



Afring News online 38:22, 2009

Preventing birds of multiple retraps being held captive for too long

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Being part of a large Ringing Group it sometimes occurs that the same bird is recaptured three to four or even five times in one morning. This is due to the fact that five or six ringers may put up 600 to 700 metres of net in a reasonably small area which increases the chance of multiple trapping of the same bird. Large numbers of birds are often netted in a short space of time, for example 300 to 400 birds in the first two hours. Released birds can easily end up in a net many times. This brings with it the problem that multi-trapped birds can spend all morning hanging in a keeping bag, preventing it from feeding and being exposed to all the other things that go with being captured.

Our Ringing Group tried different methods to prevent birds that were already ringed from hanging in keeping bags along with un-ringed birds, but with little success. We tried to keep ringed birds apart but if you have large numbers of birds to take out of the nets it invariably ends up with a mixed result. We also tried using keeping bags of different colours for ringed birds but, as before, resulting in a mixed “bag” of birds. Although there was some success we were not satisfied with our system.

Eventually Hennie de Klerk came up with the idea of colouring the rings with a permanent marker. This idea was tried with each ringer getting a red permanent marker and colouring the rings. There were some teething problems like forgetting to colour the ring or forgetting that the rings of retraps also had to be coloured. But the system was sorted out by a group of determined ringers, and every now and again someone would remind the others to colour all rings. This is still maintained because it has become a habit.

We now make use of four colours, namely red, blue, green and black, so we can ring for four consecutive days at the same site using a different colour each day. We do not colour the whole ring because some of the colours make the numbers difficult to read. Normally we do not colour the last two or three digits of the ring number. The colour wears off reasonably quickly and in most birds the ring is colour free after seven or eight days.

So the outcome of our system is as follows: when a bird with a coloured ring is retrapped on the same day it is released as soon as it is taken out of the net. It makes both the birds and the ringers much happier.

This method can be used effectively when ringing in reed beds or vleis areas. It is a very cheap solution to a major problem and most of the ringers in our group now colour all rings used.