Age 5 Dunnock with symmetrical primary covert moult

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Spring 2013 saw a record 391 Dunnocks ringed at Falsterbo Bird Observatory, Sweden, surpassing the previous spring record of 322 in 1987. Of these, 275 were aged as 5s and 47 as 6s (according to Menzie & Malmhagen, *Ringing & Migration* 28, 57–62). I ringed the majority of these and examined all birds with entirely 'adult-type' greater coverts. Among those with 'adult-type' greater coverts were five birds in their second year (age code 5), that had moulted all their greater coverts (equivalent to 1.8% of the 5s ringed during the season, slightly higher than the 0.6% and 0.7% quoted by Jenni & Winkler and Menzie & Malmhagen respectively). One of these proved to be particularly interesting, ringed on 20 April and initially aged as a 6 on account of all 'adult-type' greater coverts and apparently adult coverts. On handling the bird, I discovered two juvenile primary coverts in the middle of the feather tract, symmetrical on both wings. The bird was examined carefully and the following conclusions were reached (primaries, primary coverts and tail feathers are numbered descendently and the moult patterns are symmetrical (except for a single re-growing tail feather)):

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Dunnock wing showing the difference in length and colouration of the moulted inner primary coverts.

- Post-juvenile feather tracts
  - Coverts – greater, median and lesser coverts
  - Alula
  - Tertials
  - Tail (Rectrix 2 on left side growing (stage 4) following presumed accidental loss)
- Mixed-age feather tracts
  - Primary coverts 1–2 were post-juvenile, PC3–4 juvenile, PC5–8 post-juvenile
  - Primaries 4–10 juvenile. P1–4 left unclassified
  - Secondaries – left unclassified

It's important to note the symmetry of the primary covert moult. Symmetrical but accidental seems highly unlikely, implying a controlled, ordered moult. Based on feather shape and wear, at least P4–10 were unmoulted juvenile feathers. In many species with an extensive post-juvenile moult, it is the primaries and not the primary coverts that are moulted: *eg* Greenfinch, Siskin and Woodchat Shrike.

I had suspected that the primary coverts on juvenile Dunnocks are longer than on adult birds and the shape of the primary covert tract on the closed wing often appears narrower and 'more pointed' on juvenile birds. Comparing the two generations of primary coverts side-by-side confirmed this.

The possibility of an adult bird undergoing a limited first post-breeding moult should be borne in mind, though the degree of wear on the retained primaries and primary coverts was typical for an age 5. Additionally, iris colour, viewed through a jeweller's loupe, was as expected for an age 5 bird.

Data requested from BTO when writing our *Ringing & Migration* paper showed 100 records of first-year Dunnocks with moult code M ('*active Moult of wings and tail (main moult)*') and, of these, 20 contain individual feather moult scores. Only one gives data for primary coverts: a bird where all primary coverts were recorded as old, with P2 and P8 growing on the right but not left wing, certainly the result of accidental feather loss (*hence probably incorrectly coded as moult code 'M' – Eds*). I am aware of only one previous instance of primary covert moult in a first-year Dunnock: a bird ringed on 31 August 2003 in County Galway with "P1–3 growing; S4–5 growing, S6 dropped; tail new; alula, PCs and GCs all replaced" (Chris Benson *pers comm*).

No ageing criteria will cover every unexpected outlier or aberrant individual and it should be considered that the ageing criteria published by Menzie & Malmhagen remain safe for ageing Dunnocks using plumage characteristics. The moult pattern of this bird is likely to be an odd quirk rather than an emerging strategy, though it once again raises the importance of recording primary covert moult when recording birds in active moult.

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