

Seldomseen

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As many bird-watchers will know, Seldomseen, on the Vumba some 25 km from Mutare, Zimbabwe, is a great place to visit if you want to see some montane forest specials. What some may not know is that it has also been a ringing station for over twenty years, with a great many birds monitored throughout their life by Alec and Cecilia Manson.

Sadly, Alec died in 1995 and although Cecilia continued the work for a while on an occasional basis, once she had moved to live in Mutare, even this became difficult. Wanting the ringing station to continue, Cecilia asked the new owners if I could take over and ring there once a month, starting in April 1998, to which they agreed.

I too agreed, although with some reservations. I had spent 17 years working on lowland bush birds and another eight on mid-altitude bush birds. I had never been much of a bird-watcher and in Malawi, although I had had the opportunity to go looking at montane forest birds, I had never done so. Likewise, in the Vumba Botanic Gardens I had never gone into the forested bits to see the denizens; generally when trapping there I am running round like a mad thing, trying to rescue sunbirds and other garden species from the nets and do not have time to bird-watch. As a result, although I had seen representations of their appearance in various bird books, my knowledge of montane forest birds was nil.

The first day's trapping at Seldomseen was interesting. Of the initial ten birds brought in, the only two which I had ever seen before were an Olive Sunbird *Nectarinia olivacea* and a Stripecheeked Bulbul *Andropadus milanjensis*, both of which I had caught out in the open in gardens. I must admit that I cheated. Peter Mwadziwana knows the Seldomseen forest birds extremely well, so each time he brought in a bunch of bags containing indignant, struggling captives, I

asked him what he had. This solved the identification problem very nicely, without giving away to Peter just how little I knew. Of course, I did look the birds up in my 1978 *Roberts'* (which deigns to give sub-species and which uses the species numbers required for SAFRING's computer) to ensure that I had it right, but at least I did not have to spend hours working things out for myself.

Six months later there was another period of difficulty, when the breeding season started and juveniles, some of which bear little or no resemblance to their parents, started to turn up in the bags, but that was solved in the same way. Now, after 18 months, a trapping session at Seldomseen is just 'another day at the office'. Two or three Orange Thrushes *Zoothera gurneyi*, a Swynnerton's Robin *Swynnertonia swynnertonia* and some Starred Robin *Pogonocichla stellata* in the first few rounds, with Cape Batis *Batis capensis*, Yellow-throated Warbler *Phylloscopus ruficapillus* and Roberts'/Brier Warbler *Oreophilais robertsi* more common in the afternoon: bags throughout the day also being filled with forest bulbuls of one sort or another, other robins and thrushes, lots of Redfaced Crimsonwings *Cryptospiza reichenowii*, the odd Gorgeous Bush Shrike *Telophorus quadricolor* and the ubiquitous Olive Sunbirds. Even Buffspotted Flufftails *Phyloscopus elegans* and Whitetailed Crested Flycatchers *Trochocercus albonotatus* are no longer a novelty.

In May 1999, there was some excitement when Peter brought in something which he did not recognise. I opened the bag with some trepidation; I would definitely lose face if I did not know what it was. Thank goodness it turned out to be an old friend from lower Shire valley (Malawi) days – a Bluemantled Crested Flycatcher *Trochocercus cyanomelas*. Just what it was doing at over 1750 m in a Vumba forest, nobody knows, but at least

I was able to keep my end up by identifying it.

I have only been ringing in the Mutare district since 1990, so cannot presently catch any bird which I ringed more than nine years ago and, in fact, have only caught a few which were ringed eight years ago, but on the Vumba there are still quite a lot of old Manson-ringed birds flying about. The star geriatric at the moment is a Stripecheeked Bulbul, ringed when immature 17 years ago and now aged about 18, but there are two others, ringed when adult, which are known to be over 15 and over 10.5 years old respectively, while a Yellowstreaked Bulbul *Phyllastrephus flavo-rostriatus*, ringed as an adult nine years ago, is over 10.5 years old. There is a Cape Robin *Cossypha caffra* more than 10 years old, a Barthroated Apalis *Apalis thoracica* of at least 10.5 years, a Miombo Sunbird *Nectarinia manoensis* of more than nine (his normal perch is on a pole standing beside the Manson's old cottage, now called 'Crimsonwing') and two Olive Sunbirds of over 11.5 and over 10 years old. There may still be a Bronze Sunbird *N. kilimensis*, ringed in 1984 when immature, which moved to the Botanic Gardens many years ago and was last seen there when he was about 12.5 years old. Unfortunately the colour rings which I have been using do not last for more than 7–8 years before breaking, so he may be alive and unrecognisable. The area in which he has or had his territory is difficult to net and recently I have been unable to catch the ringed, but not colour-ringed, male which is living there, so I do not know if it is Alec Manson's bird, which would be nearly 16 years old by now.

Perhaps 16 is a bit much for a sunbird, even one the size of a Bronze (it seems that size and longevity are related). However, size must relate to the maximum possible lifespan and it is evident that, although the Stripecheeked Bulbul is the largest of the species listed above and has the two apparently oldest birds, among the others, birds ranging in mass from 10–40 g are known to have lived for at least nine years, with one of the smallest having reached more than 11.5 years old. Thus it may be that 11.5 years is

not the maximum possible age for even the 10 g birds listed here.

From the list of old birds given above, life-style seems not have have much effect on longevity. Admittedly most of the elderly Seldomseen birds are basically forest species, but the Miombo and Bronze Sunbirds are not, and all the other species frequently can be found more or less out in the open. Perhaps the proportion of individuals which reach or approach maximum possible age might indicate whether or not habitat and habits affect actual longevity, but that must await a detailed study of the Mansons' files.

It is a pity that trapping at Seldomseen was not regular between 1995 and 1998, so that not only were few new birds ringed, but previously ringed birds were not monitored and there may be several more old birds in the area, which have not been recaptured during the last few years. On the other hand, the five-year drought between 1991/92 and 1995/96 (which Alec said had reduced his forest population by 70%, although I do not know on what he based this figure) could well have reduced the numbers of old birds, so that the few which I have recaptured are the sole survivors.

Of course, since droughts are normal in this bit of Africa and the birds doubtless have a strategy to deal with them, which may consist of moving downstream, hence leaving the trapping area, it is possible that some of the 70% took a holiday in forests towards the Mozambique border and are gradually returning to Seldomseen. If this is the case, I should recapture more old birds over the next year or so.

However, even if I do, I fear that it may not be possible to get a true picture of normal survival rates from the Seldomseen capture/recapture data, from which to assess differences between forest and open-country birds. Nevertheless, there is a daunting amount of information in the files, much of which should be published, but I still have most of my Malawian passerines (some 20 000–25 000 birds) to deal with. Perhaps I will get around to the Seldomseen birds in my next life, but, in the meantime, the forest specials are a pleasant change from a sunbird movement project that is going nowhere.