

**IDENTIFICATION PROBLEMS  
DURING BIRD RINGING – THE  
WHITETHROAT EXAMPLE!**

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The Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* is a relatively rare species in the Orange Free State (O.F.S.) which has only been reported from a few localities from Hoopstad to Parys along the Vaal River with additional sightings near Kroonstad and Ventersburg (Du Plessis 1992, pers. obs.). This species is also overlooked as it is difficult to separate it from other similar-looking warbler species where they mostly occur in thornveld habitats (Maclean 1993).

Most of the records (in the O.F.S.) are from birds captured during ringing activities and the aim of the note is to emphasize the problems one can sometimes encounter in identifying certain cryptically-coloured

species, especially when the species has not previously been recorded in the Province.

During fieldwork on 8 February 1989 at Lindekweesfontein (27°02'S, 27°14'E) near Vredfort (northeastern O.F.S.) three birds unknown to me were mistnetted in wooded grassland with scattered *Acacia* spp. and *Ehretia* spp. (De Swardt 1989). The birds were thoroughly examined and measurements taken. One individual was ringed and the other two were collected for identification purposes. The birds were tentatively identified as juvenile Karoo Chats *Cercomela schlegelii* on the basis of their smallish size, as the birds in the northern parts were much smaller than in other parts of their range (Maclean 1993).

Five years later I came across my Vredfort birds and realised that my identification was in error at that time as they were much smaller than the Karoo Chats that I have collected in the southwestern O.F.S. (pers. obs.).

**Table 1.** Whitethroat mensural data in the Orange Free State.

Ref/Ring No.	Culmen	Tarsus	Wing	Tail	Mass (g)
BB 92883	11,2	21,0	66	64,8	16,0
NM 2928	12,0	21,2	75	62,5	17,5
NM 2929	10,8	22,6	71	67,6	15,0
F 31641	10,3	19,2	71	65,0	11,0
AB 99506	10,4	20,0	70	65,0	14,6
Du Plessis (1992)	11,0	21,0	76	58,0	15,0
Mean: (n=6)	10,9	20,8	71,5	63,8	14,8

While catching estrildids for the Museum's Aviary along the Vaal River in *Acacia* veld at the farm Modderfontein, near Bothaville (27°25'S, 26°20'E) on 17 February 1994, a single individual of this species was captured alongside a few Willow Warblers *Phylloscopus trochilus*.

The first impression was that of a warbler, and I confused it with the greyer form of the Willow Warbler. Then I realised that this was the same species that I had caught a few years ago. The bird was photographed, measured and notes about its plumage were taken before it was ringed and released. Back at the Museum the two specimens were re-evaluated and compared with other similar-looking birds such as Willow Warblers and of course Karoo Chats! I then came to the conclusion that the bird was a Whitethroat, a relatively rare bird in the O.F.S. and a new bird for me (although I have mistnetted three on one day five years ago).

The distinct features of the Whitethroat are their dark brown wings, the outermost tail feathers (and 5th tail feather) which are edged whitish, and their whitish underparts. This bird was possibly a female as its head

was brown and not brownish-grey as in males. The bird's breast was also buffy, looking like a small breast band. The measurements taken (Table 1), also correspond with the other Whitethroat measurements of the O.F.S. (e.g. Du Plessis 1992) and those of Maclean (1993).

This observation serves as a warning to bird ringers not to be too relaxed about their bird identification skills when it comes to difficult groups such as warblers. I consider it important to make detailed notes and measurements (and photograph the bird) before releasing any ringed bird which presents identification problems. Care must therefore be taken not to confuse similar-looking species and detailed measurements must be taken to eliminate such errors. Ringers are always learning and should accept their errors and publish their corrections where appropriate.

#### REFERENCES

- DE SWARDT, D.H. 1989. A possible range expansion of the Karoo Chat? *Mirafra* 6:43-44.  
DU PLESSIS, G.J. 1992. The Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* in the Orange Free State. *Mirafra* 9:4-6.  
MACLEAN, G.L. 1993. Roberts' birds of southern Africa. Cape Town: John Voelcker Bird Book Fund.

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## RAPTOR RINGERS' REVELATION

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On driving around in the Wellington district, the idea was born – raptors also need to be ringed. What follows are some of the trials, tribulations and frustrations that we put ourselves through to diversify into raptor ringing.

## The Trap

We knew that raptors were caught on a Balchatri trap but what did one look like? Nowhere in our books was there any description, so we set the phone wires buzzing. Results were confusing: "It must be rectangular in shape with a curved top"; "Cone shape works better"; "No, it must be round like a pancake, or perhaps a better description is like a space craft!?" Well, giving it a lot of thought and considering the material we had on hand, we decided to construct a cone trap.