

Ringling Lesser Kestrels in the Karoo

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Ever since I was a young child I have been fascinated with Lesser Kestrels *Falco naumanni* as they came to roost in a huge Eucalyptus tree in my grandmother's garden in Cradock every summer. When I started ringling raptors in 1989 I tried on numerous occasions to capture these elusive creatures using Bal-chatri traps baited with white mice. Only three Lesser Kestrels were captured using this method. I can only presume that on these occasions the kestrels were attracted to the prey in the trap because there was a scarcity of other food.

During December 1999 I lit upon the idea of trying to catch the birds with mistnets when they enter their roosts at night. After investigating various materials for the poles I decided that glass fiber windsurfer masts would be most suitable for suspending the nets above the ground. They are extremely light, strong, durable and not too flexible. As I was not able to obtain enough windsurfer masts I used aluminium poles as well. The aluminium and glass fibre poles were joined using specially turned wood sections. A collar in the middle prevented the joiners from slipping into the poles. A T-piece was placed atop the uppermost pole and these were connected to each other with a rope the length of a 12 m mistnet. Two guy ropes were attached to the outer sides of each T-piece, which served as anchors to keep the poles vertical and to keep them exactly the required distance apart. Also attached to each T-piece was a small pulley, through which a thin cord passed to hoist the net up and down. The poles were painted black and the guy ropes were dyed black. The 2.4 m high net was attached to a 2.5 m length of aluminium 19 mm in diameter. The net was strained to the poles by the nylon rope to keep it in position.

I left Port Elizabeth on 15 February 2000 and headed towards Vosburg trapping perch-hunting raptors with Bal-chatri traps. Gillian Murray from Zimbabwe and Ivan, a recent graduate who was on an extended vacation from Eger in Hungary, joined me. Ivan is involved in raptor conservation, especially in the protection of Saker Falcons and Imperial Eagles in eastern Hungary. It was a huge asset to have such a knowledgeable scientist along on the trip.

We stopped at Pearston to investigate the roost site which is situated in pine trees in the grounds of a church in the main street. It did not appear to be a suitable site for mistnetting as the trees seemed too high and there was a fence in the way. Many Lesser Kestrels were seen on the outskirts of Pearston and towards Graaff-Reinet and beyond. Larger numbers of Lesser Kestrels were seen near Hutchison and Victoria West. We investigated one of the roost sites in Victoria West before heading to a farm between Carnarvon and Vosburg for the night. Mark Anderson told us that there were large roosts throughout the central Karoo. We dispensed with the idea of trapping any more raptors and headed towards Strydenburg. The Town Clerk was visited and the trapping technique was explained, as the poles would have to be placed in the street. The roost in Strydenburg is situated in Eucalyptus trees in the south-eastern eastern part of the town.

The rig used initially was 14.5 m high but it was decided to reduce it to 10 m as the poles appeared to be unstable at the top. There was a light wind blowing from the south and we feared it would blow the structure into the tree. The first breeze did in fact blow the net into the tree, creating a large hole in the net, but this was because the guy ropes had not been attached correctly to the T-pieces.

As dusk approached hundreds of Lesser Kestrels seemed to appear out of nowhere and later there were thousands. The roost appeared to number about 3000–5000 birds. We managed to trap three birds that night. The reasons for the poor success rate were mainly that the net was too low and that the shelves were too small. The height of the main tree was estimated at 22 m. It was nevertheless clear that the technique was successful and could be modified to trap many more birds.

Ronel Visagie, a ringer who farms in the district, and Stoffel Visagie joined us the following evening. Using an additional net supplied by Ronel we managed to increase the size of the shelves. With the extra net and the help of interested local people matters improved and five kestrels were caught. However, the net was still far too low as most of the birds were entering the tree at 15–20 m above the ground. It appears that the net must be placed at between 70% and 100% of the height of a tree to trap significant numbers of birds. It was for this reason that we headed for Victoria West where the roost trees were lower and where greater success could be achieved.

One of the four major roosts in Victoria West was at the hospital where an estimated 5000 birds roosted in six Eucalyptus trees. Other roosts in the town also contained large numbers of kestrels. The 10 m high net was placed between two of the highest trees. As dusk approached so did a thunderstorm. The net was raised into position and within a few seconds 11 kestrels were caught. Almost simultaneously the rain came down, drenching us and the birds to the skin. It was difficult enough to remove the kestrels' talons from the net without having the rain to contend with as well. The wet birds were placed in makeshift bags, which we transported to the guesthouse. The birds dried off overnight and were released early in the morning after being processed and ringed.

The following evening another nine kestrels were ringed in ones and twos. After spending another night in Victoria West we strapped the poles to the roof racks and

headed home after successfully ringing 28 kestrels.

Realizing that Lesser Kestrels could be successfully trapped using conventional mist-nets I purchased suitable poles, masts, nets and steel, etc. to make three individual rigs. Longer aluminium poles were used which made erection of the rigs much easier. A 12 m joined section of pipe can easily be lifted by one or two people and then raised by adding 1.5 m sections to the bottom to achieve any required height.

Another trip to Victoria West was undertaken on 10 March 2000 for two nights' ringing. Adri Barkhuizen and my son Guy, who at seven years is a very keen raptophile, accompanied me. David Pepler and Rob Martin from Stellenbosch University joined us in Victoria West. We arrived at the hospital at almost the same time and together we erected the poles and nets to trap the birds before the northerly migration. I was disappointed with the number of birds at the roost. There were not more than 25% of the number seen three weeks earlier.

David Pepler was very keen to get blood samples from the kestrels for DNA tests. He was not disappointed as we managed to catch 36 birds on the evening of 10 March 2000, one being a re-trap from three weeks before. This was most encouraging considering the number of birds at the roost. A further six kestrels were netted the following evening.

The greater trapping success was achieved by placing the nets higher and using more than one net. At this site three nets of different heights were used: 10 m, 12.5 m and 14.6 m. The poles were mixed and matched to attain the required height. Assistants are also very important in the erection of the poles and the extraction of the birds. For instance, the erection of three nets required the unrolling of more than 400 m of nylon rope.

Altogether 70 Lesser Kestrels were trapped and ringed between 16 February and 11 March 2000.

My thanks to Ivan and Gillian and the authorities in Strydenburg and the staff of the Victoria West Hospital who made all this possible.