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Operation Oxpecker 2008

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Each year, under the leadership of Arnaud Le Roux, the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) runs an Oxpecker capture program with the goal of relocating Red-billed Oxpeckers *Buphagus erythrorhynchus* from cattle farms in the far north of Limpopo province to game farms in various parts of South Africa where they have become locally extinct due to indiscriminate use of pesticides. I have just taken part in this exercise for the second year running and this is a summary of our 2008 activities.

The capture this year was from July 8th to 15th giving us 6 working days (excluding the 2 travel days) to try to capture 150 Red-billed Oxpeckers. Last year we caught 170 oxpeckers in 7 days and had to release 20 birds (after ringing) due to the strict licence conditions.

The whole relocation process takes a lot of time and effort. It usually starts with a request for oxpeckers from an existing Reserve or Game Farm such as the Zululand Rhino Reserve - one of last year's recipients. EWT officials visit the reserve and check on the management practices and then meet with all of the surrounding landowners to check on the correct use of pesticides and dips, etc. Although no money changes hands, the cost of capturing and relocating an oxpecker is estimated at several thousand Rand per bird, so there's no point in relocating birds to an area where they are likely to get poisoned.

Our capture area is between the Platjan and Zanzibar border posts in the northern Limpopo, about 50km west of Alldays. Some cattle farmers have a general dislike of oxpeckers as they believe these birds deliberately keep wounds open so that they can get blood as well as the infected tissue. Although protected by law, the birds are even sometimes shot on cattle farms.

The capture team consisted of Joseph Heymans (who is a Limpopo Biodiversity Officer), the Raijmakers brothers Kobie and Tony, Arno Ellmer, and me. We were joined by well-known tern ringer Mark Boorman from Swakopmund. He wanted to learn the techniques as he had been asked to organise a similar activity in Namibia. For three of the days we were also joined by Hennie de Klerk.

On the drive up, we tried to catch raptors with a bal-chatri along the quiet roads between Vaalwater and Platjan. After three failed attempts, we caught an African Hawk Eagle *Hieraetus spilogaster* which Tony ringed. A little while later, we caught a Pale Chanting Goshawk *Melierax canorus* which I ringed (my second ever).

This year, we were afforded the comparative luxuries of the Hunting Camp on the banks of the Limpopo at Moreland farm, sponsored by the farm's owner, Hennie Otto. We just had to take food and towels. It was comfortable for our purposes and the cooking facilities were good enough for Kobie to prepare some great meals. However, the water was brackish and hard, rendering soap almost useless. We had separate drinking water, but still used the tap water for washing up, showering and cleaning teeth, etc., so it was probably not surprising that three of us got upset stomachs, including myself. Despite the discomfort and inconvenience, I refused to give up and was probably

the least affected. Joseph Heymans had to go back to bed for one morning and Mark spent one entire day sleeping in Kobie's car!

Tony and I (and Hennie while he was there) provided the bulk of the birds to ring using conventional mistnets and flat traps. Kobie, Joseph, Arno and Mark were on permanent oxpecker net erection duty - a two-and-a-half hour exercise. These 6m high nets, usually of a larger than normal mesh size, need a lot of attention. The nets are on special runners to allow them to be raised and lowered rather like raising a flag on a flagpole. Then there are four guy ropes at each end to keep things vertical and steady.

Our activities started on July 9th at a previously unvisited farm called Isipingo where the farmer had told us there would be cattle in the kraal by 08:00. Unfortunately, his understanding of the need for cattle - a necessary prerequisite for the presence of oxpeckers - was woefully inadequate and by 13:00 no more than a handful had appeared so we packed up and went back to camp. Although there were no oxpeckers, we did, however, get about 60 other birds to ring from the normal nets.

That evening, I put up a couple of nets and flat traps near our camp and caught two Meves's Starlings *Lamprotornis mevesii* and Natal Spurfowl *Francolinus natalensis* before the sun went down. I then borrowed an ipod with external loud speaker from Mark and tried for a Scops Owl *Otus senegalensis*. I gave up after about half an hour and went to put the nets away. As I approached, I discovered there was a Scops Owl sitting quietly in the net!! Since Kobie had never ringed one, I decided to donate it to him, but my gesture was rewarded later that evening when I managed to catch a White-faced Owl *Ptilopsis granti* with a hand net and torch. The latter is a feisty little bird, but absolutely gorgeous with its finely marked feathers. Arno took some stunning pictures of this bird before we released it into the night.

The next day we set up at Isebeni farm where we caught our first 16 oxpeckers. The weather had deteriorated with a passing cold front producing strong gusts of wind which would dog our efforts for the rest of the week. The highlight for me at this farm was my first Lilac-breasted Roller. Everyone knows this is a brightly coloured attractive bird, but seeing it in the hand, the colours are unbelievable. Arno again tried to get some pictures, but it was becoming rather aggressive and stressed so we released it without getting any good photos.

July 11th saw us setting up at Hennie Otto's kraal at Moreland. We did well at this location last year for both oxpeckers and other species, and this year was similar with almost 200 birds ringed, including 25 Oxpeckers. I got my first Great Sparrow *Passer motitensis* and my first Tropical Boubou *Laniarius aethiopicus*.

For the first time this year, we took blood samples from the oxpeckers, mainly in order to sex them. After being stabbed a hundred times by their needle sharp claws, I took great delight in getting my own back. This was the first time I had taken blood samples, and I was pleased to learn something new. By the time I'd done about a dozen, it was becoming easier. We all found that the needles provided at first were a little too big, but when Arnaud found some smaller ones, the process became a little easier.

On the 12th we went to another new place called Platjan Farm, taking its name from the nearby border post. We caught one oxpecker there (yes, just the one!), but there were some large flocks of Quelea *Quelea quelea* around and we caught quite a few. I also managed to get the only Yellow-throated Petronia *Petronia superciliaris* here of the

entire week. We also caught quite a few White-crested Helmet-Shrikes *Prionops plumatus* which we didn't see anywhere else.

On the 13th we went to Ellovo which had been a disaster for me last year. I had put up my nets and traps near a rocky hill and caught just one squirrel in a flat trap. This year I set up in the bush and I was rewarded with (amongst others) a couple of Yellow-bellied Eremomelas *Eremomela icteropygialis* - another lifer. This farm also yielded another 20 oxpeckers.

For the last day, we went back to the ever-productive Moreland where we got another 23 oxpeckers and my first Cardinal Woodpecker *Dendropicus fuscescens*.

On the drive home on the 15th, there were few raptors about, but an immature Martial Eagle *Polemaetus bellicosus* proved too tempting to pass up. After some considerable wait, we had it on the bal-chatri and Kobie got another lifer. At 4.5kg and with formidable talons, this, southern Africa's largest eagle, was the real cherry on the top and Kobie couldn't hide his absolute delight.

We may not have reached the target for this year, but our total haul of 85 oxpeckers will be divided between two of the three intended recipient reserves (40 is considered a viable population) and the third will just have to go on next year's list. I finished the very enjoyable and rewarding week with 145 birds processed from 45 species. Altogether as a group we processed about 800 birds from 72 species.



Red-billed Oxpeckers in the net (A. Brooks)