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RINGING OF COMMON QUAIL *COTURNIX COTURNIX* IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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Introduction

The Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix* (hereafter referred to as Quail) has not featured that much in the ringing records for southern Africa and other regions using SAFRING rings. According to the SAFRING Ringers data portal a total of 74 Quail were ringed between 1962 and 2009, with 34 of these being ringed in 1969 by the (then) Natal Parks Board. It appears that all other birds that have been ringed since have been incidental captures.

My curiosity regarding the targeted ringing of quail was aroused upon viewing YouTube video clips of a Czech Republic ringer catching quail in mist nets. The success of the operation hinged on a call that was being used to attract the birds. A thorough search of the web yielded nothing but a reference to the female's call that has been used for a long time by hunters and poachers for hunting quail.

The call was finally apprehended after a few emails of introductions and proof of my registration as a ringer. Since then, from October 2011 until the time of writing, a total of 54 male quail have been ringed proving the effectiveness of the call for the subspecies occurring in South Africa (Figure 1 and 2).

Quail movements

According to Hockey et al. (2005), the quail that are present during the South African summer overwinter in the central and eastern African savannas. These represent the African subspecies, *C. c.*

africana. This taxonomic status of this subspecies together with another African subspecies, *C. c. erlangeri* is still apparently unclear. The European subspecies is the nominate subspecies, *C.c. coturnix* and appears to overwinter in north and west Africa (European Union management plan 2009). All in all, it appears that very little is known about the Common Quail and where the different subspecies move to after breeding in Europe and South Africa. According to Mr Micheloni of the Italian Ringing Centre, no African ringed birds have been recorded as yet despite the fact that about 30 000 quail have been ringed by him personally over the last 20 years, and on average, the Italian ringers alone ring about 5000 birds a year (Micheloni, pers. comm.). According to Mr Moudry of the Czech Republic over 2500 birds have been ringed this year alone in the Czech Republic, in contrast to the 2400 or so that have historically been ringed there (Moudry, pers. comm.). The lack of recoveries of African ringed birds is probably largely due to the fact that very little ringing of this species has occurred in Africa, a region where the three subspecies mentioned earlier occupy at some point in the year. According to the current literature that I have read, it is unlikely that we would get the European subspecies in South Africa, but this is not known for sure.

Materials and methods

This section summarizes what has been gleaned from the European ringers and what has worked so far here in South Africa. A lot of the quail ringed by Italian and Czech Republic ringers are ringed at night during the period of arrival from their overwintering grounds. According to Mr Micheloni, a night with good conditions can result in 200-300 quail being caught. Night time ringing has been tried on my home farm with no success so far as at the time of writing. It is however a little past their time of arrival and it appears that the later in the season the quail are reluctant to move after dark. This will need to be tested next year again at the time of arrival in order to get an idea of its effectiveness. The best times of day have been found

to be early morning and late afternoon, with the early morning so far being the most successful.

The European ringers use nets with a 28 mm mesh size and the 16 mm mesh size that is commonly used for small passerines potentially leads to a large percentage of quail escaping out of the nets. That being said though, the number of escapees as a percentage of birds landing in the net is decreasing as I've adapted to combat this. The net setup initially used was the V-net setup as seen and demonstrated on the YouTube video clips posted by Mr Moudry of the Czech Republic. These video clips can be seen at <http://www.moudry.cz>. This configuration is effective in open areas in that it catches birds coming in from different directions. Many of the birds that walk under nets and into the centre area where the speaker has been placed are flushed back into the nets upon approach. This configuration is simple and easy to setup. I have found though that due to limited audio coverage of the area I'm in, due to the power of the speakers I use, and what I would assume to be a lower density of quail than the European ringers are familiar with, I would have to move 200 m or more after an hour or so and setup again, which is time consuming. The net configuration which I am currently using involves a single net set up about 2-3 m in front of a bush with an alcove in which I can hide. This is very quick to setup and more importantly allows shelter from the wind, which is a constant problem at the coast. Most of the quail approach from the front, and those that come from behind will fly over the bush if it is dense or will walk towards the speaker if the bush has walk-ways through it. Upon reaching the speaker they will usually flush into the net upon approach. In order to combat the net escapees, I extend the net to about 60% of its full height (I use 12 m, 5 shelf nets) thereby increasing the pocket depth of each shelf. It is very seldom that a bird flies over the top (in the case of the single net setup) and most often will land in the middle shelves, which is ideal. The bottom shelf poses a problem in that the quail have the ground to push off from and will often escape. The escapee problems are essentially eliminated by using the larger 28 mm mesh size and then one can

place the bottom shelf on the ground and it will snag any quail that walks into it.

A walk-in trap has been tried with very limited success and nets are the best way to catch quail as found by myself, and as recommended by the Italian ringers.

The future

The advent of satellite tracking systems will make for some interesting future research in the whole quail movement riddle. Until then though, a start can be made by ringing the birds and seeing what is received back in terms of recaptures and recoveries over the years. The female call is closely guarded and official proof of registration with SAFRING is required before it will be made available to anyone who would like to ring quail. An appeal is made to those who do obtain the call to honour the request of the author of the call by keeping it confidential and safe as it can be distributed with great ease. If anyone is particularly interested in ringing quail and would like the call, Mr Pierfrancesco Micheloni can be contacted at the following email address: micheloni@libero.it

Acknowledgements

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Figure 1: Recently ringed adult male Common Quail



Figure 2: Cryptic patterning on a Common Quail's back