

VAALIES AND HOUSE MARTINS

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Terry Oatley has asked me to write something about my visit to Johannesburg last year, when I went out at the end of February for a couple of weeks to see my son. He, like me, is a mining engineer and now works for Anglo Vaal.

Terry put me in touch with some ringers in the area, and as a result I spent many a happy hour with Frank Douwes and Ted Robson.

I spent four days ringing with Frank: one at his farm in the Magaliesberg, two at the Johannesburg Zoo and one at Rondebult Bird Sanctuary. Having spent some years on the Copperbelt in Zambia, it was great to make contact again with African birds.

It was also nice to handle a Willow Warbler on the farm. Had it come from my local patch in Lincolnshire? As the Spanish would say "Quien sabe?", who knows?

The two days at the Zoo were not very productive as it rained much of the time, but I enjoyed walking round the grounds. I was very impressed by the smartly uniformed keepers - especially the girls - but I couldn't help feeling that the general aspect and upkeep of the gardens had deteriorated a bit since my last visit in 1983.

One of the keepers brought Dick Reucassel along one day to see Frank and they stopped for half an hour for a chat. We were talking about sound recording at one stage and Dick said that he, of course, had done quite a bit in his time.

He told us of an interesting experience in Wankie Park when he was with a party of VIP visitors, all dressed very smartly in white safari suits. They were sitting under a huge tree at a rest camp when one of the VIPs said he'd like to hear Dick's recording of lions. So Dick got out his recorder, and the lion tape, and played it.

He hadn't noticed, however, that there was a troop of baboons resting quietly in the tree overhead.

When the tape started the whole troop, in unison ... well, I can't remember Dick's exact words but I think he said "they emptied their bowels." Anyway, whatever they can be said to have done, the mess and smell were unbelievable, and the safari suits were ruined.

I never saw Dick's production of 'Nile Crocodile' and 'Whispering Wings', but I was told they were real classics.

Frank, with good reason, has a special set of nets for the Zoo. They had some interesting holes which reminded me of my pheasant holes at home. His were even bigger and had been made, he said, by Egyptian Geese and Sacred Ibis.

Frank, of course, measures just about everything a bird has got, from its bill to its pelvic gap, and computerizes all the data - which filled me with awe! He's making a start on acquiring information for a South African "Svensson". As he says, South Africa is such a large chunk of real estate that there are significant differences in the vital statistics of widely-spaced populations of common birds, such as the Masked Weaver for instance.

I did get interested, however, in the Pelvic Gap! There is a bird I would like to be able to sex by this method outside the breeding season (when sexing is easy because of the brood patch on the females) and that is the House Martin, of which more anon.

I thought that the Rondebult Bird Sanctuary was first class, with some really excellent hides. Marius van Zyl ringed about 70 birds that day of which over half were, of course, Red Bishops. It was good to see some English "friends" there, including Ruff and Curlew Sandpiper.

On my last day Ted Robson picked me up at my son's house in Honeydew at 6 am, and we set off on a drive of about 250 km through the Transvaal veld. He had with

him his Balchatri trap and his two pet mice.

This was the first time I had seen that type of trap in action and I was very impressed indeed. We caught seven Steppe Buzzards, a Dark Chanting Goshawk (Ted's first - he had never seen them in that part of the Transvaal before) and a Blackshouldered Kite.

Between 1985-1990 he has ringed 1 389 raptors! Unbelievable! They include 379 Blackshouldered Kites, 333 Steppe Buzzards, 234 Greater Kestrels and 121 Pale Chanting Goshawks.

And he's had three Steppe Buzzard recoveries from Russia.

My own special project bird has much less glamour than any of these. It is the humble, common House Martin *Delichon urbica*. Humble and common it may be, but a great aura of mystery still surrounds it.

Even in this day and age, with bird watchers in Europe two-a-penny, and in spite of the fact that they mostly breed in villages (they like people!) no-one knows where they roost when not in their nests. No-one knows where they roost when they are down in Africa either.

Do they roost on the wing like swifts?

And, believe it or not, no-one knows whereabouts in Africa do our English birds spend the European winter. Of some 250 000 birds ringed in the U.K. since 1950, only one has been recovered south of the Sahara, and that was in Nigeria!

My guess is that over two million have been ringed in Europe and, as far as I can gather, only nine have been recovered south of the Sahara, of which seven were in southern Africa. These were from the Baltic countries and Germany.

Terry Oatley tells me that southern African ringers ring only about 15 of these birds each year.

On the south coast of England large numbers are caught by means of tape lures during the autumn migration (September/October); for some odd reason they are almost all juveniles.

Two of the organisations that catch them in this way, the Stour Ringing Group (SRG) in Dorset and the Sandwich Bay Bird Observatory, have been kind enough to let me have their numbers of birds ringed in the last few years. I understand that tape lures came into vogue in 1983.

| Year | St. Alban's Head Dorset | Sandwich Bay Kent |
|--------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| 1984 | 1 821 | - |
| 1985 | 3 759 | - |
| 1986 | 5 101 | 7 488 |
| 1987 | 3 608 | 4 021 |
| 1988 | 2 846 | 1 424 |
| 1989 | 1 569 | 1 017 |
| 1990 | 771 | 402 |
| 1991 | 1 880 | 485 |
| Totals | 21 355 | 14 837 |

The Stour Ringing Group has tended to restrict catching House Martins since 1986 because of the cost of rings. Here we have to pay for our rings, and the House Martin size now cost 10p each. So that 5 000 birds ringed would now cost the Group members about £500!

It is possible that tape lures would work in Africa. Alan Martin of the SRG tells me that if you see one House Martin high in the sky and turn on the tape full blast, large numbers will come down in no time at all to see what the fuss is all about, and you only need one net!

So if any SAFRING NEWS readers are interested, I would be very pleased to let

Terry have a tape and he could have copies made in Cape Town.

Catching larger numbers in southern Africa would hopefully lead to more recoveries and help to clear up some of the mystery. And we might find out, at last, where our English birds spend the European winter. Quien sabe?

Ed. Sandy didn't supply a title to his text, so I did. No slur is intended on any Transvaal ringer! If anybody is interested in Sandy's offer of a tape please let me know.

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