

REVIEW

BOOKS :

McClure Elliott. 1984. 'BIRD BANDING'. pp 351; 65 black and white photographs, 165 text diagrams. Pacific Grove: The Boxwood Press. U.S.\$15.00

In the preface the author explains that this book was originally written in 1963 for the specific purpose of aiding groups co-operating in the Migratory Animal Pathological Survey of Eastern Asia; the text was revised and enlarged in 1966 and further revised for the general birdbander in 1984. The result is a book in which the birdbander (or birdringer as we say in southern Africa), will find an enormous amount of information, and its handy size (21,5 cm x 13,6 cm x 2,0 cm; 500g) makes it practical for use in the field.

Because of its original purpose and authorship, the book leans heavily on examples drawn from south-east Asia and from North America. This may be felt to be a weakness from the point of view of ornithologists in Africa, but in some respects this aspect is an attraction, providing as it does a novelty of ideas and species and ways of catching them.

The piecemeal revisions and enlargements of the text result in some related aspects of bird ringing being covered in disjunct sections of the book instead of in one Continuous text. For example, Chapter 7 entitled 'Nets and Netting', deals comprehensively with every conceivable aspect of netting birds and the handling of mistnets, cannon nets, Dho-Gaza nets, etc. However, nowhere here will the reader find guidance on how to get birds out of a mistnet; these techniques are discussed instead in Chapter 3, which is entitled 'The bird and the Bander' and which commences with a section on 'Types of Migrants'. Similarly, Chapter 8, 'Banding Nestlings' contains only some two pages of text in total, an "all too brief discussion" as the author admits, but readers are referred to Chapter 4 in which the 'banding idiosyncrasies' of birds are discussed by order and family and information is given, when known, on the age at which nestlings can be safely banded. Instructions on the fitting of bands are found on pages 519-520 under the subheading 'Band sizes' in Chapter 13 which is entitled 'The Art of Keeping Records'. This seemingly random arrangement of subject matter will not aid the novice who wants to quickly refer to a particular aspect or technique of ringing.

One topic that appears not to be discussed concerns bird mass and techniques for weighing birds. The words 'weight', 'mass', 'scales', 'balances' do not appear in the 11-page long index, but Pesola scales and metric balances are mentioned in equipment lists and are figured in accompanying photographs. Aside from this omission of a subject that many ringers consider important, the text is impressively comprehensive. Chapter 5 (73 pages) is devoted to traps and trapping and covers a range from simple sieve-drop traps to Heligoland traps. Chapter 6 (27 pages) deals with snares, including Bal-chatris. As the author points out, there is no clear distinction between snares and traps. Chapter 7 (53 pages) is devoted to nets and netting as aforementioned. These three chapters are profusely illustrated with many good line drawings and some photographs; the latter are not ideal for depicting traps and several are of such poor contrast and scale as to have been better left out.

For those who like gadgets, a great variety of automatic traps for different types of mainly nearctic birds are figured and described. Obviously automatic trap design has been a matter of abiding interest to many banders in North America. By contrast, some very effective techniques for catching birds (without injuring them) have been learnt from rural populations in Asia and are remarkable in their simplicity - the Bee-eater 'snare' from Malaya and the Rajasthani method of 'shining' birds are examples. McClure does more than merely describe the techniques; he gives the reader the benefit of his own experiences in trying them out and, where necessary, elaborates on the important factors and constraints peculiar to each method.

There is a great deal more in this book: a chapter on bats and bat banding; informative sections on first-aid for birds; bird parasites; techniques for taking blood smears; skinning and preserving birds and repairing mistnets, to name only a few. McClure who has personally handled and banded "only about 520 species" conveys his wealth of experience unstintingly and often humourously. Parrots are aptly described as "a pocket of headaches for the bird bander" and he advises that the birds' bills be taped before attempts are made to remove them from nets or traps. Parrots are strong and resourceful and can quickly remove the offending tape should they escape before the bander has untaped the bill himself. Similar advice to tape the bills of shrikes and grosbeaks, albeit with warnings about the fatal consequences to such species should they fly free with the tape still in place, do not meet with the approval of this reviewer. Most advice given, however, is very pertinent. On p. 188: "You have to be of a special temperament to net birds. If you cannot stand frustration and defeat without anger, then don't try to use a mistnet. It is a diabolical device and fully lives up to Murphy's law that 'Whatever can go wrong will!'" He lists all the problems familiar to the majority of mistnetters plus a few additional ones for good measure, such as a taxi-cab driving through a net and irate or concerned picnickers trying

to release birds with razor blades.

McClure's professional involvement with birds as vectors of pathological diseases often provides food for thought. For example, in referring to the Great Horned Owl (p. 52) he writes "... these large owls have been demonstrated to have antibodies for rabies, or to be carriers for the live virus, and the toe nails that might have contacted a diseased animal can be infectious.". In view of the endemic status of rabies in southern Africa, ringers who handle large owls or other mammalian-eating birds of prey should bear such risks in mind and take appropriate precautions against laceration by the beak or talons.

I consider this to be a book that any keen birdringer/bander will benefit from having on hand. At U.S.\$15 it is very reasonably priced and good value for money by today's standards.

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This innovative advice is reprinted from the pages of the 8th Annual Report of the Middlesex Field Study Centre, Western Australia, with the permission of the anonymous author.

A BIRD LIST FOR INSOMNIACS

I used to feel inferior when in company of those comparing lists, all on a global scale, into three figures in length and I had none. Not any more, with the immortal Gilbert and Sullivan I sing 'I've got a little list' a very little one, easily portable in a tiny mind. The list contains no birds known to me in reality that bring sleep-murdering scientific facts. Selection for inclusion has been rigorous with long trials and many errors, and the rejection list is long. For example, Thick-heads and Thick-knees were discarded - too reminiscent of medical symptoms (reminders of past or future ailments are not sleep-inducing). The Cut-throat Finch was crossed off very soon, only two murmured repetitions of that name has one not only wide-awake but frightened to death as well. Willett was tried many times before rejection. Will it? Won't it? Indecision, and wrestling with permutations of what it would if it could, were too aggravating. Poor-me-one was nice, pathetic and wistful, until I found myself muttering Pour-me-one. All of these and many more had to go, they were not soporific.