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Richard ffrench

Toftingal, Laurieston Road, Gatehouse of Fleet, Scotland DG7 2BE.

E-mail: Richardffrench@aol.com

ABSTRACT

The Ruddy Turnstone is a regular non-breeding visitor to Trinidad and Tobago. Groups of up to 20 birds have been studied on the beach at Speyside, Tobago over several years. During 2001 – 2002 some individuals were seen to be marked with coloured leg-bands. From these it was found that the birds had come from the coast of New Jersey, U.S.A., where a major study of the species is being carried out. The Tobago birds were seen feeding on their usual diet of invertebrates, crabs etc, but also on readily available fallen fruits of Sea Grape, an unusual food item for a sandpiper.

The Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* is a member of the family Scolopacidae, generally known as Sandpipers, of which some 30 species are known to visit or breed in Trinidad and/or Tobago either regularly or merely from time to time. This bird can easily be distinguished from the other shorebirds by its rather squat appearance, rather short, bright orange legs, and contrasting black and white upperparts mingled with varying amounts of chestnut and brown. The species is known on both sides of the Atlantic; the subspecies *morinella* occurs on the American side. It can be classed as a fairly common visitor or non-breeding resident, having been recorded in every month, although it is rather uncommon during the months of April through June. During the period 1960 – 1962, when my wife and I trapped and banded many species of shorebirds, mainly at Pointe-a-Pierre, but also on the east coast of Trinidad near Manzanilla, we banded seven individuals of this species, but those individuals were not recorded again.

During the period 1994 – 2002 I made regular visits to Tobago, and frequently stayed at or visited Blue Waters Inn at Speyside, usually in September, but also in March, April, May and December. I often encountered small flocks of up to 20 Turnstones feeding on the sandy beach beside the hotel, and was often struck by the propensity of these individuals to become remarkably tame, on occasions coming to within a metre or two from humans, and even venturing up the steps to the bar area of the hotel. No doubt they are attracted by the possibility of tit-bits, though this is not a usual habit of this species.

In September 2001 while watching these Turnstones from close quarters, I discovered that two of the birds were carrying on their legs bands of varying colours, which with binoculars from close range could be fairly easily discerned. Because one of the bands consisted of a rather larger coloured marker, sometimes known as a “flag” the bands were clearly designed to catch the attention of observers. Thus, one bird had on its left leg a green flag above the leg joint, and below the joint a white-over-red band. On its right leg it had a metal band above the joint, and a green band below the joint. The second bird had on its left leg a green flag above the joint, and a blue band below; and on its right leg it had a metal band above the joint and below it had a green-over-red band. Although it was impossible to see the details imprinted on the metal bands without handling the birds, I knew that these bands were issued by the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and contained a specific number and address in the U.S.A. to which such details could be reported.

When I reported these findings, I was informed that the first bird had been banded on the coast of Delaware Bay in New Jersey

in May 2000, while the second bird had been banded at the same location about one year later in May 2001. These birds were banded as part of a study to determine migration routes and body condition of shorebirds stopping over in Delaware Bay, and were included amongst some 25,000 shorebirds banded there since 1997, mainly of four species including Ruddy Turnstones, stopping in the Bay on their northbound migration to Arctic nesting areas.

It was particularly interesting to note that our second bird had been banded at Delaware Bay in May 2001, but by early September in the same year was already in Tobago. Could it have been able to breed in the Arctic during those four months? As a further development, I was at Blue Waters Inn on Tobago in September 2002, and these two birds were again present, along with two more with a different series of colour-coded bands. All of these have been reported to the U. S. authorities, and details are awaited. If, as I suspect, all these Turnstones leave Tobago for the north in April or May, then we would have evidence that some individual shorebirds return to precise wintering grounds in subsequent years. The use of such colour-coding is particularly helpful, since it enables individual identification to be made without recourse to trapping and handling the birds, which is not always practicable or desirable.

It seems likely that at least some, if not all, of the members of the flock I saw at Blue Waters Inn spend most of the off-season there, so what advantages do they find at that site? It may well be that the peaceful nature of the beach, which lacks the bustle and crowds of beaches like Maracas or Manzanilla on Trinidad, provides a safe haven. There are few predators, though very occasionally a dog may appear. The people who frequent the beach are mostly content to relax or sit quietly reading or sun-bathing. There is not much there to scare off the birds, and certainly all the encounters they had with humans whilst I was present led me to believe that the birds might quickly become accustomed to people, so in time would tolerate quite a close approach.

In addition, the Blue Waters Inn beach provided a constant food supply. Generally Turnstones live on invertebrates and small creatures that live amongst the rocky shores and sand beside the sea. Many times I have watched them busily rooting about in the sand, digging vigorously and frequently finding tiny organisms and occasionally small crabs or sand-hoppers. The bird's name indicates that it is adept at using its short and slightly upturned bill to flip over pebbles, leaves and other objects on the beach which might be hiding a tasty morsel. But closer scrutiny revealed that the birds were also finding sustenance in a more unusual source. The beach is lined on the landward side by a row of mature trees of

the Sea Grape *Coccoloba uvifera*. During August and September, and possibly in other months, many berries are produced, which hang in bunches from the tree. When ripe, they are purple in colour and about the size of marbles. The Turnstones were often seen pecking at these berries, when they had fallen on to the sand, and were so partial to the fruit that if a berry rolled down the sand towards the sea, the feeding bird would follow it down for several metres in order to continue feeding at it. Attempts were made to ascertain whether the birds might be trying to extract seeds from the berries or even possibly invertebrates that were infesting the fruit, but this could not be demonstrated. Indeed the seed of the Sea Grape is comparatively large and unlikely to be nutritious for Turnstones, especially if swallowed whole. Certainly the impression was that the birds were actually pecking at the flesh of the fruit, sometimes after discarding the outer skin. This interest in feeding on Sea Grape appeared to be shared by all in the group of 15 birds under observation, but without recourse to recognisable markings or bands, one cannot be certain that every individual fed

on the fruit. It has been shown (Cramp and Simmons 1983) that the species is an opportunist, resorting to berries of the Crowberry (*Empetrum*) and certain sedges on its breeding grounds, possibly when other food was in short supply. But there seem to be few known examples of the species feeding extensively on fruit, which was certainly the impression given on Tobago in September, when other food was certainly available.

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