BIRD-IN-THE-HAND

AGEING AND SEXING THE LITTLE STINT

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Like most palaearctic waders the Little Stint is rather difficult to age and sex satisfactorily. Wader ageing is usually based on plumage state, and sexing on measurements. In the Little Stint ageing is difficult once juvenile plumage is lost. Furthermore the majority of first year palaearctic migrants that visit southern Africa have only a partial moult of the remiges (Tree, in prep.), while the Little Stint has a complete moult like an adult.

The following scheme for ageing and sexing the Little Stint is based on a comparatively small sample of museum skins. It can be used as a guide until a larger sample has been examined.

Sexing

Fig.1. shows the correlation between wing and bill lengths for a sample of 23 females and 21 males from the National Museum, Bulawayo (courtesy of M.P.S.Irwin). Wing lengths were measured to 0,5mm and bill lengths to 0,1mm. Although there appears to be a fairly substantial overlap in measurements, over 60% of the total can be sexed on this basis. The data are tabulated below:-

Wing Length		Range	Sample	Mean
	♂♂	91,5 - 99*	21	94,5
	♀♀	95 - 102,5	23	98,4

* The range may only be up to 97mm, the solitary 98mm and 99mm wing lengths may have been from mis-sexed birds. It is highly probable that some specimens were incorrectly sexed on skinning, in particular two specimens of my sample identified as females fell into the low part of the male range and have been treated as such.

Using wing-length only as a sexing guide, males may be classified as those with wing-lengths less than 95mm, females more than 99mm. This would sex about 40% of my sample.

Bill Length		Range	Sample	Mean
	♂♂	16,8 - 18,9	21	17,8
	♀♀	17,3 - 20,0	23	18,8

Using bill-length only as a sexing guide, ♂♂ may be classified as those with bills 17mm or less and females 19mm or more. About 40% of my sample can be sexed on this basis.

Ageing

In central Africa the first juveniles may arrive as early as mid-August but the main arrival is from late September onwards. The early arrivals in August are mainly second year birds that probably spent the northern summer well to the south of their breeding grounds; for a while these birds may be easily recognised by the varying amounts of breeding dress and relatively unworn remiges. This age group appears to constitute overwintering populations,

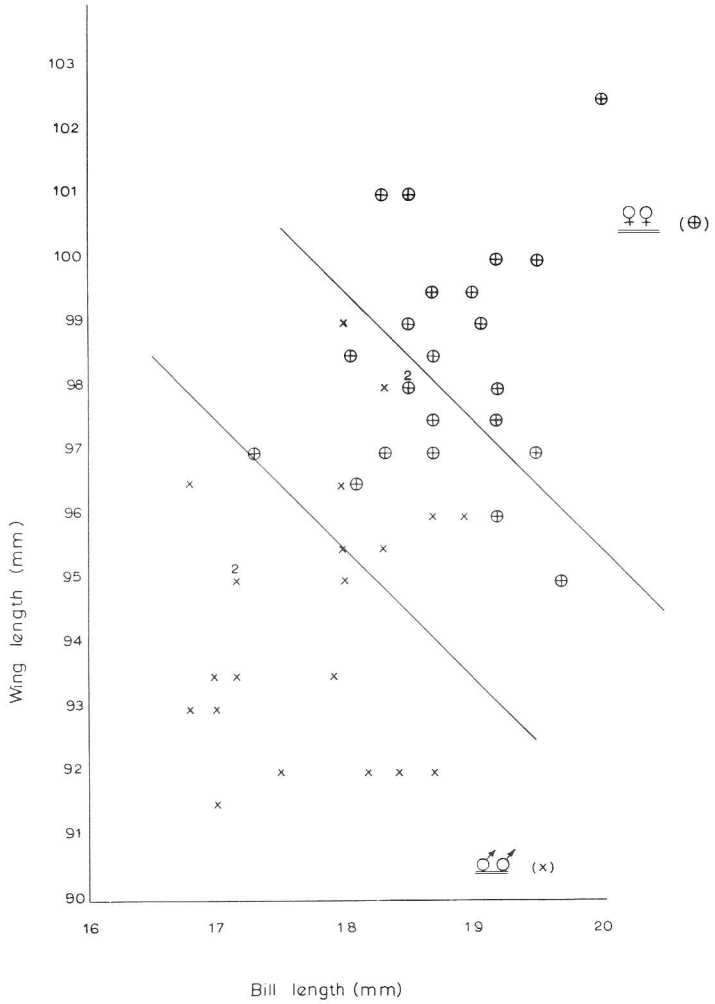

Fig 1 Little Stint — correlation between wing and bill lengths.

except for the occasional injured adult. In southern Africa post-breeding adults arrive in faded/worn plumage and are easily separated on this point.

Juveniles: The feathers of the mantle and scapulars are brownish-black with narrow, pale buff edging. The wing coverts are dark brown with a similar narrow, pale buff edging around the entire feather. The breast feathers have broad brownish centres with pale buff edging giving a rather spotted appearance.

The breast feathers are lost very rapidly to be replaced by the normal poorly and finely marked non-breeding plumage. The remaining juvenile feathering, apart from the wing coverts, is lost gradually and rarely shows after mid-November. By January only a few juvenile inner lesser and median wing coverts remain. Birds start to assume varying amounts of breeding plumage from March onwards and it is in March and early April that they are most difficult to separate from adults moulting into breeding plumage. Most adults should have left by mid-April and first year birds do not assume breeding dress on the lesser wing coverts or the breast. The amount of breeding dress assumed on the upperparts is very variable, from almost none to almost complete, but the mantle and scapular feathers never assume the richness of colouring of the adults and are usually mixed rich and pale buff.

Moult is much more rapid than that of the adult and may take only 60 to 80 days as against 90+ days in adult birds. Moult of the remiges takes place from late November onwards and some birds may still be found moulting in April with exceptional incidences later. The moult of the remiges is complete.

2nd Year: These birds may be recognised as mentioned above and usually quite well into moult, especially where the remiges are relatively unworn. However, it is not possible to be certain of ageing all members of this age group successfully as the season progresses.

Adult: Usually arrive in worn plumage and normally with few traces of breeding dress. Their moult is started in late September but some birds may not start till well into November. All adults and 2nd year birds should have completed their major moult by the end of February, a few may tail off into early March.

Both 2nd year and adult birds in full non-breeding plumage are slightly greyer on the upper-parts than first year birds and have broader pale margins to the feathers of the upper-parts. Neither have pale edging to the lesser and median wing coverts.

ADDENDUM - Kittlitz Plover

It should be noted that the weight criteria given for the Kittlitz Plover (Safring 2(2):23-25), do not apply to the Cape coastal birds. The latter are larger and heavier. It is not known what the position is in Natal.

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