

Short communications

Ruddy Turnstones *Arenaria interpres* in Zambia

MARK CAULTON¹ & LES G. UNDERHILL²

¹*Pelican Safaris NZ, 26 The Circle, Taupo 3330, New Zealand*

²*Animal Demography Unit, Department of Zoology, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
les.underhill@uct.ac.za*

Keywords: Ruddy Turnstone, *Arenaria interpres*, Zambia

Both Taylor (1979) and Dowsett *et al.* (2008) described the status of the Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* in Zambia as a species that occurs in small numbers, mainly on southward migration. The largest flock reported by Taylor (1979), who reviewed the period 1971–76, consisted of six birds on 27 Sep 1975 at Lochinvar National Park (15°59'S, 27°15'E), Kafue Flats. Dowsett *et al.* (2008) reported that the usual group size was one or two birds, with “large groups” consisting of up to ten birds. The average date of first occurrence over 20 years was 21 Sep (Dowsett *et al.* 2008), and the 56 dated records between 1972 and 1976 in Taylor (1979) suggested that the median passage date is 8 Oct, with 50% of records falling between 23 Sep and 27 Oct. There are four records for the second half of the non-breeding season, one in Jan, two in Feb, and one on 19 Apr (Dowsett *et al.* 2009).

This status in Zambia conforms to the general pattern of Ruddy Turnstone occurrence in Africa in that it is almost exclusively a coastal bird (e.g. Dowsett 1980, Summers *et al.* 1989, Underhill 1997). The facts that (1) turnstones are almost exclusively recorded in central Africa on southward passage, (2) they are relatively late compared to the arrival of adults in southern Africa, and (3) numbers on passage tend to be small in years of breeding failure on their Siberian breeding grounds (Underhill 1997), have been interpreted to suggest that most birds in the interior of Africa are first-year birds on their first migration south.

The following observation contrasts with this general pattern. On 25 Sep 1993, MC, leading a group of experienced British birders, encountered large numbers of Ruddy Turnstones foraging on the Kafue Flats. All birds were in breeding plumage; i.e. they were adults. The birds were observed to be scattered over a shoreline distance exceeding 10 km. Many were actively feeding by turning over the mud-clod mosaics created by the drying out of mudflats as the water levels receded prior to the onset of the summer rains – a decrease of water level of a few centimetres extended the width of the mudflats by many metres. Other turnstones were standing motionless; their breeding plumage provided excellent

camouflage against the background. A conservative estimate, made by the group as a whole, was that several thousand birds were present. During this period, large numbers of Lechwe *Kobus leche* had completely grazed the grassland surrounding the pan. The area was revisited during Oct, but no Ruddy Turnstones were recorded.

From ring recoveries, southward migration of adults of the Ruddy Turnstone population breeding in Siberia is thought to take place across the eastern Mediterranean Sea and overland across the Sahara Desert to the Gulf of Guinea and then along the eastern Atlantic coastline to Namibia and South Africa; a recovery in Burundi indicates that some adults also migrate along the Great Rift Valley (Dowsett 1980, Summers *et al.* 1989, Underhill *et al.* 1999). Given that adult Turnstones do migrate overland across the interior of Africa, observations such as the one described here are probably not exceptional, and should be anticipated from time to time.

LGU acknowledges support from the SeaChange Programme of the National Research Foundation and the Earthwatch Institute. Barry Taylor commented on a draft.

- Dowsett, R.J.** 1980. The migration of coastal waders from the Palaearctic across Africa. *Gerfaut* 70: 3–35.
- Dowsett, R.J., Aspinwall, D.R. & Dowsett-Lemaire, F.** 2008. *The Birds of Zambia: an Atlas and Handbook*. Tauraco Press and Aves a.s.b.l., Liège, Belgium.
- Summers, R.W., Underhill, L.G., Clinning, C.F. & Nicoll, M.** 1989. Populations, biometrics and moult of the Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*, with special reference to the Siberian population. *Ardea* 77: 145–168.
- Taylor, P.B.** 1979. *Palaearctic and intra-African migrant birds in Zambia: a report for the period May 1971 to December 1976*. Zambian Ornithological Society, Occ. Paper 1: 1–169.
- Underhill, L.G.** 1997. Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*: In: Harrison, J.A., Allan, D.G., Underhill, L.G., Herremans, M., Tree, A.J., Parker, V. & Brown, C.J. (eds). *The Atlas of Southern African Birds. Vol. 1: Non-passerines*. BirdLife South Africa, Johannesburg. pp. 404–405.
- Underhill, L.G., Tree, A.J., Oschadleus, H.D. & Parker, V.** 1999. *Review of Ring Recoveries of Waterbirds in Southern Africa*. Avian Demography Unit, Cape Town.