

NOTES AND NEWS

THE TRIALS OF A TYRO

S. L. Lane

I had been waiting for months it seemed, when the first net arrived from Cape Town. Bags had been sewn and stashed, anchor pegs had been purchased, bamboo poles - strong and shiny - lay on the khondi, and I had the initial net sites picked out. My netting area, a two-acre plot behind my house, has a firebreak just inside the surrounding chain-link fence - perfect, it seemed, for the nets.

I collected the net from the parcel window at about 3 p.m, drove home at full-speed and, assisted by my wife, my grown daughter and her visiting friend, proceeded to put it up. The first delay was a search for string; I had forgotten string! Fortunately there was some that looked suitable in the kitchen drawer. The second delay was caused by the amount of bed rock under the site I'd chosen. Two bent pegs later, I found some pockets of soil closer to the fence - a bit too close for comfort actually, but time was against me. The third delay was caused by the entanglement of a trouser button in the net. I had learned to avoid shirt buttons when netting, but nobody had told me to expect attacks from the rear! Finally, my air of cool competence only slightly in disarray, I managed to get the net up and we retired to wait for birds.

At about 4.30 p.m. I went out and saw the anticipated flutter of wings in the net. Triumphantlly I summoned the women to watch the hunter retrieve his prey. As I got closer I discovered that the bird, a female Yellowbellied Sunbird, was encased in a large glob of net. It looked like it had been spinning itself a cocoon! The poles, it seemed, had been too shiny and not strong enough. The poles had bent, the guy string slipped, and as a result the bird had had three (or was it four?) layers of net to play with. Fifteen minutes later there was one hysterical ringer, an equally hysterical bird, three women offering infuriating advice, and growing dusk. Nothing else had changed. What could I do but send one of my 'helpers' for the scissors. Score for the first day: one sunbird, three holes in my new net, a good deal of injured dignity, and a new netting principle: 'Never turn your back on a net'. "Well", I thought, "Things can only get better".

The next morning, determined to avoid the mistakes of the evening before, I cut new poles, reassembled the net, tightening the strings to the breaking point, and immediately tripped over one of them, which duly broke. Down came the net over me, a cactus, and the chain-link fence. I hadn't actually noticed before that a chain-link fence has a series of hooks along the top. Every hook had tethered a loop of net; it was neat and tidy, but not functional. By the time I had removed the net from the fence and the cactus, and the cactus spines from the ringer, the birds were ready for their mid-day naps. Score for the second day: one Blackeyed Bulbul, one Kurrichane Thrush, one ringer, one prickly pear, one chain-link fence.

Fortunately, several days of fairly satisfactory netting intervened before I encountered the woodpeckers. Nobody had warned me about woodpeckers! It was evening, and the first evening motif was reiterated - this time with variations. There were two birds - not just hysterical, but screaming. There were two great globs of net, not just around the birds, but firmly stuck to their three-inch tongues. The ringer was not just hysterical, but horrified as well. Fortunately, there was only one woman to offer 'helpful' advice and she was my wife before whom a pretence of cool competence is a waste of time anyway. The scissors once more came into play. Releasing the birds from the net was easy; releasing the globs of net from the tongues took longer due to the impossibility of being sure where the tongue ended and the glob began.

I retired to bed determined to give the whole thing up as a mistake, but in the morning I remembered that, as the equipment had used up about six months of my entertainment budget, I had little else to occupy my spare time. So I decided to struggle on. I'm glad I did.

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