

Basics: Postjuvenile moult is extensive, comprising body-feathers, lesser and median coverts, and all the greater coverts. The carpal covert is moulted in 96% of cases. 51% of 1Ys moult AL1; 5% AL1-AL2; and 3% all three of their alula feathers. Tertial moult is regular, with 13% renewing one tertial (T8 or T9); 42% renewing two tertials (T8 and T9); and 30% renewing all three tertials. In addition to all tertials, 2% replace S6. Nearly half, 48%, of 1Y birds moult between one (12%) and all (20%) of their tail feathers. Adults have a complete post-nuptial moult.

1Y birds: Reed Buntings are difficult to age. Since the greater coverts are always all moulted, you have to rely on moult-limits within the tertials, between the tertials and the secondaries, within the alula and within the tail. 55% of 1Y birds show a moult limit in the tertials, and 30% show moult contrast between the tertials and the secondaries. Moulded tertials have jet-black feather-centres and broad, squared ends, and will be less worn than juvenile unmoulded tertials. Unmoulded tertials are narrower, and have feather-centres less deep black. The outer fringes of juvenile tertials are less deeply rust-brown than the fringes of any renewed feathers, and this fringe bleaches out during the summer. Pale outer fringes are typical of juvenile tertials in autumn. From December to March, the degree of wear on P5-P6 can be helpful. No wear = adult; some wear or very worn = 1Y. As with other buntings, 1Y Reed Buntings have more pointed tail feathers than adults. This difference is particularly obvious in those 28% of birds which have a moult limit within the tail. It should, however, be noted that 20% of 1Y birds renew the entire tail and cannot be separated from adults on this criterion alone.

Adults: Adults show no moult limits within the tertials, alula and tail; and no moult contrast between the tertials and the secondaries. Adult primaries and secondaries bleach more gradually, and show less wear, than their juvenile counterparts, and they have the same feather-centre ground-colour as the tertials. As a rule, AL3 is darker than in 1Y birds, and the primary coverts are less loosely textured.

Iris colour: Juvenile birds have the iris dark-grey; it is tinged brownish in adults. During spring the 1Y iris is dark-grey or lightly tinged brownish, but still darker and less brownish than in adults.

Lackford : We found the best ageing characters to be PCs (broader rounder tips and richer brown edges in adults), shape, degree of wear and colour of longest PP tips (a very under used ageing character). Many 1st years replaced all of their tails making use of this single character as many people do when ageing according to Svensson highly unreliable, also many replaced one or two tertials though seldom all three. Eye colour was also used and birds with adult PP and PCs always had richer brown eyes.