turned up a week later on Patrick Meire's study area at Vianan in the Zeeland Delta of the Netherlands. An Oystercatcher Haematopus ostralegus marked in the Zeeland Delta and a juvenile Knot Calidris canutus in the Waddenzee island of Schiermonnikoog were both seen in Kent, England. Two Dunlin marked in the Zeeland Delta were seen on the Plym, Devon within a week of being marked. A Bar-tailed Godwit Limosa lapponica from the Wash moved to Aberlady Bay, E. Scotland. Dunlin from the Wash have already been seen on Budle Bay, Northumberland; the Dee, Cheshire; Essex (where a Knot from the Wash was also seen); Calvados, France and, most remarkably, Asilah, Morocco. Even more outstanding is the Sanderling Calidris alba also seen at Asilah from 18 to 27 September as this was identifiable as one of only 5 marked at Heacham, the Wash, on 31 August. Some of these sightings of cases in which very few birds were marked show how powerful this technique can be in generating urgently required information rapidly. Particularly where larger numbers have been marked, we are very hopeful of obtaining enough data to allow sound quantitative analysis of the movement patterns within the same season.

Computerisation of ringing data

Our analysis of year-to-year differences depend mainly, of course, on ringing results. The response of ringers to the use of the "green forms" has been excellent. Some ringers have probably been wondering when they will hear more from us. The answer is soon. As explained in our previous progress report, we have taken advantage of the relative lull in work of Durham University's punching service over the vacation, so that now almost all data sent in has been transferred to computer file. Unfortunately, this in itself involves quite a lot of work on our part, preventing us running the checking programs, performing the manual checks and sending material back to the ringers. However, this is now in hand.

We must send our apologies to anyone waiting over the past few weeks for replies to letters: we have been involved personally in much of the field-work described above and consequently away from the office. Our thanks go again to all involved in the project. Participants may like to note that some interim results from the study have already been used by the Nature Conservancy Council in connection with further reclamation proposals in the Thames estuary. Apart from this, the project links in with several more local investigations on individual estuaries, such as the Zeeland Delta, the Wash, Teesmouth, the Firth of Forth and the Moray Firth where large scale developments have been proposed or are under way.

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