

AGEING OF RUFF *Philomachus pugnax*

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Information gained from the recapture of Ruff on the Witwatersrand tends to disprove one theory on the ageing of this species. The theory, used by some overseas and local workers, suggests that the leg colour of the Ruff changes from grey or green in juvenile birds to orange, pink or vermillion in birds of two-and-a-half years or more. In the transition from juvenile to third year the grey or green is present in the form of patches and/or spots on a background of orange, pink or vermillion. The patches and/or spots are said to disappear by the third year, leaving a plain coloured leg.

The leg colour of nearly all Ruff trapped by the Rand Water Ringing Group has been noted and, on recapturing the bird, the leg colour again is noted. The table below shows the details of three Ruff recaptured after at least one season. Ruff recaptured within a season have so far shown no noticeable change in leg colour and are thus not included.

| <u>Ring No.</u> | <u>Age</u> | <u>Sex</u> | <u>Ringing Date</u> | <u>Leg Colour</u> | <u>Recap. Date</u> | <u>Leg Colour</u> |
|-----------------|------------|------------|---------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| 4-14832 | ad | ♀ | 30.09.72 | 50% orange 50% green | 08.09.73 | green |
| 5-18720 | ad | ♂ | 28.10.72 | orange | 22.09.73 | orange |
| 4-11550 | ad | ♀ | 04.12.71 | not noted | 13.10.73 | 80% orange 20% green |

From the above it can be seen that the leg colour of bird 4-14832 changed from orange/green to green, and bird 5-18720 did not undergo any leg colour change. Unfortunately the leg colour of bird 4-11550 was not noted when originally captured but the plumage indicated that it was an adult bird. This bird was at least 40 months old when recaptured (assuming that it hatched late in the 1970 breeding season) and in accordance with the above mentioned theory, should have had plain coloured legs by the time it was recaptured.

All juvenile Ruff captured to date have either had green, lead-grey or yellow-grey legs. 21 out of a total of 370 adult Ruff captured between September and November 1973 had grey legs (10 birds with green legs, 7 birds with olive legs and 4 birds with grey legs). A juvenile Ruff can be recognised by the cream coloured fringes to all wing coverts and back feathers while the adult wintering bird has a uniform grey on the wing coverts and back.

These results tend to indicate that leg colour is not a reliable criterion for ageing of the Ruff, and at present only two ageing categories can be relied upon, viz. juvenile birds (NUBRA age code 3) and full-grown/adult birds whose hatching season is unknown (NUBRA age code 2 or 4).

With the increased interest in water ringing in southern Africa it is hoped that enough data will soon be available to be able to age the Ruff more accurately.