

Afring News

An electronic journal published by SAFRING, Animal Demography Unit at the University of Cape Town



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Editor: H. Dieter Oschadleus

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Recommended citation format: Covas R. 2012. The benefits of long-term studies: 16-year old sociable weaver caught at Benfontein Game Reserve. Afring News 41:11-12

URL: http://safring.adu.org.za/afring_news_current.php

Published online: 23 May 2012

-ISSN 2222-341X -



THE BENEFITS OF LONG-TERM STUDIES: 16-YEAR OLD SOCIABLE WEAVER CAUGHT AT BENFONTEIN GAME RESERVE

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In 1993 Mark Anderson (currently executive director of Birdlife South Africa) started a study on Sociable Weavers *Philetairus socius* at Benfontein Game Reserve, near Kimberley, Northern Cape, South Africa. Mark was interested in collecting basic demographic data on a fascinating colonial species with an intriguing cooperative behaviour. In addition, Mark, then ornithologist at Northern Cape Nature Conservation and based in Kimberley, was interested in getting people involved in bird ringing. Benfontein is conveniently located 15 km outside of town and for five years Mark and an enthusiastic group of volunteers regularly captured the birds at some 20 colonies on the farm. In 1998, I started a PhD project on the cooperative breeding behaviour and life history strategies of the Sociable Weavers at Benfontein, starting a new line of research that continues to this day. Studying the costs and benefits of cooperation requires detailed information on reproductive success and survival and hence we have continued with annual weaver captures at most colonies in the reserve.

Data on the weaver population at Benfontein now span 18 years. One of the greatest benefits of long-term projects is to have variability in population parameters spanning several years and hence encompassing natural fluctuations in population trends. This allows us to study, for example, the effects of cooperation under contrasting environmental conditions or the factors that affect population fluctuations.

Another benefit of long term-studies is that one is able to follow individuals throughout their lives. This can provide insights into animal life histories that cannot be gained in any other way. At the end of 2010 we captured two Sociable Weavers that had been ringed by Mark Anderson in the mid 1990s: one of these (ringed as a juvenile) was 14 years old (BC62497), and the other (ringed as an adult with ring BC42438) was at least 16 years old, making it the oldest Sociable Weaver on record (Fig. 1).

Our perception that small passerines have short life spans has been largely built around northern hemisphere passerines, which typically have low survival as a consequence of the harsh winters, with extreme cold, bad weather and low food availability. Now, with the increase in number and duration of studies of southern hemisphere and tropical birds based on marked individuals, we are beginning to realise that small birds with life spans above 10 years are not unusual.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my collaborators and all the volunteer ringers that have kindly helped keeping the Sociable Weaver captures going over the years. In particular I would like to thank G. Grieve, P. Cochran and R. Visagie. De Beers Mining Co provided access to the land.

Note:

The details for the two oldest Sociable Weavers may be viewed here (the birds were recaptured at Benfontein several times between the first and last captures):

http://afring.adu.org.za/m3/retrap_process.php?ringno=BC42438&incription=SAFRING

http://afring.adu.org.za/m3/retrap_process.php?ringno=BC62497&incription=SAFRING



Figure 1: The author with the 16-year old Sociable Weaver BC42438.
Photo: C. Doutrelant