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BIRD RINGING AT WHITE ELEPHANT LODGE, KWAZULU-NATAL

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White Elephant Lodge (WEL) lies within the Pongola Game Reserve (PGR) in northern KwaZulu Natal (KZN), South Africa, close to the Swaziland border. PGR was (in 1894) the first government proclaimed game reserve in Africa. It has been described as a co-operative conservation project between private landowners, tribal communities and government conservation services. It adjoins Lake Jozini and is overlooked by the imposing Lebombo Mountains. Although there are many specialised habitats present within the Reserve, the dominant terrestrial habitat is savannah woodland, or 'bushveld'. PGR is home to over 350 bird species (WEL 2012), including both Palearctic and Afrotropical migrants.



Fig.1 Elephant herd in the Pongola Game Reserve, with Lake Jozini and the western escarpment of the Lebombo Mountains forming a backdrop

The ringing activity at WEL described below covered three periods: 9 to 15 April **2004**; 19 to 27 March **2005**; and 29 January to

14 February **2006**. In total, 989 birds were ringed, comprising 84 species. Red-billed Quelea *Quelea quelea* accounted for 32% of the ringing total, although this statistic is somewhat misleading as a high number of this species was only caught during one period (2005). Other abundant species (>30 ringed) were: Blue Waxbill *Uraeginthus angolensis*; Lesser Masked Weaver *Ploceus intermedius*; Green-winged Pytilia *Pytilia melba*; and White-winged Widowbird *Euplectes albonotatus*.



Fig.2 Typical 'bushveld' ringing habitat

Mist netting was the principal method of capture, augmented by some night time 'dazzling' with a spotlight and hand net. Most of the trapping was carried out near sites of human settlement. The ringing list (Appendix 1) is made up of species that are, for the most part, common and relatively widespread in the area, but with a few surprises that add a lot of interest to the site. From a personal perspective (as a resident of the UK), it was very exciting to catch the following Palearctic migrant species: Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris* (20); Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* (19); Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* (14); Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* (9); Icterine warbler *Hippolais icterina* (2); Olive-tree warbler *Hippolais olivetorum* (2); and Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* (1).



Probably the most notable species caught at WEL, was the Common Whitethroat. In KZN, this species is at the extreme southern limit of its wintering range and the KZN record represents only the third record of the species for the province by 2007 (Roberts 2013). Another notable Afrotropical species was the edge-of-range Red-billed Buffalo Weaver *Bubalornis niger*. It is widespread and common in the northern half of southern Africa, but at the edge of its range in KZN. In Swaziland, for example, the estimated population is only 80 birds (Parker 1994). It has been recorded (presumably breeding) at Nkonkoni, at the southern end of Lake Jozini (Colahan 1997), approximately 30 km from WEL. A small breeding colony was present at WEL in 2003 and 2004 (at *Leeuwspoor*) but was eventually displaced by an expanding monkey population (Heinz Kohrs *pers. comm.*).

Another notable species, simply because not many are ringed in southern Africa, was Bronze-winged Courser *Rhinoptilus chalcopterus*. The SAFRING ringing total was 188 in 2006, although a further 120 have been ringed since then (SAFRING 2012). Twelve were caught during the relatively short period of ringing at WEL between 2004 and 2006. Other night-time captures included Spotted Thick-knee *Burhinus capensis* and Fiery-necked Nightjar *Caprimulgus pectoralis*.

285 Red-billed Quelea were ringed at WEL in 2005, during a period which saw a massive influx of this species into the Pongola Game Reserve (a number easily exceeding one million birds was estimated to be present). Some might consider it a waste to ring what is widely considered to be an agricultural pest, but we persevered with this small project, despite being occasionally overwhelmed by birds. On more than one occasion it was necessary to close the nets to restrict the catch and, at one point, we came close to running out of rings. But our determination not to ignore this unpopular species subsequently paid dividends, in the form of a recovery from Malawi (Table 1).

Table 1 Recovery of Red-billed Quelea, ring no. AM40693

| | |
|----------|--|
| 27.03.05 | Ringed: Pongola Game Reserve, KZN |
| 10.07.07 | Recovered: Bimbi Village, Lake Chilwa, Malawi |
| Details | Trapped deliberately for food or for an aviary |
| Distance | 1,397 km |
| Duration | 835 days (2.3 years) |

The pattern of Red-billed Quelea recoveries across southern Africa is complex, as this species is highly mobile and somewhat nomadic (Oschadleus 2000). But the general pattern of movement and successive breeding attempts (usually two each year) are thought to be heavily influenced by the seasonal rains which result in the germination of grass seed. Essentially, Red-billed Queleas follow the rains (Ward 1971).

In *The Birds of Malawi* (Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2006) only six recoveries from South Africa are described, plus two from Botswana and a further two from Zimbabwe. All were ringed between September and January and recovered between May and December, '...presumably as non-breeding visitors'.

Since 2010, Dr. Barry Taylor of the University of KZN has added considerably to the list of birds ringed at WEL and is now the organiser of ringing activities at the site. However, all initial enquiries should be directed to the reservations team, as follows: tel: +27 (0) 34 413 2489; email: info@whiteelephant.co.za.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1. List of species ringed and annual totals at White Elephant Lodge

| SPECIES | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | Total |
|-------------------------------------|------|------|------|-------|
| 205 Kurrichane Buttonquail | 1 | 2 | - | 3 |
| 297 Spotted Thick-knee | 3 | - | - | 3 |
| 303 Bronze-winged Courser | 4 | 4 | 4 | 12 |
| 354 Cape Turtle Dove | - | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| 355 Laughing Dove | 1 | 13 | - | 14 |
| 356 Namaqua Dove | - | 1 | - | 1 |
| 358 Emerald-spotted Dove | - | 16 | 12 | 28 |
| 382 Jacobin Cuckoo | - | 1 | - | 1 |
| 386 Diderick Cuckoo | - | 5 | - | 5 |
| 398 Pearl-spotted Owlet | - | 1 | - | 1 |
| 405 Fiery-necked Nightjar | - | 1 | - | 1 |
| 424 Speckled Mousebird | - | 3 | 3 | 6 |
| 426 Red-faced Mousebird | 3 | - | - | 3 |
| 431 Malachite Kingfisher | - | - | 2 | 2 |
| 432 African Pygmy Kingfisher | - | - | 1 | 1 |
| 433 Woodland Kingfisher | - | 4 | - | 4 |
| 435 Brown-hooded Kingfisher | 1 | 4 | 2 | 7 |
| 451 African Hoopoe | - | - | 1 | 1 |
| 454 Common Scimitarbill | - | 1 | - | 1 |
| 459 Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill | - | - | 1 | 1 |
| 465 Acacia Pied Barbet | 4 | 1 | 7 | 12 |
| 473 Crested Barbet | 2 | 2 | 1 | 5 |
| 474 Greater Honeyguide | 1 | 2 | - | 3 |
| 476 Lesser Honeyguide | - | 3 | - | 3 |
| 486 Cardinal Woodpecker | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| 487 Bearded Woodpecker | - | - | 1 | 1 |
| 518 Barn Swallow | - | - | 14 | 14 |
| 527 Lesser Striped Swallow | - | 3 | 1 | 4 |



| SPECIES | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | Total | SPECIES | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | Total |
|-------------------------------|------|------|------|-------|-------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| 554 Southern Black Tit | 1 | 2 | 4 | 7 | 764 Cape Starling | 5 | - | 8 | 13 |
| 560 Arrow-marked Babbler | 1 | 7 | 3 | 11 | 772 Red-billed Oxpecker | 1 | - | 4 | 5 |
| 568 Dark-capped Bulbul | 8 | 7 | 8 | 23 | 779 Marico Sunbird | - | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| 569 Terrestrial Bulbul | - | - | 1 | 1 | 780 Purple-banded Sunbird | - | 1 | - | 1 |
| 572 Sombre Greenbul | - | - | 1 | 1 | 787 White-bellied Sunbird | - | 2 | - | 2 |
| 599 White-browed Robin-Chat | 2 | - | - | 2 | 791 Scarlet-chested Sunbird | - | 6 | 2 | 8 |
| 602 White-throated Robin-Chat | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 798 Red-billed Buffalo Weaver | 1 | - | - | 1 |
| 613 White-browed Scrub-Robin | 4 | 3 | 6 | 13 | 801 House Sparrow | 1 | - | - | 1 |
| 620 Common Whitethroat | - | - | 1 | 1 | 804 S. Grey-headed Sparrow | 3 | 12 | 6 | 21 |
| 625 Icterine Warbler | - | 2 | - | 2 | 810 Spectacled Weaver | 1 | 2 | 2 | 5 |
| 626 Olive-tree Warbler | - | 2 | - | 2 | 815 Lesser Masked Weaver | 1 | 8 | 40 | 49 |
| 643 Willow Warbler | - | 5 | 4 | 9 | 814 Southern Masked Weaver | 10 | 13 | 2 | 25 |
| 653 Yellow-bellied Eremomela | - | - | 4 | 4 | 818 S. Brown-throated Weaver | - | - | 1 | 1 |
| 656 Burnt-necked Eremomela | - | - | 2 | 2 | 821 Red-billed Quelea | 5 | 285 | 34 | 324 |
| 633 Marsh Warbler | 1 | 17 | 2 | 20 | 829 White-winged Widowbird | - | 41 | 1 | 42 |
| 651 Long-billed Crombec | 2 | 8 | 12 | 22 | 834 Green-winged Pytilia | 6 | 24 | 12 | 42 |
| 649 Rudd's Apalis | - | - | 2 | 2 | 841 Jameson's Firefinch | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| 657 Green-backed Camaroptera | - | 1 | 3 | 4 | 842 Red-billed Firefinch | - | 8 | 1 | 9 |
| 664 Zitting Cisticola | - | 1 | - | 1 | 844 Blue Waxbill | 19 | 44 | 8 | 71 |
| 672 Rattling Cisticola | 4 | 11 | 12 | 27 | 846 Common Waxbill | - | 2 | - | 2 |
| 683 Tawny-flanked Prinia | - | - | 2 | 2 | 857 Bronze Mannikin | - | 2 | - | 2 |
| 701 Chinspot Batis | - | 5 | 3 | 8 | 860 Pin-tailed Whydah | - | 2 | - | 2 |
| 711 African Pied Wagtail | 1 | - | - | 1 | 862 Long-tail Paradise Whydah | - | 2 | - | 2 |
| 716 African Pipit | - | 1 | - | 1 | 867 Village Indigobird | - | 3 | - | 3 |
| 733 Red-backed Shrike | - | 10 | 9 | 19 | 869 Yellow-fronted Canary | - | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| 736 Southern Boubou | - | - | 3 | 3 | 884 Golden-breasted Bunting | 1 | 2 | 2 | 5 |
| 743 Brown-crowned Tchagra | - | 2 | 1 | 3 | Total ringed | 102 | 622 | 265 | 989 |
| 744 Black-crowned Tchagra | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 | Species | 34 | 60 | 56 | 84 |
| 747 Gorgeous Bush Shrike | - | - | 1 | 1 | | | | | |
| 756 Southern Black Flycatcher | - | 1 | 1 | 2 | | | | | |

Species names (and numbers) are based on Hockey, PAR *et al.* (eds) (2005), *Roberts Birds of Southern Africa - Volume 7*, Cape Town.



Photographs – the birds



Acacia Pied Barbet



Arrow-marked Babbler



White-winged Widowbird



Red-billed Buffalo Weaver



Brown-crowned Tchagra



Kurrichane Buttonquail



Lesser Masked Weaver



Southern Masked Weaver



Diderick Cuckoo



Cardinal Woodpecker



Red-billed Oxpecker



Pearl-spotted Owl



Photographs – the people!



LR and Ongani at the ringing table.



CR extracting from the mist nets (left); PT with Spotted Thick-knee (centre) and weighing a Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill (right).



CR delivering the early-morning tea. Ringing at a game lodge does have some benefits!