

A YEAR'S RINGING AT PHAKALANE SEWAGE LAGOONS IN SOUTH EAST BOTSWANA

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Phakalane sewage lagoons, which lie just 15 km north of Gaborone, were constructed in 1990. They cover 100 ha of which about 75 ha is open water in four large lagoons. Stands of reedmace *Typha* fringe these lagoons, whilst there is an extensive *Typha* swamp at the lowest end of the complex, around the fourth lagoon which has the cleanest water and good fish population. Water from there discharges into the Ngotwane River, a tributary of the Limpopo. Remnants of *Acacia* woodland and areas of open grassland also occur around and between the lagoons.

Phakalane lagoons have become of great importance to a huge variety of waterfowl, holding particularly important numbers of Maccoa Ducks *Oxyura maccoa* and African Pochard *Netta erythrophthalma* (the lagoons are listed as one of the 12 identified Important Bird Areas in Botswana). Their emergent vegetation also attracts a diversity of wetland passerines, both residents and Palearctic migrants. As such, it provides an excellent ringing site. When we came out to Botswana in early 1996, our choice of a home was greatly influenced by its proximity to the lagoons! Obtaining necessary permission from the City Council and access keys took time but after initial forays from July to September 1996, we started ringing in earnest in November of that year. We chose three ringing sites within the whole complex, two in *Typha* stands and adjacent seasonally flooded vegetation at the edge of the second lagoon and a third site in the large *Typha* swamp in the bottom lagoon.

We had an exciting few months during the summer, especially from January to March, catching *Acrocephalus* warblers and other birds. A highlight was a Basra Reed Warbler *A. griseldis*, the first record for Botswana, on 28 January, but another surprise was the large number of European Reed Warblers *A. scirpaceus* that we caught – 53 birds between early

November and mid April, 14 of which we subsequently retrapped during that period. This was formerly regarded as a rare Palearctic migrant to southern Africa, but ringing at Phakalane and elsewhere is showing that this species is not uncommon, certainly in years of high rainfall. Handling the European Reed Warblers in worn plumage when they arrived in November and December, then in moult and finally in fresh plumage in late March and early April, has given us good practice in separating the species from the European Marsh Warbler *A. palustris*. We only caught three individuals of the latter species, all in March or April, at the edge of the *Typha*. European Sedge Warblers *A. schoenobaenus* figured prominently in the catches from early November to mid April with an apparent influx or passage in late January. Many of these Sedge Warblers remained at the site for weeks or months as the 40 retraps (18%), out of 219 birds ringed, demonstrated. The only other Palearctic 'Acro' was the Great Reed Warbler *A. arundinaceus* of which we caught 55 (12 retrapped - almost 22 %) between the end of December and late March.

The African 'reed' warblers caught at Phakalane included large numbers (261) of African Reed Warblers *A. baeticatus* (surely a better name than African Marsh Warblers, given their very close relationship with European Reed Warblers). The majority were caught between November and April when some were beginning to moult. During March and April numbers reduced as birds presumably migrated north. A few birds were present during the winter months (June to August). Whether these are resident or immigrants from further south remains to be determined. The latter is suggested by the fact that none of the winter birds caught were already ringed. During the summer by contrast, we retrapped 62 (23%) of our ringed birds. Some 27 Lesser Swamp (Cape Reed) Warblers *A. gricillirostris* have been ringed but just two Little Rush (African Sedge) Warblers *Bradypterus baboecala*, both caught well out into the large swamp.

Other 'bread-and-butter' species caught have been Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild* (102 to date), Orangebreasted Waxbill *Sporaeeginthus*

subflavus (50), Tawnyflanked Prinia *Prinia subflava* and Fantailed Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis* and of course, large numbers of Red Bishop *Euplectes orix*, Whitewinged Widow *E. albonotatus* and Redbilled Quelea *Quelea quelea* coming to roost at dusk. More welcome than these have been the roosting European Swallows *Hirundo rustica*. Variety is provided by the odd Burchell's Coucal *Centropus superciliosus*, Black Crake *Amaurornis flavirostris* or Bluecheeked Bee-eater *Merops persicus* and by 'bush' birds moving out into the reedmace and other vegetation in the flooded area. There is always plenty to see between net rounds – flamingoes to fish eagles, and coots and crakes as well as a large roost of Cattle Egrets *Bubulcus ibis*, Sacred Ibis *Threskiornis aethiopicus*, Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* and Hadada Ibis *Bostrychia hagedash*. Ringing in the winter months is relatively quiet without the Palearctic 'Acros' but to make up for their loss are the winter visitors such as Stonechats *Saxicola torquata* and Fiscal Flycatchers *Sigelus silens*. Other insect-eaters, Marico Flycatchers *Melaenornis mariquensis* and Drongos *Dicrurus adsimilis*, also seem to

make more use of the swamp area in the winter than in the summer.

We are gathering data on moult, biometrics and location of the net and position in the net where each bird is caught, to try to show differences in foraging niches between species. We intend to work the three sites systematically over the coming year but also to look at the birds in the fringes of vegetation at nearby Bokaa and Gaborone Dams to see if there is any interchange between these locations. We made two brief visits to Shashe Dam near Francistown, some 450 km north of Gaborone, in February and March 1997 and the first two birds we caught, an African Reed and a European Reed Warbler, were already ringed! These turned out to have been ringed the previous year at Shashe by Bennie van den Brink of the Dutch/Botswana Swallow Project. It would be excellent if other ringers at wetland sites were to generate some controls of our Phakalane summering African Reed Warblers at their wintering quarters, possibly in Namibia or even Malawi, or of our wintering birds, possibly in South Africa? We will try to control our birds too.

ANNOUNCEMENT

COMPUTERISED SCHEDULES

Dieter Oschadleus

I am busy setting up a database to capture all ringing data in electronic form. If ringers are putting their ringing data onto computer, please keep on doing so. Ringers should contact me, however, to discuss the exporting of the data into a SAFRING format.

Initially, the data required would be very similar to the Schedule I forms. Retraps and recoveries should be entered in the same database in the same format. Eventually ringers will be able to e-mail schedules or send them on stiffies. For the time being, however, schedules must be filled

out manually or printed out. Printout schedules from your computer should resemble Schedule I forms.

Those ringers who have computers but are waiting for a users' program, could enter their ringing data into a simple spreadsheet. Spreadsheets are universally available, and easy to use. The data can be entered in a Schedule I format and then printed out to send to SAFRING. Simply leave enough space to write in the schedule summary (very important) if you can't get the computer to do it.

Ringers who have not yet joined the computer age need not worry. SAFRING will always be happy to accept the usual handwritten schedules.