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A Ruddy Long Way to Fly

This year the Australasian Wader Studies Group has declared the Ruddy Turnstone as the celebrity species of World Migratory Bird Day, held annually on the 8th of May. This 100 gram migratory bird recently completed an incredible 27,000 km round trip journey between Australia and Siberia, cleverly tracked with a light-sensor 'geolocator' attached to its leg.

World Migratory Bird Day is a global initiative to raise awareness of birds that need to migrate to survive. The data collected by the geolocators is vital for the conservation of migratory birds that pass through a number of countries throughout Asia and the Pacific.

'These birds are travelling immense distances and then have to build up enough energy to breed,' said Ken Gosbell, Chair of the Australasian Wader Studies Group (AWSG), a specialist arm of Birds Australia. 'Before they leave Australia they literally double their body weight from 100 to 200gms. They look like plump tennis balls.'

The birds began their journey on Flinders Beach, Victoria in April 2009 where Australian researchers attached the geolocators to six Ruddy Turnstones.

Six months later, four recaptured turnstones were found to have flown a non-stop, six-day flight to Taiwan (7600 km) from Australia. They rested and fed for 15 days and continued on to the Arctic Circle with one or two more stops en route. For roughly six weeks the four birds remained in Far East Russia which is where they attempted to breed.

To record the birds' location, the geolocators measure changes in the length of daylight. During the Arctic summer where daylight is almost continuous, the geolocators ceased to record. But as the birds began to migrate south in August, day light hours shortened and their trails were picked up again.

One geolocator recorded the entire round trip of Ruddy Turnstone, 9Y. Most unexpectedly, it migrated directly across the Pacific Ocean on its way south, stopping only on the Aleutian and Gilbert Islands: one of the longest ocean-crossings ever recorded in a terrestrial bird. These results provided new insights into where the birds go and the time they spend in flight on their migration path.

The AWSG in partnership with the Victorian Wader Study Group (VWSG) coordinated the project. The 1.1 gram light-sensor geolocators were provided by the British Antarctic Survey, based in Cambridge, UK.

Dr Clive Minton of the VWSG explained, 'When you think about how far these little birds fly, we wanted to ensure the sensors would not hamper their chances of survival.'

Based on the success of these geolocator trials, 60 more have been attached to Ruddy Turnstones in March and April 2010. Ken Gosbell noted, "Increasing our knowledge of the flight path of the Ruddy Turnstone will help us target conservation investment and activities for this tiny world traveller."

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