

“Mr Ellesmere did not return.....”

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That was the sad news during the migrant season of 2006/2007 here at the coast. It concerns a small shorebird from Ellesmere Island, Canada, and here is his story.

His species, the Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*, is about 30 cm long, from the slightly upturned black bill to the end of his black tail feathers and he walks swiftly and purposefully on bright orange short legs. One finds them mostly at water's edge on rocky beaches, where they feed on small creatures among the kelp and under stones, which they deftly move from their site in their own manner, giving them their name.

Turnstones are still in rich brown, black and white plumage, their courtship gown, when they arrive here to spend their non-breeding months on our beaches. They moult during this time and when they leave around March/April their plumage is even more beautiful than when they came.

This very special turnstone, Mr Ellesmere, was first noticed in March 1999 by my friend, Sandra Dantu, during a stroll on the beach near the saltworks north of Swakopund. “That one has four rings – and colour rings, look!” she exclaimed. And indeed: it had the metal ring on its right leg and above that a white flag ring and above the ankle a yellow one – to top it all, there was a blue ring on its left leg! I had never seen four rings on one single bird, let alone so many colour rings.

We sighted him again until he disappeared soon after, but in September that year he was back. - Inquiries were made at the ADU in Cape Town and it could be established, that this bird had been ringed by ornithologist Dr. Guy Morrison in 1996 at Alert on Ellesmere Island, Canada. Alert is an outpost on the northernmost tip of this island, already within the arctic circle and north west of Greenland (82 30 N 62 20 W)

He was seen again on our beach, mostly on a flat rocky outcrop near the pump that supplies the salt works with sea water in the season of 2000 (Dec. 2000 to

March 2001). By now he had lost the blue ring, but the conspicuous white flag made him easily recognizable sometimes even to the naked eye – whenever we were watching waders in that area.

He returned for his “winter sojourn” in 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005 to his rocky base, always causing triumphant “Mr Ellesmere is back” telephone calls to friends and e-mails to Guy Morrison, who labelled him a “star migrant”. He arrived later than the majority of “our” turnstones, of whom it is said, that they, belonging to the Siberian race, breed in the tundra areas of Taymir Peninsula in Russia – and he left, now clad in glossy courtship plumage, later than the plebs.

I may be mistaken, but I thought, towards the end of the season, say in March, that there was always a group of six to eight other turnstones around him, taking off with him, when there was a disturbance at the beach, and returning together with him to his special site.

We marvelled: could it be, that a small group, or a small contingent of a group of nearctic turnstones, crosses the Atlantic Ocean to overwinter here so far south of their usual wintering areas in Europe? It is known that turnstones from Greenland and Northeast Canada migrate to western Europe and northwest Africa. Those belong to the Greenland race. The Siberian and Scandinavian birds use northwest Africa and South Africa as non-breeding areas. Vagrants have been observed on the islands of the Southern Ocean.

Our bird was no vagrant, since he returned every season to the same site on our Namibian beach. Banded at Alert, he should have overwintered farther north, somewhere on the European seaboard.-

He was last seen here at the beach on 10 April 2006 and we are wondering whether his life has come to an end. Was he eaten by an arctic fox, caught by a snowy owl, whilst going about his important task of reproduction on the tundra? Did he drown, caught in a storm over the Atlantic? Or is news of his death premature and he will appear again next year? We fear the worst, and offer this note as an obituary!

He was a special bird, a hero, dear to us. Although: how many unringed “heroes” might be achieving the same record in travel and survival amongst the “plebs”? Conspicuous heroes are easily remembered – which is essentially unfair.

Dr. Morrison, informed about the absence of his star writes:

“You are right, that the world is a little less friendly, when good acquaintances leave us - not to return – even if those friends are birds!! Working at Alert I have made many such “friends” on the tundra. Mr Ellesmere is one such story. There is another turnstone, named “Pierre” (Pierre le Tournpierre in French), who became the subject of an article in the magazine “Aves” in Europe, written in the style of a diary, who was followed in a memorable account from the moment he was captured at Alert to his ultimate death from botulism in Europe, by a bird-watcher in Belgium. Another bird has spent winters in Holland, near the ferry to Texel, where there is much research on shorebirds, and where I have taken the ferry over to the island, unaware of his presence not far away. One of our turnstones, which I have photographed on the nest at Alert, spends the winter at La Coruna in northwest Spain at a marina – we have photographs of the bird on its nest at Alert and on its winter home – is there another record, where the SAME shorebird has been photographed on its nest in the Arctic and on its wintering grounds...??!!.....

It is wonderful to make contact with these birds on an individual level. We are lucky to have experienced “Mr Ellesmere” – let us celebrate his life with appreciation.”