

REVIEWS

BOOKS:

Rogers, K., Rogers, A. and Rogers, D., assisted by B. Lane and B. Male. 1986 "BANDER'S AID". pp 137. 3 pp of line drawings. A. Rogers, Lot 17, Ninks Road, St Andrews, Victoria, Australia, 3761. Australian \$17.50 plus \$2.50 post and packing.

In reviewing this guide I have used the opportunity to place it in a South African context, and to append a few of my own thoughts on ringing in general. I trust the authors and the Editor of Safring News will forgive me for taking the liberty.

This guide to the ageing and sexing of some Australian bush-birds is a fine example of what can be achieved by ringers who, given the opportunity to do what only ringers can in these enlightened days, are prepared to scrutinise every bird in the hand, accurately record what they see, and synthesise the accumulated information. This 'Aussie Svensson' in-the-making is based on the results of mistnetting in the State of Victoria in Australia. 112 species are covered in various degrees of detail, largely determined by the numbers of birds handled. Four introductory chapters lead into the species descriptions and there are appendices on age codes, statistics, moult and site locations.

A section is sensibly devoted to techniques, which are difficult to standardise at the best of times. Details of how to take full biometrical data are given, including the increasingly popular and most satisfactorily repeatable 'Total Head Length'. This measurement is eminently suitable for passerines, not only for waders (where it has seen most extensive use). If universally employed, it may finally narrow to statistically acceptable limits the range of inter-observer variability currently associated with culmen length alone.

To have any hope of pin-pointing age- and sex-related differences, it may be necessary to record full plumage and body details of all birds caught, particularly retraps. In this way, seemingly minor characteristics may blossom into valuable ageing and sexing criteria. Here again, the authors spell out the

features to be recorded, from eye colour and cloacal protuberance to underwing feathering and wing formula. A chart to standardize colours would be a useful addition to ensure that one man's Warm Sepia isn't another man's Burnt Umber. Three pages of clear diagrams ensure that we all know which part of the bird to measure/describe. Seasoned campaigners might be inclined to skip such sections under the impression that it can teach them nothing new. But a refresher course is no bad thing, and when did you last check the palate colour of a retrap? Instructions on how to record moult are also given and an appendix provides a particularly interesting and useful account of this phenomenon. Moult is certainly one of the most useful parameters which can be obtained from the bird in the hand and, as the authors point out, only takes a little practice to learn how to record. I know of ringers who would sooner extract a Boomslang bare-handed from the net, than attempt to 'moult' a Mossie. Why the pathological terror of this fascinating and valuable facet of a bird's life? Don't be intimidated by the glaring empty boxes on a moult card. They look less awesome when they're filled in....

Interesting that skull ossification, so beloved of Svensson, does not get so much as a mention in "Bander's Aid". Certainly the museum bench, with its uncomplaining line of stiff, is a far cry from the field situation with its inherent difficulties of fiddling around with sticky fingers for pink and white patches on the cranium of some indignant, and very much alive, bird. So this omission is perhaps forgivable, although I would think the technique merits at least a try. Two pages of specimen transcribed field-sheets detail all the parameters to be recorded, so ignorance is no excuse now. Full credit is also given to that most important member of the ringing team - the scribe!

95 of the 137 pages are devoted to the species descriptions. An explanation of the codes, format and presentation of data is given in a chapter 2, which precedes the species accounts by a dozen pages. For quick reference I would have preferred the two to be propinquent. Brief but appropriately detailed descriptions of adult plumage are given for all species, with distinguishing features of the sexes, juvs and imms included where they differ. The colour of bare parts is also included; in many instances this is critical to accurate ageing and sexing. Timing of moult is dealt with, and also of breeding. The latter is perhaps a surprising inclusion in a ringers' guide, but where gravidity may be the only means of sexing a bird, or some individuals are found in breeding condition in subadult plumage, then it is worth recording. And how can one fail to check for brood-patch when the post-breeding belly is described as "a cross between scrambled egg and a Turner sunset"? Basic statistical data (mean, standard deviations and sample size) are presented for wing, total head length, tail and weight. All the above aspects are discussed together where they are a means of ageing and sexing.

The authors are not coy about admitting that certain characters were "not observed" or "unknown". These demonstrate the tremendous opportunity that exists for ringers to make valuable additions to current knowledge. There is no doubt that this applies in South Africa - just look at the small sample sizes for measurements, or the number of times "unrecorded" crops up in the various sections of "Roberts" (5) to see how much information is lacking for even the commonest of species.

Which brings me to the question: 'When can we expect to see a guide of this nature for SA ringers?' An 'Afro Svensson' has long since been proposed in the pages of Safring News, but the response has not been exactly overwhelming, it seems. Perhaps there is a lag-phase between initiating data collection and actually getting some presentable results? But come on, how many of you out there have heaps of yellowing field-notebooks, stacked full of biometrics and descriptions, just waiting to see the light of day? I know I do. Oops, what a give-away. Perhaps it would be appropriate to first push for a series of regional guides (based on bird club areas?) which can be added to, and then amalgamated at a later stage if necessary?

To return to "Bander's Aid". One major flaw is its binding. Having looked through it once in the (relatively) amenable conditions of my office, five pages had come adrift. It would clearly last no time at all in the field, where the large page size (A4) would also make it clumsy to use. If a hard cover proved too expensive, perhaps a photoreduced, ring-bound volume would be appropriate? It would certainly be easy to flick through, remain open at the relevant page and avoid the risk of the leaves being carried away on the wind and ultimately incorporated into the nest of an Eastern Rosella (which sounds like something you might catch in Durban).

That the guide is scientifically accurate and full of facts and figures does not preclude a refreshing and anecdotal style which livenes up the text and reminds us that ringing is, after all, an enjoyable and frequently highly sociable pursuit. A few lines prefacing many of the species sum up the impressions of a bird that will linger long after the wing length of males or the iris colours of immatures are forgotten, e.g. "Green Rosella...bill can inflict a painful wound; gloves or a trainee are useful" (for their [the trainees] benefit, I also pass on Pied Barbets and Fiscal Shrikes. After all, why should bleeding be restricted to fox-hunting?); "Song Thrush...noisy and sheds feathers when handled. Not a good bird to catch when introducing Granny to banding"; "Crested Shrike-Tit...usually caught in threes; if only one caught, the other two escaped"; "Rufous Songlark. A regular Houdini bird"; "House Sparrow. A nasty aggressive little bird...it should have been left in England, where it is still a nasty aggressive little bird."

As well as the quips, there are serious words of warning on the idiosyncracies of some species - liable to be tongued, tend to lose feathers if not handled with extreme care, usually caught in the bottom shelf and therefore prone to ant attack, are examples. Chapter 4 is entitled "CAUTIONS", with sections such as "Dangers to birds in mist nets" headed "Mist netters who", which is full of the sort of common sense that should not need repeating, but often does. Being prepared to snip nets, in order to safely and quickly extricate twisters, tonguers and double-pocketters, is an example. How often do you stride off in the direction of the nets without a 'Quickunpik' or similar...? To the list of NEVERS, I would add the abominable and almost unbelievable practice of leaving nets open and unattended overnight so that idle ringers can have an extra few minutes in bed and still catch the early bird (and nocturnal bats, beetles, buck, owls and other inconsequential items...). I would also be inclined to add the use of boxes for holding passerines to the aforementioned list. Trainees, in particular, can have as much trouble extracting a bird from a cavernous box, than from the net in the first place. This surely subjects the bird to unnecessary trauma as a result. Furthermore, the crating of birds of all shapes, sizes and dispositions in the same hard-walled container must exacerbate the feeling of discomfort that the individual will already be experiencing.

As ringing inevitably becomes more exposed to the public eye, ringers will find themselves increasingly under scrutiny and accountable to enquiring and inquisitive members of the public to whom, not unnaturally, it may appear a pretty unreasonable pursuit. Public relations will, therefore, become an art in which all ringers must excel; extraction, handling and ringing standards must match their claims that the welfare of the bird comes first. I hope that when the southern African version(s) of this excellent guide appear(s) plenty of page-space will be found to include words of wisdom as well as a wealth of ageing and sexing info. Meanwhile, my congratulations to the "Bander's Aid" team for a job well done but, in their own words, only a "starting point" for the (hopefully) many editions yet to come. It certainly provides a good model on which to base the SA equivalent(s). The success of this guide, within its limited but realistic limits, has been due to the enthusiasm and hard work of the authors and a relatively small number of fellow ringers. On this basis, there is every reason to believe that the same could be achieved here.

I would like to thank Liz McMahon for her review of my review.

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