



LANIOTURDUS

VOL. 43 (3) 2010

www.namibiabirdclub.org

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DEMASIUS E Kavango/Caprivi
Trip 2009

RARITIES AND INTERESTING
OBSERVATIONS

ANSWERS TO THE BIRD QUIZ

Editorial

In a past editorial (Lanioturdus 42-4) I mentioned the changing distributions of certain species. One species which seems to be a lot more common around Windhoek these days is the pin-tailed whydah. When I first moved to Windhoek some 28 years ago this was a species which one saw perhaps twice in five years. Now it is regularly seen at Avis Dam and we are getting more and more reports of these birds from suburban gardens all around Windhoek. Its host species, the common waxbill, is not a terribly common species around Windhoek and I certainly have not noticed any great increase in the numbers of these birds. However, both Roberts VII and Trevor Carnaby (Beat about the Bush *Birds* – Jacana Media 2008), indicate that it is suspected that the red-billed firefinch may be a secondary host although this is not proven. Come on you citizen scientists out there – this is a chance to make a name for yourself in the world of ornithology. We have a burgeoning population of red-billed firefinches in and around Windhoek and if they are indeed secondary hosts to pin-tailed whydahs this might just be the time and place to prove it.

In Search of Individually Colour-ringed Bar-tailed Godwits in Namibia

Bernard Spaans & Laurens van Kooten

Introduction

In January 2009 we visited the mudflats of Walvis Bay and Sandwich Harbour in Namibia to look for colour-ringed Bar-tailed Godwits and to determine the density of these colour-ringed birds. At the Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research on the island of Texel (NIOZ) we have been colour-ringing Bar-tailed Godwits since spring 2001 and have individually marked over 3400 birds. A large proportion (over 90%) of these birds belong to the subspecies *Limosa lapponica taymyrensis* which breeds in Siberia and winters in West Africa. With 3 resightings in Namibia, up to 2008, of birds ringed in the Netherlands we already knew that some individuals migrate that far south. For more information on this colour-ringing project see www.nioz.nl (go via research, Scientific departments and Marine Ecology to colour-rings).

Marking birds individually offers many research possibilities. With the large number of resightings we get, we are now well able to estimate the annual survival and with that we can estimate the number of marked individuals alive at a certain moment. By combining the density of marked birds with the number of marked birds alive, it is theoretically possible to estimate the size of the whole population. Because of the effect of site-faithfulness to the ringing site, it is important to determine the density in an area far away from the site of marking where random mixing of marked among unmarked birds is assumed. That's why we went to the Banc d'Arguin in Mauritania in December 2007 to determine ring density of Bar-tailed Godwits marked during spring migration in the Netherlands. We controlled 11 700 Bar-tailed Godwits there and in this sample we found 38 of our colour-ringed birds. In other words 1 in every 308 (11 700/38) Bar-tailed Godwits was colour-ringed. This resulted in a total population estimate of 240 000 individuals, much lower than the estimate of

600 000 based on counts (Delany *et al.* 2009). One of the assumptions for doing an estimate with ring-density is that the marked birds disperse evenly over the wintering area. If this assumption is not met, this could explain our relatively low population estimate. To see whether the ring-density in Mauritania differs from that in another parts of the wintering area, we decided to go to Namibia, the most southern part of their flyway, to try to measure actual ring-densities there.

The fieldwork

From 19 to 22 and on 26 January 2009 we visited the mudflats and the salt pans around Walvis Bay. The only place where we found reasonable numbers of Bar-tailed Godwits was the promenade along the lagoon in the south of Walvis Bay town. The daily numbers we were able to control for colour-rings varied between 125 and 270. Including birds foraging far away on the west side of the lagoon (only well visible in the early morning), we never counted more than 280 Bar-tailed Godwits in this area. We did not find any colour-ringed birds among them.

From 23 to 25 January we stayed in the northern part of Sandwich Harbour, joining the team that was doing the midwinter bird-count there (*Southern hemisphere mid summer count – Ed*). Here we had a nice view of a high tide roost of Bar-tailed Godwits. The maximum number we counted here was 910 and we were able to control all these birds for colour-rings in the course of the days. We found 4 colour-ringed birds: 3 of “our” godwits ringed in The Netherlands and 1 from another project in France (Table 1).

| Code | Date of capture | Place of capture | Coordinates |
|----------|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| R1YYW | 11-05-2006 | Terschelling (NL) | 53.23 N, 5.20 E |
| Y3YYRR | 09-09-2002 | Schiermonnikoog (NL) | 53.29 N, 6.15 E |
| Y5RYYY | 28-04-2004 | Castricum (NL) | 52.32 N, 4.37 E |
| mtOf//LY | 13-10-2007 | Moëze-Oleron (FR) | 45.54 N, 1.02 W |

Table 1. Colour-codes, date and place of capture of the 4 colour-ringed Bar-tailed Godwits that were seen in Sandwich Harbour between 23 and 25 January 2009.

For the Godwit from Terschelling, it was the first resighting after capture. The Schiermonnikoog bird was observed several times on Terschelling in May 2006. However, the Castricum Godwit had the most interesting life-history. It had been observed by Mark Boorman on 2 February 2005 at exactly the same spot in Sandwich Harbour! Moreover it was observed on 20 December 2006 near the village of Iwik on the Banc d'Arguin in Mauritania. This bird shows that Bar-tailed Godwits can be very site-faithful to their wintering grounds but also that they might use feeding areas, such as the Banc d'Arguin, as a stopover during the long migration to Namibia. The flight from their breeding area in Siberia, via The Netherlands and Mauritania to Sandwich Harbour is at least 15,000 km.

Conclusion

Coming back to the ring-density, we ended up with a total of $280 + 910 = 1190$ Bar-tailed Godwits controlled with 3 of our marked birds, giving a density of 1 marked bird on 397 birds. This is not very different from the density of 1 on 308 we found on the Banc d'Arguin in December 2007. However the total number of birds we were able to control in Namibia is in fact too small to make a reliable comparison. The main conclusion from our work can therefore only be that there are no clear indications that the density of marked Bar-tailed Godwits from the Netherlands is different in Namibia than in Mauritania.

If there is indeed no difference, it would mean that the basic assumption for doing a population-estimation based on ring-density is met and that this low estimation (240 000) is reliable. So, maybe the relatively low numbers of Bar-tailed Godwits present in the two main wintering sites in Namibia in January 2009 is also an indication of a decreasing total population!

Colour-marked Sanderlings.

By searching for colour-ringed Godwits with telescopes during a large part of the day we also checked many other waders and found 4

different colour-ringed Sanderlings, see Table 2.

| Code | Date of capture | Place of capture | Coordinates |
|--------|-----------------|--------------------------|------------------|
| G5WYRW | 17-07-2008 | Greenland | 74.29 N, 20.31 W |
| R3WRWR | 24-08-2007 | Asenko, Ghana | 4.55 N, 19.08 W |
| R3WRYW | 24-08-2007 | Asenko, Ghana | 4.55 N, 19.08 W |
| B2BGBR | 28-04-1997 | Schleswig Holstein (BRD) | 54.23 N, 8.36 E |

Table 2. Colour-codes, date and place of capture of the 4 colour-ringed Sanderlings that were seen in and around Walvis Bay between 19 and 25 January 2009.

The Sanderling from Schleswig Holstein that we observed along the promenade in Walvis Bay was ringed almost 12 years ago as a 2nd calendar year bird. It was only seen again once, about one year later, at the site of ringing. The 2 birds from Ghana were seen by us in the Saltpans west of Walvis Bay lagoon. These birds are from the same catch in August 2008 and there are no other observations yet. These Sanderlings probably used the coast of Ghana as a stopover site during their migration to Namibia. The Sanderling from Greenland is already the most famous bird of this project. It was ringed as a chick on the breeding area in Greenland. Then, 5 weeks later, it was observed several times on a small island in the Netherlands (Griend, between 26 August and 3 September 2008, remarkably by one of us, BS!). On 19 January 2009 it was discovered by Mark Boorman at Walvis Bay promenade while he was waiting there for an appointment with us! In the days thereafter we saw this bird several times at the same spot. On the 17th of July 2009, this bird was seen again (and recorded by picture) in Brittany, France, showing that a second year bird can migrate as far north as Brittany (and maybe further). On the 9th of October 2009, this bird was back again in Walvis Bay, confirmed by Mark Boorman. This example shows the power of colour-ringing and ring-reading! Hopefully this stimulates the local birdwatchers in Namibia (and anywhere else!) to pay more attention to colour-marked birds.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to Mark Boorman and Holger Kolberg who helped us organising this trip, gave us advice and allowed us to join their count trip to Sandwich Harbour. Thanks a lot for that. We enjoyed your and Sandra Dantu's nice company during this trip.

Literature

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Photo: Eckart Demasius

Comparison of the Techniques used on two Sociable Weaver Ringing Projects.

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During the May 2009 Namibian ringers' get-together at Farm Wiese near Rehoboth, ringers assisted Dirk Heinrich with what I believe was the third iteration of the ringing

project he had initiated with Dieter Oschadleus to study the movements between colonies of sociable weavers. While on the first occasion birds were fitted with metal rings only, on the second occasion colour rings were also added, using a single colour which applied to a particular colony - in order to track whether there is any movement between nests.

I was lucky enough to participate in the 2009 get-together and naturally helped with the ringing of the sociable weavers. I understand that it was only on a subsequent retrapping at one of the nests later in 2009 that any evidence was found of a bird caught at one colony having "defected" to another colony.

Subsequently, at the end of August 2009, I travelled up to Benfontein Farm to help researcher Dr. Rita Covas with her project on the social behaviour of sociable weavers. Benfontein, a De Beers-owned hunting farm just outside Kimberley lies on the provincial border between the Free State and the Northern Cape, although for nature conservation purposes the farm falls within the Northern Cape. The farm seems to be close to the eastern extremity of the range for sociable weavers.

Most of the farm is covered in Karroid scrub and sparse grass, but on one section of higher-lying ground there is deep sand and this is where the *Acacia eriolobas* grow and where the sociable weavers' nests are found.

Rita Covas was awarded her PhD some time ago for her earlier work on the sociable weavers here at Benfontein; this research has been continuing for several years now along with other projects (pursued by other researchers) such as one on ant-eating chats and another on aardwolf.

I thought it would be interesting to compare the work done on these two projects to see if any lessons could be shared between the projects.

In both projects, attempts are made to catch all individuals in the colony. This seems to be