

▶ Juvenile Great Spotted Woodpeckers have red caps.

FIELD CRAFT

Improving with age

BTO Training Manager Nick Moran explores the importance of age in bird ID.

Just like a good wine, bird identification gets better with age! And we don't mean the age of the observer (that would open a can of worms) but determining the age of an individual bird. It can be hard to resist the desire to put a name to a bird as soon as possible, but taking a moment to look for clues as to its age can ease the process and help avoid mistakes.

A classic case is the red-capped woodpecker on a feeder: it must be a male Lesser Spotted – they have a red cap! Focusing instead on the loose and fresh-looking plumage leads down a different path: it is in fact a young Great Spotted (which also has a red cap). Other examples among regular garden visitors include the scaly-looking chat-like bird and the yellow-winged yet brown-faced finch. Both might prove hard to identify by simply flicking through a basic field guide but picking out the tell-tale signs of 'youth' – the baggy, ill-fitting feathers – should help to identify these unfamiliar-looking birds as juvenile Robin and Goldfinch. It is important to make the distinction between 'fluffy' and 'scruffy' – whilst recently fledged birds can look like their feathers are one size too big, adult birds often look dishevelled by late summer and can have feathers out of place or missing altogether. This can be critical when deciding if a pale wing panel on a Marsh or Willow Tit is a genuine plumage feature or, as might be the case in an adult Marsh Tit, simply a sign of wear.

Waders can present notoriously tough identification challenges, particularly after the adults lose their distinctive breeding finery. In many species, juveniles have fresh, neatly patterned upperparts, creating a scalloped impression. This knowledge

alone could make it easier to narrow down the identification of an unfamiliar medium-sized wader with yellowish legs and peachy-buff underparts: not a Buff-breasted Sandpiper but a juvenile Ruff, which shares the buff underparts. Young Knot and Curlew Sandpiper – both regular 'problem species' in their own rights – also have peach-washed

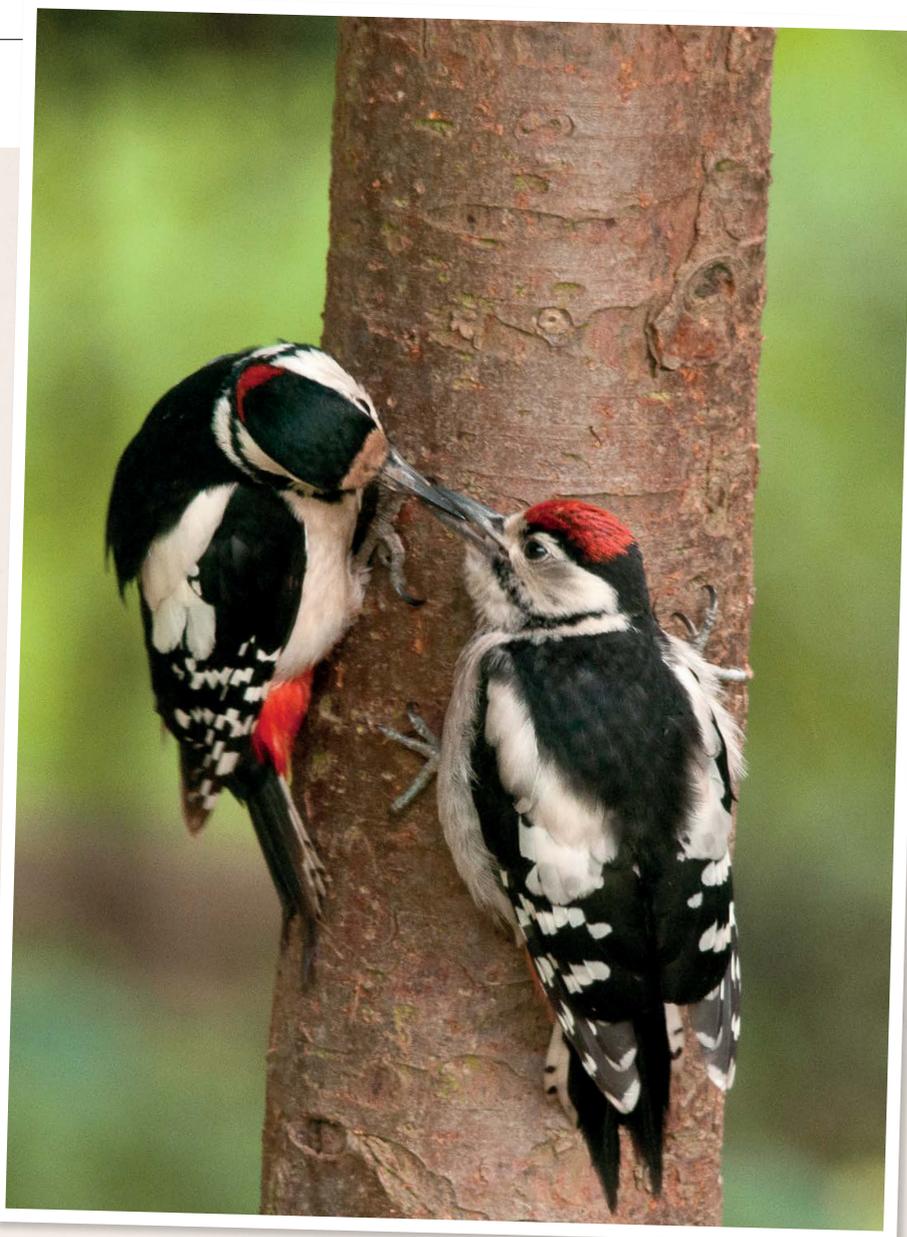
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underparts when fresh, immediately distinguishing them from Dunlin. Ageing before identifying can also help ascertain the relative importance of each feature. For example, first establishing that an unidentified ringed plover is a juvenile should mean less emphasis is

placed on the leg colour, and a reversal of the expected extent of white on the face – adult Little Ringed usually has more white on the face than Ringed, whereas the opposite is true of youngsters. Ageing waders in early autumn, then, is often a handy shortcut to identification and a skill well worth developing.

SLOW-MATURING SPECIES

Bigger species usually take longer to reach maturity than smaller ones. This makes ageing a key part of the identification process for groups such as gulls and raptors. With large gulls, the timing of the replacement of certain feather tracts can be a useful pointer for one species over another. This is certainly an 'advanced' skill that requires time and patience to master, but it demonstrates another way that ageing can play a significant role in identification. For smaller gulls, recalling that younger birds have a black terminal tail band could help identify a fly-past gull with white



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triangular patches on its wings and a black tail band as a young Kittiwake, rather than an adult Sabine's Gull.

FEATHER FEATURES

The fresh juvenile wing feathers of raptors, particularly larger ones, can create broader-looking wings, with more conspicuously bulging secondaries (inner part of the wing). It is useful to keep this in mind when looking at soaring raptors in late summer and autumn. In some groups, including falcons and accipiters, juvenile feathers are pale-fringed, which can make the upperparts look scaly, whilst in others, such as Hen Harrier and Goshawk, young birds tend to have buff-tinged underparts.

Whatever the species, just remember that you're never too old to get to grips with ageing. ■

► Black-headed Gulls: first-calendar-year (left), non-breeding adult (centre), breeding adult (right).



Ageing terminology

Juvenile, immature, sub-adult, first-summer, third-winter...the plethora of terms for describing the age of a bird often causes confusion. This partly stems from the fact that moult strategies differ between species, meaning that it takes varying lengths of time for adult plumage to be attained. Some terms have a specific meaning and can often be identified in the field. Juvenile plumage, for example, refers to the first full set of feathers that allows a young bird to leave the nest and effectively fend for itself. Nests are dangerous places, an easy target for predators, so juvenile plumage is usually characterised by poor-quality – but functional – flight feathers and rather loose body feathers, grown in the shortest possible time. Other terms are often vague (such as 'immature', i.e. anything

other than adult) and are therefore open to interpretation (particularly the first-winter → first-summer → second-winter progression). A good way to avoid these sources of confusion is to use the calendar-year system. From hatching to 31 December, a bird is in its first calendar year. From 1 January to 31 December of the following year, it is a second-calendar-year, and so on. Why not try it out on your local Black-headed Gulls: until juveniles start to fledge, there should only be two age classes: 'clean-winged' adults, and individuals with brown/blackish feathers in the middle part of the wing – second-calendar-year birds. Once the brownish juveniles start to disperse, these can simply be referred to as first-calendar-years, instead of trying to determine if they are juveniles or first-winter birds.



◀ Ageing birds in the field can be a useful monitoring tool. For example, determining the proportion of adult to young birds in flocks of wintering geese can help to establish breeding success in a given year (a young Dark-bellied Brent Goose has white tips on its wing coverts that an adult lacks, but a less distinctive or absent neck collar).

► Whilst the ability to age warblers in the hand is an essential skill for ringing, ageing warblers in the field might seem a step too far. There are some species for which it can be very useful to know the typical juvenile features, though. Remembering that young Willow Warblers often have rather bright yellow underparts can save confusion with Wood Warbler, for example.

Find out more

Watch our bird ID videos for more details on ageing: www.bto.org/bird-id
Go on a training course to improve your skills: www.bto.org/training

