

SEASONAL MIGRATION AND SITE FIDELITY IN CAPE BUNTINGS *EMBERIZA CAPENSIS*

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The Cape Bunting *Emberiza capensis* is a medium sized, sparrow like passerine belonging to the family Emberizidae and is the only member of this family to be found regularly along the southern parts of the Cape west coast. Larklike Bunting *E. impetuani* occurs as a vagrant but is essentially confined to the more arid northern areas. Sexes are alike but males can generally be separated from females by wing length: the former normally fall within the range 76-80mm and the latter 70-74mm. Immatures resemble the adults but have a softer feel in the hand, are slightly speckled on the breast and flanks and very young birds usually have a bare patch under the wing. Food is primarily seeds, insects and arachnids.

Koeberg Private Nature Reserve is situated some 35 kilometres north of Cape Town on the west coast road (R27) to Velddrif and is approximately 2 200 ha in extent. The vegetation type is mostly west coast strandveld with patches of alien acacia, mainly Rooikrans *A. cyclops*, this latter species being the subject of an eradication programme by both spraying and manual removal. The ringing area is in the vicinity of the three coastal ponds which lie between a half and one kilometre from the sea and where the highest concentration of bird life is to be found, particularly during the summer months from

October to March. During this period large numbers of Cape Buntings abound around the ponds which provide a source of water.

On the basis of the numbers of young birds caught, it must be assumed that they breed within the Reserve but I personally have not found any conclusive evidence of this. Probably because I lack the skills to find nests! The ponds themselves are home to large numbers of carp which are exploited as a food source by a variety of water birds as well as a pair of African Fish Eagles.

During the three years 1995, 1996 and 1997, using mist nets, I caught a total of 525 Cape Buntings, comprising 459 first-time captures which were ringed, and 66 retraps of these birds. Analysis (Table 1) shows that 504 birds were netted between September to March and only 21 within the period April to August, with a total absence of birds over a period of several months during each year. The majority of the birds were caught with nets which were set parallel to the edge of the dam and very few caught on occasions when the nets were set at ninety degrees to the water. Many birds were wet from bathing.

In the summer months, commencing September, large numbers of buntings move into the Reserve and then, in April, move out again. Why this should be is unknown, as the weather is still warm and there are still considerable numbers of insects and arachnids available, although the quantity of seed is reduced.

Although I have ringed 459 buntings at Koeberg alone, plus a number elsewhere, I have never had

Table 1. Monthly analysis of Cape Bunting *Emberiza capensis* mistnetted from 1995 to 1997.

Year	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	May	Jun	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
1995	26	25	9	6	3	0	0	0	0	9	39	26	143
1996	54	17	14	1	0	0	0	8	31	7	12	43	187
1997	5	44	32	3	0	0	0	0	22	17	16	56	195
Totals	85	86	55	10	3	0	0	8	53	33	67	125	525

Seasonal summary of birds trapped: Sep – Mar = 504; April – Aug = 21.

either a control or a recovery from any site removed from the ringing area. At Koeberg, I have made 66 retraps involving 58 individual birds and in each case the retrap has been made with

Table 2. Retrap analysis of Cape Bunting *Emberiza capensis* by breeding season.

Totals	Season retrapped after ringing			
	Same	1st	2nd	3rd
58 birds	13	37	12	4
66 retraps				

nets set in the same positions as at the time the bird was ringed. In addition, the buntings have been retrapped over a period of three breeding seasons (Table 2). Although they migrate from the Reserve in winter, they return to the same place each summer. A number of the birds have been retrapped in more than one subsequent season which also suggests that site loyalty is a feature of this species.

The questions now arising are: what makes the Reserve attractive to the birds in summer? Why do they leave in April and, most intriguing, where do they go?

**LESS THAN ONE IN A MILLION:
NOCTURNAL BAL-CHATRI STATISTICS,
OR ... MURPHY IN EENDEKUIL**

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We have made it a routine to end a day of bal-chatri raptor ringing by also including an eagle owl (or two). Ingredients for this are a quiet road with plenty of utility poles and, of course ... an owl (or two).

Returning from Namaqualand on 17 August 1997, we reached the R365 between Eendekuil and Piketberg right at dusk. In addition, the full moon made checking the poles on the east side of the road very easy. In 80 minutes, we crossed or were overtaken by only six cars, further adding to the picture that conditions were absolutely ideal; except ... there were no owls!

Eventually, we found one – and the trap was dropped in the opposite verge because of the fairly tall grass. This is not recommended practice as the bird then has to cross the traffic (if

there is any), but as the road was absolutely quiet, the risk seemed acceptable.

Over the next 38 minutes, 23 cars passed, including what seemed to be the heaviest truck at the most crazy speed the Eendekuil Road could ever carry (although this might be an overstatement in Africa!). Furthermore, this traffic rush did not come as a long procession, but instead the cars were incredibly nicely spaced at just less than two-minute intervals – just enough to chase the bird off when it had decided to give it another try.

Statistics tell us that such an event of traffic contrast (leaving out the aspect of spacing interval) has a chance of occurrence of less than one in a million (which is, of course, a far rarer instance than any we would attempt to verify by spending nights along the Eendekuil Road in order to test the value of statistics ... or to catch owls for that matter). In practice, however, it takes just one evening, *i.e.* the 17 August.

The owl was eventually caught after 40 minutes, in his ninth attempt, during an unusual traffic lull, which lasted just over three minutes. With a little misfortune, he could have been flattened 23 times by that time.