# FEATURE ARTICLES

The following is taken from British Birds 68:53-57 (1975) and we are grateful to the editor for permission to reproduce it here. It contains certain points which are most relevant to us.

## EDITORIAL: What results from Bird-Ringing?

The bird ringing scheme in Britain, run by the British Trust for Ornithology, is the largest outside North America, but there is cause for disquiet in the relatively small output of published analysis and of other papers making use of ringing data. With admirable persistence an annual report has been published giving summary tables of the numbers of birds ringed and recovered, together with a highly selective list of detailed recoveries, dealing with only a fraction of the year's total. Recently, rather more information has been compressed into the same space by the use of maps and tables. Also included in each report is a list of the papers and short notes published in the year in question that are based wholly or partly on data derived from the ringing scheme. A survey of the twelve reports for 1961-72 reveals just over 100 titles in these lists, of which about 80 are based mainly on ringing results, the remainder partly so. This total may seem quite commendable but it is small in comparison with the amount of data available. It is also heavily biased towards the interests of rather few professionals and students pursuing their particular subject.

The sheer quantity of data being gathered by Britain's 1 600 ringers is staggering. About half a million birds are ringed each year, while there is an unknown but undoubtedly large number of recaptures. This mass ringing produces an average of 12 000 recoveries annually. Encouraged by the BTO, the majority of ringers do not just ring and release each bird, but also record weight, several measurements, moult data, and so on. However, not only is this latter material very little used, a considerable portion of it is of very little use. For example, the solemn measuring of the bill and tarsus of passerines, which, excluding nestlings, amount to around two-thirds of all birds ringed, cannot be remotely justified beyond the taking of a reasonable sample of, say, 100 birds in each age and sex class. And this needs be done only once, not repeated year after year up and down the country. If anyone feels that such a total waste of time and effort has some purpose, where are the published results to prove it?

Ignoring purposeless mensuration, there is still a great wealth of information being accumulated both by the ringing scheme as a whole and by individual ringers. Yet the majority of papers are coming neither from the staff of the BTO nor from the amateur ringer. Nearly two-thirds of those published during 1961-72 were written by professional biologists and full-time students at university or other institutions, all of whom clearly found ringing a most useful tool. BTO staff contributed about one-fifth of the papers, and amateurs, not all ringers, slightly fewer.

It must be pointed out at once that the BTO is not really in a position to increase greatly its output of ringing analyses. The administration of the scheme is financed by a contract with the Nature Conservancy Council, plus not insignificant contributions

from the ringers themselves. There is little or nothing left over to allow either the personnel or the time to be devoted to working up the results. This imbalance can only be overcome by further funding, and it is to be hoped that the NCC can be persuaded that future contracts should include money for analyses as well as for administration.

Although published papers from BTO staff are few, a considerable amount of mostly small-scale analyses is carried out by them particularly in answering specific queries that arise, in compiling maps and tables for the annual ringing report, and to provide data for a recently devised scheme for the monitoring of populations of certain common species. It remains the contribution of the amateur ringer that is so disappointing and without apparent cause.

In recent years, the BTO has encouraged ringers to form themselves into informal groups to coordinate study of a particular species, or for the more efficient working of a trapping site. The species involved include waders (Charadriiformes), tits (Paridae), Pied Flycatcher, Ficedula hypoleuca and Acrocephalus warblers. Apart from the other advantages of such co-operative work, one of the stated aims of such groups has been the analysis and publication of some of their data. So far -- and most of the groups have been in existence for at least four years -- this aim has remained little more than a pious hope.

One form of output has increased has been the delivery of a short talk at the BTO's annual Ringing and Migration Conference. Many of these lectures are necessarily interim statements on work in progress, but so few completed studies have been written up and published that it seems obvious that most speakers regard such a talk as a substitute for preparing a finished, publishable paper. This it most certainly is not. There is no permanent record, even as abstracts, of these conference talks, and no way a subsequent researcher can discover what was said or what results were given.

The scope for analysis is enormous. Apart from the obvious fields of migration, local population studies, mortality and biometrics, it is worth pointing out that in recently published papers there has been a considerable bias towards certain species, leaving others completely ignored. Not surprisingly, the species that have been studied include those with high recovery rates and others which have interested full-time workers. Just under half the papers in the last twelve years have dealt with the Manx Shearwater, Puffinus puffinus, Cormorant Phalacrocorax carbo, and Shag P. aristotelis, plus wildfowl (Anatidae), gulls (Larinae), pigeons (Columbidae) and thrushes (Turdinae), considering in detail some 21 species. Yet the 1972 ringing report (the latest available) shows an equal number of species with over 500 recoveries and valuable analyses have been published using over half that total -- which have not been written up for years. By far the worst example is the Sand Martin, Riparia riparia, for which there was a BTO-sponsored ringing enquiry over several years in the early 1960's. So far, almost nothing has been published concerning the more than 11 000 available recoveries and several thousand re-traps. Similarly, the enormous effort that has been put into mass wader ringing in the last 15 years has resulted in hardly any published papers.

Such serious deficiencies must make one wonder whether there is any justification for such large scale ringing. Enen the relatively small interference in the life of a bird caused by catching and ringing it should not be carried out solely to provide a satisfying, interesting, indeed at times, exciting hobby, for a small number of people. There is so much to be learnt from ringing that the lack of published results commensurate with the time, effort and money put into it becomes less a matter of the sheer waste of laboriously gathered information though it is certainly that, and much more a complete failure to see the potential value of the results. Although a proportion of what can be discovered from ringing is pure knowledge that cannot be applied in any useful way, though none the worse from that, there is a great deal to be learnt that is instantly relevant in the fields of conservation and of species or habitat management. The use made by migratory birds of threatened habitats throughout their range, or the causes and effects of changes in the mortality rate of a species, are just two examples.

Every ringer should be seriously considering both the present values of his ringing and the way in which he can present his findings to a wider public. There is a powerful case to be made for much co-operation between ringers, coupled with strong leadership from the BTO. Some progress has already been made along this road but clearly much more needs to be done.

---

## THE TIMING OF WING MOULT IN SOME PALAEARCTIC WADERS WINTERING IN EAST AFRICA

By: D. Pearson

This article is reproduced from the British Wader Study Group Bulletin 12 of July 1974. We are grateful to the editor for permission to reproduce it here.

Palaearctic waders which winter at temperate latitudes usually complete their main annual wing moult in late summer or early autumn, either near the breeding grounds or shortly after the completion of autumn migration. In either case, moult is a rapid process involving extensive feather replacement and high energy requirements over a period of a few weeks, and birds are usually fully moulted well before the winter months. The young of such species retain their juvenile flight feathers throughout their first year and undergo their first moult when about a year old, only shortly before the moult period of older birds. With species which migrate to tropical wintering areas the situation is very different. Adult wing moult is partly or wholly delayed until after autumn migration and may begin as late as October or even November, persisting commonly into December, January and in some cases March. The young of a number of smaller tropical wintering species undergo a complete moult of their flight feathers during their first winter, thus fitting in an extra moult as compared with similar species wintering at higher latitudes.