

Whimbrel Makes a Long Journey

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The advent of Microwave Telemetry's 12g solar PTT has opened up the possibility of deploying satellite transmitters on medium sized birds – something that was simply not possible a few years ago. It is now feasible to tag some of the larger waders (shorebirds if you don't live in Europe). These birds undertake some of the longest journeys of any bird, with migrations often spanning the globe – from the high arctic all the way to South America, South Africa, Australia or New Zealand for instance.



Photo by David Tipling & rspb-images.com

The successful use of the 12g solar PTT on a Whimbrel has demonstrated that we should plan to use such a tag to find the breeding area of the globally threatened Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris*.

As part of a joint project between the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and English Nature, "Wally", a Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* was trapped and fitted with a 12g solar PTT as he passed through UK on its northward migration in spring 2005. The PTT was fitted using a simple pelvic harness. Tagged in May in Yorkshire, England, the bird soon moved to northeast Iceland, a flight of 1600 km, where he remained in the breeding area for over 2 months. In August Wally moved briefly to the northwest of Iceland but then moved quite quickly all the way to Guinea in West Africa – a total journey of some 7000 km over 28 days including stopovers in France, Mauritania and Senegal. As of 30 October, the Whimbrel is still in Guinea. The PTT is programmed to transmit every four days which has allowed a sufficient period for the solar panel to recharge the battery between transmission periods. Perhaps this is not surprising given that the bird has spent the summer close to the Arctic Circle where the sun never sets and is now experiencing the strong sunshine of the tropics. Over the next few months we hope to gain even more valuable insights into the migration strategy of our Whimbrel and with luck follow his migrations north again next spring.

Although the Whimbrel is important in its own right, this project is also an important contribution

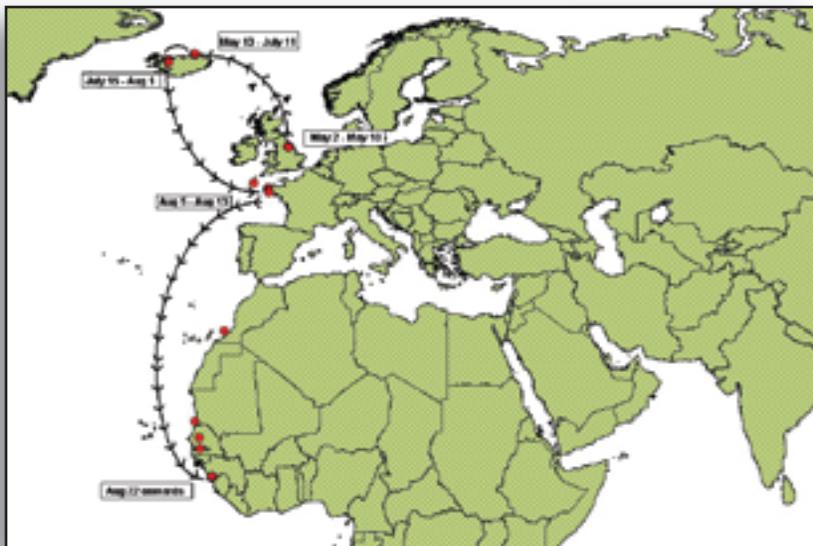
to the conservation of the closely related Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris*. This is one of the rarest and most threatened birds in the world. Formerly the species spent the winter in North Africa, around the Mediterranean Sea and in the Middle East. It nested somewhere in Western Siberia but there have only ever been two confirmed breeding records, the last in 1924. Numbers are now so low that the bird is rarely seen. Conservation efforts are severely hampered because we do not know where the birds breed within the vast marshes and bogs of Western Siberia. Searches on the ground have failed to find the birds breeding. Working with BirdLife International, the RSPB has been trying to find a technical solution to the location of the breeding areas. The 12g solar PTT looks extremely promising. The successful trial of the tag on a Whimbrel means that we can now confidently recommend it for use on the Slender-billed Curlew. There remains the significant challenge of finding a



Photo by David Tipling & rspb-images.com

The Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* is a common long distance migrant shorebird with a worldwide distribution. The Palearctic subspecies breeds in the northern hemisphere from Iceland through Fenno-Scandinavia into Russia and winters around the coast of Africa in the tropics and further south.

Slender-billed Curlew and being able to catch it but the availability of this new technology will stimulate renewed efforts on the ground.



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A summary of the migrations of the satellite tagged Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* between May and August 2005. Apart from two, the red dots indicate stop over areas and represent many individual fixes. The two red dots over the sea were locations obtained whilst the bird was actually migrating. We think the Whimbrel bred in northeast Iceland where it stayed in a small area through May and July. The arrows are purely illustrative.

Anyone interested in following the journeys of the Whimbrel can find the latest information on www.whimbrel.info/. The project partners RSPB, English Nature, the Huddleston & Jackson Ringing Partnership and Wheatear.biz keep the website up to date with the latest news.