GREENSHANK STUDIES

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I remember when, as a schoolboy in Ireland, I saw my first Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*. It was a mild September day following several days of heavy rain; the ground was sodden and pools of water had formed in hollows in the close-cropped grass. On climbing a bank close to the shore of the lough I peered over the top and there were five Greenshank loafing and preening in a freshwater pool not 10 metres away. What excitement, my first Greenshank, and what a magnificent view. They were obviously tired from migration and allowed me to view them through binoculars at that range, picking out all the standard identification criteria. Since that memorable day I have seen thousands of Greenshank in many different places but the thrill of seeing yet another one still hasn't left me. The powerful flight, the clean cut lines, the strong "tew-tew-tew" call-note, the quick bob of the head when watching you, the running through the shallow water with head down and bill submerged while chasing fish fry, are all distinctive features that attract me to this bird. I have not had the opportunity to watch the Greenshank at "home" in the lonely marshes and moorlands of the northern hemisphere breeding range but rather in the less exciting loughs of Ireland when on migration or in a myriad of localities on its African wintering ground.

It was a remark in a letter from a friend of mine in Scotland, as well as an apparent lack of knowledge of this bird in its winter quarters as evidenced by Desmond Nethersole-Thompson in both his monographs on this wader, that led me to start taking a greater interest, other than aesthetic, in the bird.

Initially studies were very basic, involving observations on numbers, habitat utilisation, timing of occurrence, etc., together with some ringing studies. However, the latter were fairly low-key owing to the difficulty in trapping Greenshank in any appreciable numbers. For example, I only ringed 150 birds between July 1970 and December 1981. From these, measurements, mass and moult data were obtained, all but mass being facilitated by utilising specimens from several museums in southern Africa. A paper incorporating all this initial data was published in Ostrich (Tree, 1979).

In July 1976 a colour ringing study was started in the Salisbury (now Harare) area in which birds were marked with individual colour combinations on the tibiotarsus. From this it was hoped to determine the differences in feeding habitat utilised by adult and first-year birds, consistency of flock formation, degree of fidelity to feeding zones while present, distance

travelled to roosting areas, *ortstreue* - differences between adults and first-year birds, whether first-year summering birds also overwintered in the same area, and for possible determination of movements within southern Africa. In Zimbabwe the individual marking of birds was stopped in January 1980 due to an almost total lack of subsequent results. This can possibly be due to the widespread creation of dams in Mashonaland, hence the difficulty in tracking down individual birds. However, in October 1981 colour ringing was resumed but on a site-colour-coding basis only. Zimbabwe also lies on a migration route and many birds pass through quickly never to be noted again. Further, migration routes appear to vary from year to year dependent on the intensity of the preceding rains. A westward routeway shift occurs in years following high rainfall when many pans and river beds in the west are highly suitable for waders, whilst water bodies in the east are overfull and overgrown. In years following poor rains western habitats are generally dry and eastern habitats are well exposed.

Following up on this problem I then decided to colour-ring Greenshank at the termination of their migration route on the southern coast of Africa. I chose the Kowie Estuary, at Port Alfred, as it was an area that I knew well and visited virtually annually but the most important aspect was that there was a retired ornithologist, David Boddam-Whetham, living there and he was very keen to start up regular observations on the Greenshank. The first eight birds (five adults and three first-year) were ringed in December/January 1977/78. Five of these returned the following year and subsequently four have returned each year up to 1981/1982, the missing bird having been recovered in northern Russia. Another batch of ten birds was colour-ringed in December 1980, four of which have returned in the subsequent season.

From this small sample of colour-ringed birds a lot of data has been gained on arrival and departure, feeding habits, and a variety of other aspects of its biology, while many apparent anomalies have manifested themselves and are still the subject of continuing study. The interpretation of many of the results is still at very much of a hypothetical stage and it is obvious that a much larger sample needs to be colour-ringed over a period of time followed up by much field observation over a fairly large area of the Eastern Cape at least. This is a long-term study and slowly a picture is emerging of this bird on one tiny part of its non-breeding grounds. But in particular it emphasises the tremendous importance of being able to recognise individual birds in the field over a long period of time, in this case using coloured Darvic rings, some colours of which appear to be retentive over quite a long period of time.

REFERENCES:-

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Tree A.J. 1979. Biology of the Greenshank in southern Africa Ostrich 50: 240-251

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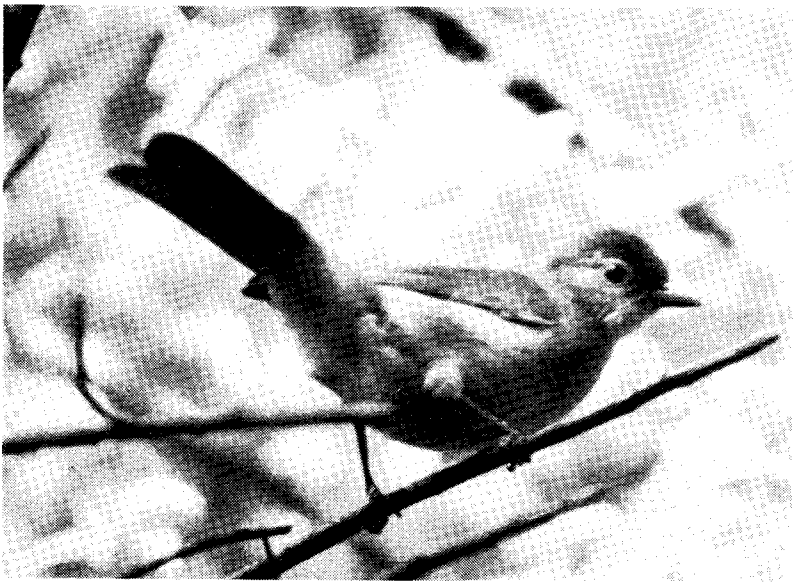

A Yellowbellied Bulbul *Chlorocichla flaviventris* photographed by T. B. Oatley on a patch of forest in Durban in 1952. The forest no longer exists, having been cleared in the mid-fifties to make way for sports fields. Apart from filling a space, there is a hint to be taken here. Ringers undertaking long-term ringing projects would be wise to choose study areas that have reasonable prospects of remaining undeveloped or 'unchanged' for the duration of the project, particularly when bush or forest habitats are involved.