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IDENTIFYING WETLAND WARBLERS AND WEAVERS IN CAPE TOWN

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There are relatively few warblers and weavers in wetlands around Cape Town, but inexperienced ringing trainees may be confused by these LBJs. There are size differences between these species but with overlap. By choosing two appropriate measurements and plotting them on a graph, there is very little overlap between species, irrespective of age or sex. Birds with wing and tail moult are included (although measurements of birds with most tail feathers missing or growing, were excluded). The method works for juveniles, but not for juvenile warblers or bishops where the tail is still very short and growing (ie. juveniles a few days out of the nest). Accurate measurements are important, and also always confirm the identity by looking at plumage and other measurements or features.

The data in this paper are based on my own measurements, from birds caught in the Western Cape (mostly Cape Town) in the time period 2003 to the end of 2012.

The warblers – wing and tail

The Lesser Swamp and Little Rush Warbler are resident while the African Reed Warbler is an intra-African migrant. The wing lengths of Little Rush and African Reed Warblers overlap and the tail lengths of Lesser Swamp and Little Rush Warblers overlap, but, by using the graph, there is very little overlap. Note that if a trainee consistently measures wing length too short, then small Lesser Swamp Warblers may be mis-identified.

The yellow weavers – bill length and bill depth

Many Cape and Southern Masked Weavers can be distinguished by bill length. Cape has a bill > 20 mm (except some juveniles), and Southern Masked < 20 mm. The largest bill measure I

have for Southern Masked Weavers is 20.9 mm (ring CV11272) but this bird may be a hybrid and the next largest bill is <20 mm.

Recently fledged Cape Weaver juveniles may have the bill under 20 mm (smallest 17.2 mm). By measuring bill length (from the notch to the tip) and bill depth (at the end of the nostril that is nearest to the head), the overlap zone is reduced by a great extent. For any juvenile weavers with bill 17-20 mm, use the graph but also look at belly colour to confirm identification. Young Cape Weavers have yellow bellies and young Southern Masked Weavers have whitish bellies – this applies to most (but not all) adult females.

The bishops – wing and tail

The Yellow Bishop usually has olive or yellow patches on the wing shoulder and rump, but this does not apply to juveniles where these patches are brown and these birds thus resemble Southern Red Bishops. Adult and immature males in summer of both species are easily identified by their plumage. For dull coloured bishops, a plot of wing versus tail length shows very little overlap.

Conclusion

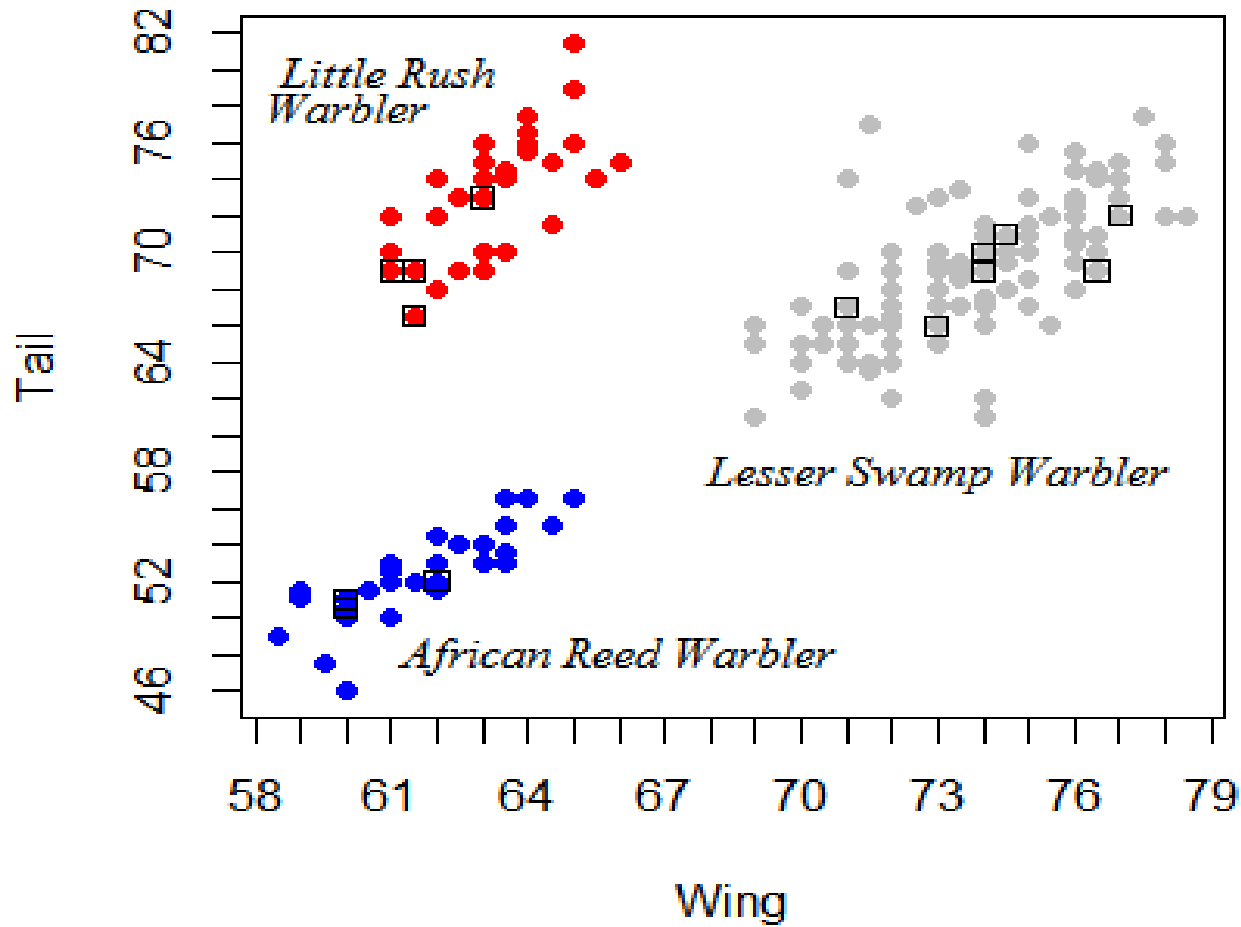
This paper shows that using certain measurements can help identify warblers, weavers and bishops in the Western Cape, irrespective of age and sex. Beware of birds in moult, and take care to take accurate measurements. The graphs may not be helpful in the rest of South Africa because of geographic size variation (especially true of Southern Masked Weavers and Southern Red Bishops) and because there are many more LBJ species.

The following pages show plots of 2 measurements with little overlap, with a summary of my measurements, and selected photos. The graphs also show the data for juveniles as squares plotted over the dots that represent all age and sex class data. Print the following 3 pages (black and white is fine) and place in your ringing book! Use the plots as a starting point but confirm other features, especially if the measurements are in the slight overlap zone.

Thanks to all ringers and trainees who have helped in the field, and to Barry Schultz for commenting on a draft of this paper.



Warblers



African Reed Warbler



Little Rush Warbler

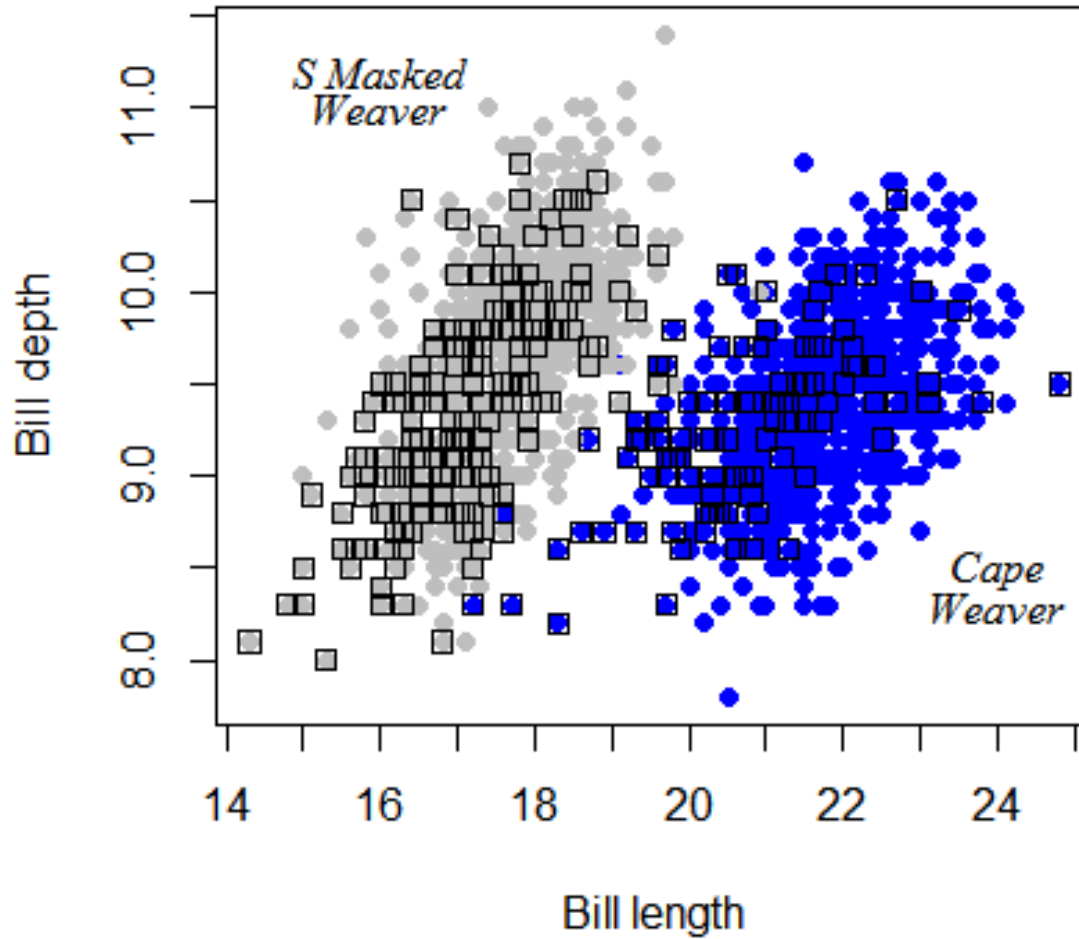


Lesser Swamp Warbler

Species	Safr. No.	Wing	Tail	n
African Reed Warbler	606	58.5 - 61.6 - 65	46 - 52.3 - 56.5	37
Little Rush Warbler	609	61 - 63.3 - 66	66.5 - 73.4 - 81.5	34
Lesser Swamp Warbler	604	69 - 73.7 - 78.5	61 - 69.1 - 77.5	116



Weavers



Southern Masked Weaver juvenile
Belly usually whitish

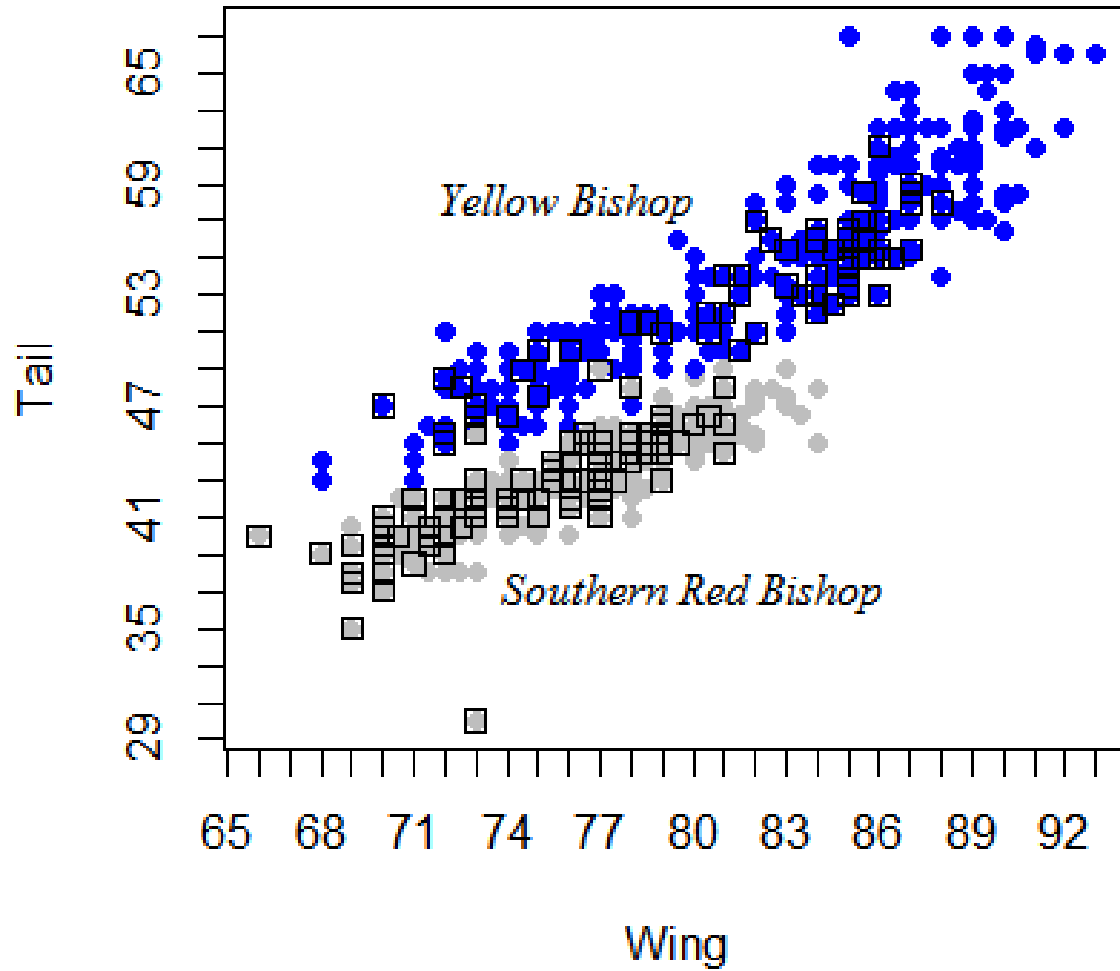


Cape Weaver juvenile
Belly usually yellowish

Species	Safr. No.	Bill length	Bill depth	n
Southern Masked Weaver	803	14.3 - 17.6 - 20.9	8.0 - 9.6 - 11.4	761
Cape Weaver	799	17.2 - 21.6 - 24.8	7.8 - 9.4 - 10.7	791



Bishops



Yellow Bishop juvenile
Tail extends well beyond the under tail coverts



Southern Red Bishop juvenile
Tail extends only a little beyond the under tail coverts

Species	Safr. No.	Wing	Tail	n
Southern Red Bishop	808	66 - 75.7 - 84	30 - 42.8 - 49	350
Yellow Bishop	810	68 - 81.2 - 93	43 - 53.7 - 67	340