

WSG Ruff census spring 1997/1998 - results 1997

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INTRODUCTION

In spring 1997, a new WSG-project was launched - a two-year spring census of migrating Ruffs in Europe (see Bulletin 82: 8-9). The goal of this project is to shed some light on the spring migration of Ruffs in Europe, focussing particularly on the timing of migration, the differences in sex-ratio in time and space and the recognition of important spring staging areas.

Since there was only a short time for preparation in the first months of 1997, we intended to cover most of the known important Ruff sites in Europe in 1997 and 'to get ready' for 1998. Following the call for help in the April issue of the WSG Bulletin, responses were received from a number of countries: Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands. Contacts were also made in Hungary and Slovenia. This paper summarises the results of the 1997 census and provides information about the spring census in 1998. As not all data have yet been received it must be stressed that the figures given are preliminary.

RESULTS SPRING 1997

In Table 1 the results of the spring census are summarised by country or region. The results received are from counts performed in five countries, and in no less than 112 different localities. In Lower Saxony in Germany and the northern provinces of the Netherlands the censuses were virtually complete, while the coverage in the other countries was (mostly) far from complete. The counts in the Netherlands all refer to roost counts, while in the other countries counts were either solely or also performed during the day, because there was no particular roosting behaviour.

The highest numbers were counted in the last weekend of March (the first simultaneous counting period), the total reaching over 40,000 individuals. During the other counting periods, numbers were lower, especially during the last one, with a total of 9,530 birds. The preliminary results

from Tipperne (Denmark) are not yet included in this last figure, where about 1,500 Ruffs were counted. The totals are dominated by the numbers which were counted in Fryslân, one of the northern provinces of Holland. Besides this region, significant numbers were seen in Italy. It is worth noting that the co-ordinators from Denmark (O. Thorup), Lower Saxony in Germany (T. Melter) and Estonia (J. Elts) reported a relatively poor migration of Ruffs, compared to former years. In Fryslân the numbers were very similar to 1995 when about 42,000 Ruffs were counted in the same period (Wymenga 1995).

Table 1. Total numbers of Ruffs counted per region in spring 1997 during four simultaneous counting periods. N refers to the number of different localities which were counted per region. It Italy, Fr France, NI the Netherlands, DI Germany, Dm Denmark and Es Estonia.

Country/region	n	28-30 March	11-13 April	25-27 April	9-11 May
Po Delta (It)	5	3.055	1.514	1.224	106
Ardennes (Fr)	3	17	131	82	67
Fryslân (NI)	45	36.140	35.064	29.409	8.379
Overijssel (NI)	15	492	529	399	25
Lower Saxony (DI)	39	401	512	763	629
Ribe (Dm)	3	0	0	251	324
Matsalu/east coast (Es)	2	0	0	0	0
total	112	40.105	37.750	32.128	9.530

Although the counts were far from complete for the whole of Europe, Table 1 shows that in Italy the highest numbers are seen at the end of March, while further to the north the peak shifts towards the end of April. One must be careful with these figures however, since only those from Holland and Germany give a complete picture. A short account of the spring migration is given for each country below.

Italy: In Italy, five localities were counted. The most southerly location concerns the Circeo National Park on the Mediterranean coast south of Rome. The other sites were situated to the north in the Po Delta. Ruffs were encountered in different habitats. In the Po Delta, for instance, they were seen foraging on hay fields, on

ploughed fields and also on fertilised and drained grasslands. In April, large flocks consisting mostly of females were recorded feeding in newly flooded rice fields. However, numbers changed rapidly in April.

France: From France, results were received from the Ardennes, where relative small numbers were seen on the sewage ponds of a sugar factory (Attigny) and flooded areas in two valleys. Peak numbers were counted around mid April.

Netherlands: In the Netherlands, counts were performed in different provinces and along the large rivers. By far the highest numbers were present in Fryslân in the northern part of the Netherlands. Significant numbers were also seen in Overijssel (Table 1). In other provinces in the north and centre of the country (and along the large rivers) numbers were very low.

In Fryslân, there were already more than 17,000 Ruffs present around mid March on the roosts which fringe Lake Yssel. Highest numbers were seen during the weekend of 28-30 March. Although the coverage was quite good, we believe the real number to be even higher than 36,000, since we missed some crucial roosts. After 20 April, there was an obvious influx of female Ruffs in the province, which was indicated by a changing sex-ratio (see below).

Most Ruffs were found roosting on inundated pastures and bare sand banks in shallow water along the coast of Lake Yssel. Large concentrations were counted in the south-western part of Fryslân, where more than 75% of the numbers was present. The birds were mainly foraging on fertilised and drained pastures on peat and peat-and-clay soils. Observations on foraging behaviour showed that they seem to prefer fairly short, mainly grazed pastures.

Germany: Ruff counts were carried out in Lower Saxony, where 38 sites were checked, and one site in the Salziger See (Country Sachsen Anhalt). Numbers peaked at the end of April (Table 1). The co-ordinator reported that this was a very poor spring for Ruffs, especially when compared to former years. In 1989, for instance the number of migrating Ruffs in NW-Germany amounted to

nearly 15,000 individuals (OAG Münster & OAG Schleswig Holstein 1992).

Denmark: The sites counted in Denmark were around Ribe and the Tipperne reserve. At the latter site up to 1,500 Ruffs were counted, while near Ribe numbers reached just over 300 birds (Table 1). In Denmark the migration of Ruffs was also rather poor compared to other years.

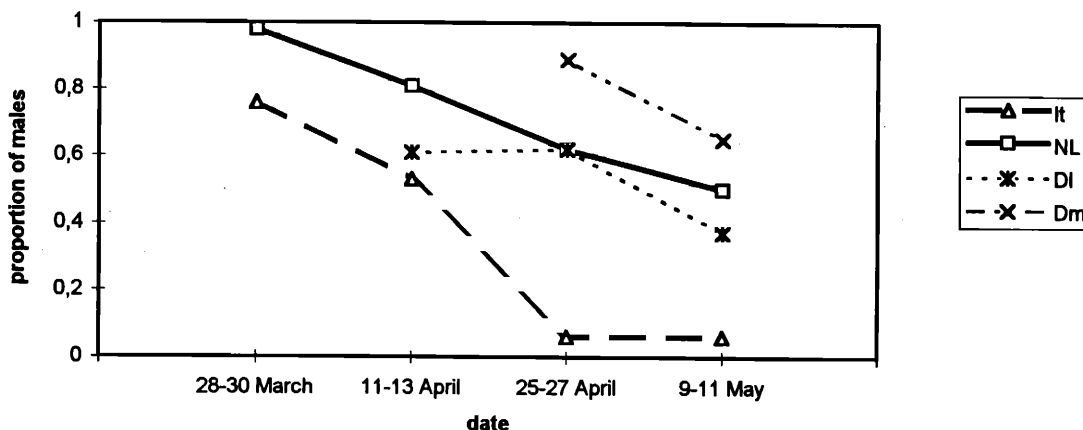
Estonia: The spring migration in Estonia was extremely unusual. Most wader species arrived much later than usual and the same applied to Ruffs. At the beginning of May only a few birds were present in Matsalu (west coast). The migration of Ruffs had finished by the end of May. Frequent visits to the Rapina polder (near Lake Peipsi) in East Estonia revealed no birds, while in other years several hundreds of Ruffs are present there.

SEX-RATIOS

Although in spring 1997 only limited attention was paid to the sex-ratio of groups of migrating Ruffs, the first results (Figure 1) show that such information can give a valuable insight into the course of the migration. The main pattern is that the proportion of males is very high at the start of the migration and drops sharply during April. This is probably caused by an influx of females and a simultaneous northward migration of males. In Fryslân for instance, where the total number of birds was fairly stable till the end of April, the proportion of males dropped markedly in the course of that month. This means that there must have been a significant turn-over with both immigrating females and emigrating males.

Furthermore, it is clear from Figure 1, that there is an apparent difference between different areas. The pattern in each area seems rather similar, but there is a clear difference in timing. We still need much more data to get a clear picture of these migration patterns.

Figure 1. Sex-ratio of migrating Ruffs in four areas in Europe in spring 1997. Note that the sample-size is rather small, so these figures may not be good representatives. It Italy (n respectively 740, 726, 500 and 106), NL Netherlands (n resp. 244, 84, 824 and 340), DL Germany (n resp. -, 91, 314 and 276) and Dm Denmark (n resp. -, -, 251 and 324).



SPRING CENSUS IN 1998

The first results from spring 1997 are encouraging and we hope this will lead wader people in other countries to join the simultaneous spring census in 1998. It will be very worthwhile to see if the low number of migrating Ruffs in the northern countries was incidental, or whether there is a real decline in this region. And of course we will try to get a picture of the total number of birds migrating through Europe in spring. We are particularly interested in getting an indication of the numbers migrating at different times through areas where full coverage is unlikely but where large concentrations of Ruffs are known to migrate in spring (e.g. Turkey, Sivash in the Ukraine and other extensive wetland areas). This is not only important to identify key areas for Ruffs in spring, but also to put the figures from the western part of Europe into perspective. Information on sex-ratios would also be very useful to see if differences in migration patterns occur.

We need a lot of support in countries in southern and eastern Europe, and we would also like to extend our Ruff-network in the north. Please respond; any information is welcome, whether you co-ordinate or perform counts yourself, or if you have ideas for people who can be contacted. Using the WSG network, I will try to contact people in each European country this winter to get coverage as complete as possible. A simultaneous census on this scale can reveal very useful information, but it is crucial that these are a lot of contributors.....

In Table 2, the simultaneous counting periods are given. Note that these dates have changed in comparison to the 1998 data published in the April issue of this year. The census periods are now linked with other international waterbirds counts in order to optimise census efforts. The simultaneous counts should preferably be carried out on the Friday evening (roost counts). Alternative dates should not differ by more than two days from the principal counting date.

Anyone who wants to participate in the spring census in 1998 can contact the project co-ordinator (address given below) for more information. You can also join by performing counts in the indicated census periods and sending the data to the project co-ordinator afterwards. Data on sex-ratios should also be gathered in the allocated periods. For statistical reasons and analysis of the complete data set, please note for each group checked: date, group size and number of males, and send these basic data to the co-ordinator.

Table 2. Simultaneous census periods in spring 1998. Note that these data have changed in comparison to earlier publications! The periods and dates between [] are facultative and probably particularly interesting for people from southern Europe [12-15 February] and northern and eastern Europe [28-31 May].

simultaneous counting periods spring 1998	preferable date
[12-15 February 1998]	[13 February]
26 February - 1 March 1998	28 February
12 - 15 March 1998	13 March
2-5 April 1998	3 April
16-19 April 1998	17 April
30 April - 3 May 1998	1 May
14 - 17 May 1998	15 May
[28-31 May 1998]	[29 May]

CALL FOR 1990 AND 1995 DATA

While gathering Ruff information, I noticed that especially in 1990 and 1995 a lot of spring counts of waders have been carried out in a number of European countries. In 1990, for instance, a WIWO-project in the Mediterranean Basin was carried out and a lot of information was collected on the timing of spring migration. In that year counts were also carried out in Bulgaria, the Netherlands and Germany (e.g. Nankinov *et al.* 1997, OAG Münster & OAG Schleswig Holstein 1992). In 1995, similar Ruff counts were organised in parts of the Netherlands (Wymenga 1995), Hungary (Góder & Rimóczi 1996) and other countries. It seems very worthwhile to try to reconstruct the Ruff migration in these years, especially when they can be compared with fresh data from 1997 and 1998. Therefore I would be very pleased to receive all Ruff counts in spring 1990 and 1995 between the end of February and the end of May. All contributors will be named in an overall publication.

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