

SHORT NOTE

Longevity of pied stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*)

A (TONY) M. HABRAKEN*

329 Jericho Road, RD2, Pukekohe 2677, New Zealand

DAVID A. LAWRIE

52 Mill Road, RD2, Pukekohe 2677, New Zealand

In 1989 OSNZ began a national study of pied stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*) to investigate seasonal movements throughout New Zealand, aiming to identify regional patterns between breeding and wintering sites, and site and mate fidelity. All birds captured received individual colour-band combinations attached to their tibia (two colours per tibia) and a single metal band on the tarsus. Adults were captured on the nest and chicks were caught as large free running chicks prior to fledging. The last birds colour banded in the study were in 1994, although two years later a further 10 were colour banded as part of a Junior Members course. Sightings of banded birds in the Manukau Harbour persisted through the mid-1990s falling away to occasional sightings between 2000-2002. This paper adds value to the original project and new knowledge about the species.

On 12 August 2010, AMH received an image of a colour-banded pied stilt (Fig. 1) photographed by Ian Southey at the Karaka shell banks on the southern shores of the Manukau Harbour. The colour-band combination appeared to be WY-BG (white over yellow on left tibia, blue over green on right tibia), with a metal band on the right tarsus. This combination was used on a juvenile bird banded in the Whangamarino wetland off Island Block Road (37.3085°S, 175.1121°E) on 20 October 1991 by AMH & DAL (AMH data base). Remarkably the bird had not lost any of its four colour-bands, though the colours were showing signs of fading and or staining as would be expected of an aged bird now late in its 18th year. The metal band, partially obscured, appeared to be very worn. On 24 June 2012, during the OSNZ wader census at the Karaka shell banks DAL also sighted a colour banded pied stilt reported as WY-BG, believed to be the same bird as seen in August 2010.

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*Correspondence: aahabroken@gmail.com



Figure 1. Pied stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*) at the Karaka shell banks on the southern shores of the Manukau Harbour. The colour-band combination appeared to be WY-BG (white over yellow on left tibia, blue over green on right tibia), with a metal band on the right tarsus (Photograph: Ian Southey).

Our experience from other colour banding projects with bar-tailed godwit (*Limosa lapponica*), red knot (*Calidris canutus*), and pied stilt, shows that in all three species colour bands may be prone to fading and/or staining over time. This is likely caused by exposure to ultraviolet light, breaking down the band colours, or from being in regular contact with boggy wetland conditions where high levels of leachates and oxides can occur,

leaving mineral deposit stains on the colour bands. Given this possibility, the time lapse since the last sightings of any colour-banded pied stilt, and that birds banded in other regions of New Zealand have been sighted in the Manukau Harbour previously, it seemed prudent to investigate and eliminate, if possible, any other potential band combinations to help confirm the identity of this bird.

We found only three combinations using Y or W on the left tibia.

- YW-BG (Y-5159) banded as a chick at Tasman Downs, South Island (43.9983°S, 170.2001°E, on 23 November 1989 by Christine Reed.
- YY-BG (Y-7651) banded as an adult female at Lindis River, South Island 44.8150°S, 169.4834°E on 16 November 1990 by Margaret Child.
- WY-BG (Y-5751) banded as a chick at Island Block, Whangamarino on 20 October 1991 by AMH & DAL.

Of the three combinations above, the only confirmed sighting was WY-BG on 1 January 1993 at Conifer Grove, Manukau Harbour, 14 months after banding. Five further sightings of a bird with similar band combinations were recorded between 2000 and 2012. No re-sightings of the two South Island birds (Lindis & Tasman Downs) have been reported. Birds from the South Island as well as elsewhere in the North Island have been recorded on the Manukau Harbour during the non-breeding season.

Although there had been no sightings of the two South Island birds, we were able to scrutinise the picture more closely in an attempt to eliminate any of the three birds listed above. The metal band was showing excessive wear and partially obscured by vegetation (sarcocornia). However, it did reveal a hyphen (part of the band inscription, separating the size, denoted by a letter, from the serial numbers) in front of the first digit which appeared to be a 7 or a 5. Both are the first numbers in the three combinations listed above, so it was not possible to narrow the identification down to only one bird.

We therefore suggest two possible scenarios for longevity.

WY-BG

There being a single positive record of the Whangamarino bird (WY-BG) after fledging means that this bird survived at least 14 months, which increases the chances of it surviving much longer. It is also the younger of the two chicks with similar combinations.

YY-BG

That this bird was banded as an adult increases the chances of its survival after banding. Though there were no positive sightings on the wintering grounds or return sightings from breeding grounds, unconfirmed sightings of similar combinations in the Manukau Harbour mean it cannot be excluded from consideration here.

It appears that the bird photographed on 12 August 2010 lived to at least 7 July 2012. If it is assumed to be WY-BG this would extend the age of the bird to 20 years, 8 months, and 18 days, which appears to be second longest record for the species.

Alternatively, if it is assumed to be YY-BG, it was 21 years, 7 months, 21 day since banding. Given that pied stilt are able to breed in their 2nd year at the earliest (AMH *pers. obs.*) this would increase the age of this bird by two years, making it a minimum age of 23 years, 7 months, 21 days extending the known age for pied stilt by 1 year, 10 months, 7 days.

The oldest Australian record is a bird banded at Roebuck Bay, Broome in May 1994 and recovered at Roebuck Bay in February 2016, giving an age of 21 years 8 months, 24 days. (ABBBS Database 2020). The longevity record for Europe is 12 years 2 months (Cramp & Simmons 1983). The age range of the two birds discussed above would be comparable to other wader species for longevity. Just what proportion of the population reach this age is not known, but this record does add new data and knowledge for the species.

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