

PALEARCTIC MIGRANTS AT NGULIA, KENYA

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Each year, when the moon is waning over East Africa, and the short rains are drawing to an end, a phenomenon takes place which borders on being a miracle. Palearctic migrants, and more especially warblers, which navigate at night on their journey southwards to warmer climes for the boreal winter, become disorientated over the Ngulia Hills. Every November and December, they descend in vast numbers to the Ngulia Lodge, disorientated by the 'lighthouse effect' caused when the floodlights that illuminate the waterholes at this game lodge interact with heavy mists. In 1969, an observant birder noted this occurrence and a ringing scheme was initiated. Every year a multinational group of volunteer ringers gather at Ngulia Lodge to process the masses of birds that are captured at night with mistnets, and even by hand from the bushes. Totals of birds ringed were 29 591 and 18 336 for the years 1996 and 1997 respectively, and the numbers ringed were limited only by available manpower.

Last December, Herman and Zephné Bernitz were the first South Africans ever to participate in this ringing extravaganza. Together with ringers from Kenya, U.K., Belgium, U S A, Sweden, Switzerland and Hungary, they formed a team which ringed for an average of 13 hours a day, beginning as the mist moved in nightly at about 23h00. The majority of species handled do not regularly migrate as far south as South Africa, except as rare vagrants, and it was a privilege indeed to be able to learn the identification, ageing and sexing in many cases of birds such as European Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*, Basra Reed Warbler *A. griseldis*, Olivetree, Olivaceous and Upcher's Warbler *Hippolais olivetorum*, *H. pallida* and *H. languida*. Differentiation between the Thrush-Nightingale or Sprosser *Luscinia luscinia* and the Nightingale *L. megarhynchos* proved simple in the hand by virtue of the difference in size of the

outermost primary feather, a difference which would hardly help the average birder! River Warbler *Locustella fluviatilis* and Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* (a bird which we catch regularly at Valkop Dam) were plentiful. The list of interesting birds handled seemed never ending: European Scops Owl *Otus scops*, Iranias *Irania gutturalis*, European Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*, Redbacked and Isabelline Shrikes *Lanius collurio* and *L. isabellinus*, and hybrids thereof, and such afrotropicals as Painted Snipe *Rostratula benghalensis* (caught in the lodge's septic tank soak area!), Redcheeked Cordon-bleu *Uraeginthus bengalis* and *Nectarinia venusta*, the Variable Sunbird. The importance of using scientific names became obvious, considering the multilingual nature of the ringing team and the resultant confusion over common names. What we call a Barred Warbler *Calamonastes fasciolatus* and what in Europe and Kenya is a Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria* are two totally different birds! To confuse the issue even further, our Redheaded Weaver *Anaplectes rubriceps* bears little resemblance to their Redheaded Weaver *Anaplectes rubriceps*!

Ngulia lies in the Tsavo West National Park in the Southwest of Kenya, so on the odd occasion that we weren't busy ringing, we were able to enjoy a little game-watching. From our window at the lodge, we saw lion, elephant, and buffalo; we saw white rhino from our ringing station, and nightly we dined while watching the local leopard feed on a tree stump baited with a haunch of goat in front of the open air dining room. Most of the lodges in Kenya feed the carnivores, which is a practice which guarantees sightings to American tourists, but which didn't impress us! One night the Hungarian contingent set out on foot in the dark beyond the pool of the floodlights to get closer photographs of some lions, and was in grave danger of being converted into Hungarian goulash. On another occasion the leopard was chased off its bait by the attempted kill of an impala by four lionesses. No sooner had this taken place when a Giant Eagle Owl *Bubo lacteus* appeared on a tree within the area of the lights, and was caught

by ourselves using a borrowed Nairobi Museum balchatri. Unfortunately the ringing group did not have a ring large enough to fit the owl, so it was released after much photographing by ringers and tourists alike. The resident Marabou Storks *Leptoptilus crumeniferus* amazed us by their ability to snap up Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* on the wing if the latter ventured to near the storks on a fly-past.

To date, 203 842 birds have been ringed at Ngulia, of which 81 have been recovered or controlled. Some interesting details are as follows.

Luscinia luscinia (Sprosser) ringed at Ngulia on 25.11.81 and caught and released at the nest by a ringer in Kymi, Finland on 10.06.82 – longest and most northerly movement of any Ngulia-ringed bird.

Acrocephalus palustris (Eurasian Marsh Warbler) ringed at Ngulia on 26.11.75 and killed by boys in Mulanji, Malawi, five days and 1 480 km later.

A. palustris ringed at Ngulia on 07.12.89 and recovered on 31.12.90 at Gokwe, Zimbabwe – the southernmost recovery.

A. palustris ringed 07.08.89 at Pisek, Czech Republic and controlled 15.11.79 at Ngulia – the first control at Ngulia (after 10 years!).

Sylvia nisoria (Barred Warbler) ringed on 28.11.72 and recovered at Al-Meznab, Saudi Arabia on 19.09.73 – the first recovery of a Ngulia-ringed bird, after only thirty Barred Warblers had been ringed.

Coracias garrulus (Eurasian Roller) ringed at Ngulia on 10.12.86 and recovered on 01.05.89 at Samail, Oman.

Ploceus rubiginosus (Chestnut Weaver) ringed at Ngulia on 06.12.74 and recovered at Migwani, Kenya, 210 km and 145 days later – the only recovery so far of an Ngulia-ringed Afrotropical bird.

South African birders are at last in a position to benefit from the political changes in our country with the opening of travel possibilities to previously hostile African and other countries. Dates for ringing at Ngulia this year will be from November 20 to December 11. During the periods around the October and December new moons, the weather conditions are too variable to warrant travelling from afar as mist cannot be guaranteed.

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