



HOW WOULD YOU LIKE ONE OF THESE IN YOUR MISTNET? A BARECHEEKED BABBLER AT HOBATERE

REPORTS, NOTES & LETTERS

SQUEEZING THE RINGERS, NAMIBIAN STYLE

Rob Simmons

The Rev Mike Yates, alias the Red Bishop, is not usually prone to excitement when a Whitebrowed Sparrowweaver flies by. Come to think of it is anyone? But, for a man accustomed to thoughts of catching Peregrines and African Hawk Eagles (among other things) and who sees anything smaller as mere bait, this was a momentous occasion. The rubbish weaver had hit the net, disturbing him from his unnammed beverage, and galvanising him into rushing to the net shouting "its mine, I'll get it, I'll get it!". There wasn't much competition it's true. From the tirade that followed from both bird and man we could understand why he usually preferred larger quarry. The bird protested, the bemused onlookers offered advice of a dubious nature, and the man of God remained unflustered. Yates had got his first sparrowweaver - well and truly attached to his persona.

The occasion for this good natured exchange was the first Namibian ringers meeting held at Hobatere Lodge (near Etosha National Park) organised by birder extraordinaire, Steve Braine. The idea was to get all Namibian ringers around one table, throw in some expertise in the form of Terry Oatley and discuss projects, problems and birds. All this and more went off remarkably well between the 12th and 15th June 1991; it included game drives, elephant watching, raptor trapping, some beverages and much discussion on why ten experienced raptor-trappers couldn't catch anything better than one Pale Chanting Goshawk and one Rock Kestrel despite about 50 balchatri-hours. That has yet to be answered.

Slicing the orange

We were ostensibly at Hobatere to discuss techniques, results and problems of ringing and the serious side was kicked off by Terry "where's your ringing schedule" Oatley with a discussion entitled "Better ways of squeezing the orange" (read "ringer" for "orange"). His talk included new stats techniques for estimating survival estimates from ring recoveries, and details on recovery rates for the U.K. (2,2% of all birds ringed are reported) versus southern Africa (1,0%). We learnt that only eleven species have been reported over 100 times in this part of the world, despite the fact that about 40 000 birds are ringed every year. To put this in perspective Terry stated that in Europe there are no less than 1,5 million recoveries of Blackbirds alone! Most recoveries come in care of some very healthy local cats or from failed attempts to stop speeding motor vehicles.

The most interesting finding to emerge from recoveries such as these is that passerines in southern Africa live considerably longer than those in temperate zones. For example the average age of a European Robin is just over 1 year (just enough to breed once), while the similar Starred Robin averages 7 years. In fact most of our passerines live over 7 years, including diminutive sunbirds which can live upwards of 16 years. This however, raises a problem: if adults are living so long and breeding and defending year-round territories, where do all the youngsters go? Do we have massive floating (non-territorial) populations for which we have no data? Do they all perish very early on, leaving only a few high quality individuals who wait for a space in the breeding population? I have put my money on the latter option. But others like Eberhard Curio suggest that lifespans are genetically pre-programmed - European Robins are programmed to live just over 1 year, and African robins 7 years. That means that if you were to put (say) a European Starling in a tropical setting it should continue to have a short lifespan, regardless of environmental and reproductive influences. There arises the perfect experimental study for a Masters or PhD student - we have thriving populations of *Sturnus vulgaris* in southern Africa, they nest in artificial nest boxes (= large accessible samples) and ring recoveries are available. Manipulations and long term monitoring would be a synch and, I bet, would prove the theory wrong. (Is Adrian Craig listening?).

The juice: raptor catching and marking

The raptor-ringers then took the floor and discussed the art (we really can't call it a science) of trapping birds of prey for marking. John Mendelsohn introduced a sceptical audience to a new "universal raptor trap" which catches everything from grasshoppers to Martial Eagles. The trouble, it seems, is to re-trap your bird once caught. Trap-shy birds are well known to raptor biologists and are the scourge of any long term study which relies on recapturing birds - particularly in the case of energy budget studies such as Mendelsohn's. One idea is to use a different trap (i.e. a noose carpet on the nest), or to disguise one's trap so well that the bird does not know what he's noosing himself up for. Moving well out of sight of a trap also helps with Martials and harriers. John later demonstrated its use to an expectant audience and successfully retrapped a ringed Rock Kestrel which three times refused the offer of a standard Bal-chatri. This, in fact, was the only raptor caught at Hobatere! Even the Red Bishop couldn't call on higher authorities to alter our luck.

That some studies might not need to retrap their animals was highlighted by Rob Simmons who described patagial tags for raptors which wrap around the leading edge of the wing and are pinned in place with a plastic or metal pin. Some eagles are known to wear them for up to 10 years with no demonstrable cost. The advantage over conventional marking systems are

that they are visible over about 300 m, they can be seen on birds in flight and may be more likely to be seen on moribund birds which the average motorist might otherwise pass without a second glance.

The main advantage of tags is that while recoveries of metal-ringed birds at best rarely exceed 4% of the total ringed (mainly for larger species), re-sightings of tags comprise between 70% and 90% of all birds tagged (in my own and a north American study). This isn't necessarily comparing apples and oranges, because the ultimate purpose (however achieved) of putting a ring or a tag on a bird is to get some information from it: 70 to 90% of the time this is achieved with tags, versus 4% with rings. Thus the value of spending some extra time putting on visible tags (or, as the French, Americans and Spanish are doing, putting on large coloured plastic rings whose number can be read in the field with a telescope) is clear, since it pays high dividends for those involved in long term studies. I will return to this subject below.

The pips

Other participants from the Ministry of Wildlife Conservation & Tourism, Rod Braby and Chris Brown, were unable to attend (a relative reflection of how hard we are all worked?), but Chris sent on a summary of the ringing effort in Namibia. He noted that about 12 000 birds have been ringed in Namibia over the last 10 years, of which many were caught and flung by staff of the Skeleton Coast Park. A blitz on the nomadic Larklike Bunting in which 981 birds were ringed has still not solved the mystery of where these birds go. This is probably more a reflection of the low and widely dispersed human population of Namibia, than death of the birds themselves, since the overall reporting rate of terrestrial Namibian birds is only 0,7% of all those marked (see report on page 53).

We were able to take a break from raptors as Steve Braine told us about efforts to catch and ring Damara Terns. The biggest problem is that these birds cannot be mistnetted (the Brabys and yours truly recently had the chance to chase 5 000 terns into a bank of nets and we caught not one); traps over the nest also cause desertion. Braine therefore devised a method arising from his own crocheting experience. A noose of crochet cotton is simply laid in the nest scrape, which when tightened from 100 m or more via fishing line, secures the bird's leg - a method with a 50% success rate and no desertions.

Other talks were given by Len le Roux on his raptor trapping in the Spitzkoppe area. Of especial interest were his observations that both numbers and species richness of the raptor population have decreased in this area. Phoebe Barnard then talked about morphological variation within populations of waxbills and whydahs, touching on her experiments with lengthened-tailed whydahs and the (dramatic) effects that tail

lengths have on horny female whydahs. The talks were completed by Mark Paxton who brought the house down with an exposé on the life of an ex-ringer; fortunately I missed the talk so I cannot offer any comments.

How far can one squeeze the orange?

The question which occurred to me while pondering Terry Oatley's orange-squeezing, and one which I'm sure has occupied many folks before, particularly in the Namibian context with its low (0,7%) ring recovery rate, is why do we bother ringing large numbers of birds when we know that we must ring at least 100 birds (in fact 143 to be precise) before our chances of getting at least one recovery is likely? Let's face it, we are never going to be able to boast that we have 1,5 million recoveries of anything - even if every Namibian were to report a dead ringed bird tomorrow!

Clearly, for most, the motivation for "ringing" is not ringing. It was obvious, and became even more so from listening to this group of enthusiasts, that ringing is merely an excuse (possibly an inconvenience) for the pleasure of actually outwitting and catching an elusive animal that one can then hold and admire in the hand. Only a handful of science-minded people really benefit from the metal rings put on a bird (which is not to say that we don't all feel some pride when it's our one-in-a-hundred turn to be in the luck). In all honesty, I believe that unless we turn to colour ringing and simultaneously concentrate our efforts in one study area - doing all the re-sightings ourselves - we are going to learn more than if we rely on metal-ringed birds. I'm talking about learning specific aspects of the bird's life history such as whether the bird stays or returns year after year to its home patch, what its lifespan is and whether it keeps its mate of last year.

A case in point is the oft quoted "fact" that eagles pair for life - this is speculation since we only have an inkling that this might be so from detailed specific studies based on plumage variations (e.g. Leslie Brown on Crowned and Ayre's Hawk Eagles). Metal wrapped around raptor legs has helped very little. Moreover, it has taken years for statisticians to come up with a method to combine recoveries with recaptures to increase samples sufficiently to be able to estimate the lifespans of even our commonest species! Even then the result may be biased because most birds reported dead are delivered care of the local feline population or (historically) were filled with leadshot. On the other hand just 2 years of comprehensive colour ringing and resightings will give an estimate of average **adult** lifespan for any population of southern African birds. So are we kidding ourselves that metal rings help at all??

My conclusion is not that we should stop metal-ringing birds. We all enjoy it, it helps us remember that there's more to

life than mortgages and report writing (!), and morphological and sexing data are extremely useful spinoffs - see Mendelsohn et al.'s Ostrich data on 66 spp. of raptor for a good example. If we need more justification, we know that it can turn up interesting (though not necessarily representative) data on movements, and clever mathematicians can use our results for some "real science" aspects.

What I do advocate is that we will learn considerably more **per unit effort** if we first start **colour-marking** our birds, and second and more important, concentrate on **one study site**. There, year after year we can chronicle the births, deaths and marriages of birds which will never appear in the pages of Safring News - because less than 100 have ever been ringed!

So, all you ringers, justify your existence - is African bird ringing rather like the proverbial castaways message in a bottle: once ringed, thrown into an ocean of chance, it is very unlikely to be seen again? In short, are we squeezing a lemon?

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PS The next ringer's meeting in Namibia is destined for Bushmanland in Easter 1992. If you are interested in presenting anything to do with ringing (or lemon squeezing) please let me know.



THE LEFT HAND OF LIGHT IS DARKNESS - PARTICIPANTS AT THE HOBATERE MEETING