

BIRD RINGING AT OLIFANTSBOS, CAPE OF GOOD HOPE NATURE RESERVE,
4 - 7 DECEMBER 1987

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This was our most successful ringing weekend to date, from the point of view of both the numbers of birds and the numbers of ringers participating. On past experience I would never have believed that 400 birds could be caught at Olifantsbos over a weekend. For those of you for whom 100+ birds in a day is fast becoming the norm, it is worth bearing in mind that my worst-ever ringing figures were 'achieved' at Oifantsbos: one bird in nine hours, and that was a retrap.

Malachite Sunbirds were far-and-away the star performers, and being very forthcoming in terms of providing data on moult, retraps and recoveries, most of the available manpower and nets were directed towards a good catch of these gems. We were not disappointed. Although after a while many of the birds bounded over the ranks of nets like 400 m hurdles, surreptitious relocations secured a few more, and the wiliest ones were ultimately foiled by installing a series of single-shelf wader nets within the *Lenotus* patch. The final tally of 202 new and 58 retraps speaks for itself. I wonder what is an average South African annual total for this species? On this weekend in 1986 we ringed four Malachite Sunbirds! If the flowering of the Wild Dagga is so unpredictable, then how do so many sunbirds manage to home in on it? Some indication of where they go to when there are no flowers at Olifantsbos is provided by previous recoveries. So, by the law of averages, we can expect at least a couple of this weekend's birds to be found elsewhere. Certainly, half the excitement of ringing is the anticipation of a quality recovery. In this context a Malachite finding its way to Cape Town is as noteworthy as a Ringed Plover being reported from Russia. Personally, I would settle for both.

The Malachite monopoly was not threatened by any other birds, but a few species did creep into double figures, notably Whitefronted Plovers. These and the other waders, the product of Les Underhill's single-shelf nets and devious nocturnal manoeuvrings by the Organiser of SAFRING, were much appreciated by the few stalwarts who had the energy to stay up after midnight. Real bushbirds again proved rather scarce (e.g. only one new Cape White-eye) and there was little evidence of a repeat of last December's weaver and canary rush. One of the single small party of Cape Weavers heading rapidly southeast was caught, and the few Cape Canaries were predominantly youngsters, probably of local origin. The most unusual capture, in a regional context,

was undoubtedly the Pintailed Whydah, a fine male. It is one of the many species which are common elsewhere on the Peninsula and beyond, but inexplicably rare in the Reserve. This, and the female which it was chasing, constitute two of only a handful of records over recent years.

Almost 800 birds have been caught on the three Skaife ringing weekends. Trainees and more seasoned campaigners alike have, I hope, benefitted from the opportunity to handle a variety of species and from the exchange of views and ideas on aspects of ringing that inevitably arise when so many ringers are ensconced together. There is clearly room for improvement in ringing and particularly extraction procedures and standardization of measuring techniques. More direct supervision of trainees and helpers by qualified ringers is required in this regard. Certainly bird-identification could be brushed-up in some quarters as well. Although a bird in the hand may bear no apparent resemblance to one of the same species hopping around in the bushes, you could do worse than to actually indulge in some birdwatching and pore over 'Roberts 5' and 'Newman' to improve your i.d. Personally, I have always been of the opinion (sometimes forcibly expressed, as some of you will know!) that ringing should be a progression from birdwatching, not the other way around. However, it is inevitable that there will be ringers who are not, *a priori*, experienced birdwatchers. These should then be prepared to spend at least as much time getting to grips with field characters and jizz by looking at birds through binoculars and swotting them up in the appropriate books, as they spend extracting mystery objects from mistnets.

Hopefully, by the time the next Olifantsbos weekend comes round (suggestions for suitable dates please), we will have improved in all ringing departments and perhaps have a few recoveries to contemplate. Ringing is carried out at least once a month at Helderberg Nature Reserve, with occasional forays to other sites - Paarl, Rondevlei and elsewhere. Please get in touch if you are interested in taking part, or have suggestions for other areas to attack, particularly if there are good numbers of sugarbirds and sunbirds to be had.

Many thanks to all who participated and made the weekend a success, and to Chief Warden Gerald Wright (Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve) and Beau Rowlands (University of Cape Town) for permission to work and stay Olifantsbos. Their co-operation is much appreciated.

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