

FURTHER RESULTS FROM RINGING THICK-BILLED WEAVERS

Dr H T Laycock  
39 Armstrong Drive  
PIETERMARITZBURG  
3201

This note supplements the account of ringing Thick-billed Weavers Amblyospiza albifrons in a Pietermaritzburg garden given in Safring News 7 (1). From September 1976 to April 1979 158 birds of this species were caught and ringed in the garden while 70 were ringed as nestlings at reed beds within 3 km. Of this total ringed birds were retrapped in the garden on 75 occasions. These retrapped birds numbered 36 individuals, 32 having been ringed as adults or sub-adults and four as nestlings. 22 were retrapped only once, one was retrapped 13 times! The longest interval between ringing and retrapping was 2 years and 85 days (ring no. 4-48229). As this bird was not a juvenile when it was ringed it would seem that three or four years is not an uncommon age for these birds to attain in the wild. The dates of ringing and recapture of 30 of these birds are shown diagrammatically in Table 1, but retraps less than one month after ringing are not included.

The trap used has been improved in several ways. It has no wire floor but stands on a bird table about one metre high. Omitting the wire floor would seem to make the trap more inviting but it has the slight disadvantage that the trap cannot be used as a cage in which to carry captured birds to the place where they are going to be ringed. In practice this doesn't matter as they are taken from the trap through a small side door. Leather gloves are always worn and a friend who tried to help but thought they were unnecessary liked to regret the experience!

The trapdoor drops vertically when the electromagnet on the trap roof releases the catch. This is much more efficient than having the door swing down on a hinge. The trap is made

of 1" mesh welded iron wire. One inch square holes allow small birds, usually Bronze Mannikins Lonchura cucullata, to escape while Thick-billed weavers are retained.

An electric contact maker is used at the trap entrance. This consists of a narrow bar of balsa wood hinged at one end and resting on a weak spiral spring. A bird treading on it brings two brass points into contact and completes an electric circuit. This may be arranged to release the trap door directly **but** is normally used to switch on an electric bell in the house, which goes on ringing until someone turns it off. Warned by this bell one can watch the bird(s) at the trap, reject species that are not wanted and on occasions wait until several can be caught simultaneously.

With doves excluded by making the trap door too low for them, the only species that really competed with Thick-billed weavers for sunflower seeds was the Streaky-headed Seedeater Poliosciza gularis. It was a surprise to find that this dainty little bird can successfully cope with such large seeds.

Birds are often attracted to the aviary without visiting the trap at all and another method has been used to catch these. The aviary is entered through two doors with a small compartment between them. Visiting birds tend to enter this compartment if the outer door is left open, as this door was fitted with a spring to close it. It is left ajar with a 2 1/2" metal rod holding it open. A string attached to this can be pulled from the other side of the garden as soon as a visiting bird is caught inside.

Birds in the hand while being ringed may be more still or may struggle violently. A useful device is to put a little stick, like a thick match, into the claws of the leg being ringed. The bird grasps this naturally and nearly always keeps the foot still while the ring is put on and the tarsus measured.

In previous years no birds were trapped during February, March or April, presumably because there was plenty of food available

elsewhere. This was unfortunate because moulting occurs during these months. In 1979 an effort was made to close the gap in order to obtain moult data. The aviary was enlarged and the number of birds in it increased, sunflowers were kept in blossom for practically the whole summer and autumn and the trap was set every day whether birds came or not (except in very wet weather). Ten birds were trapped in February, four in March and five in April, two being retraps. These 19 birds were five adult females, eight juvenile males and six juvenile females. Adult males were conspicuously absent and this must have been due to their leaving the local nesting sites before the females and fledglings and perhaps wandering further afield. That the males did not leave the district altogether was shown by the presence of a few adult males with flocks of females and juveniles at local roosts during these months.

Eleven birds in moult have now been caught during July and August 1977 and 1978 (late secondary moult) and January to April 1979 (early primary moult). So far none have been caught in the middle of their moulting season. Moult score data from these few birds are shown in Table 2. It appears that moulting in wild birds is spread over a longer period than in captive ones.

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TABLE 2

Moult score data from 11 birds trapped in the garden

o = primary moult score (P.M.S.)      s = secondary moult score  
(S.M.S.)

Moult in aviary birds (1978) was completed between A & B.

Probable moult score curves are indicated ... P.M.S. ....

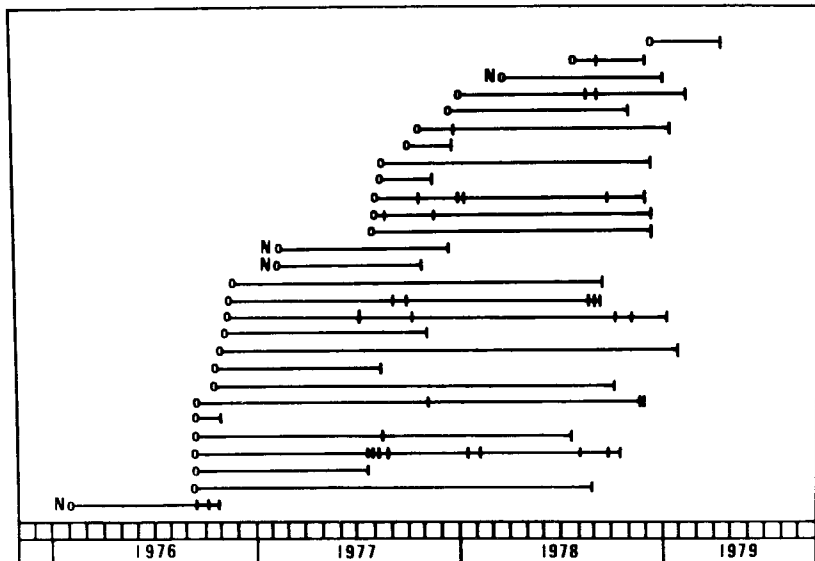


TABLE 1

Dates of ringing and retrapping 28 Thick billed Weavers

o = ringing data + = retrap date No = ringing at nest

