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Collecting bird parasites

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The study of parasites of wild birds is a neglected field of zoological study in South Africa. Our knowledge of many of the bird parasites is limited to scientific names and we have little information on their biology, distribution or general life history. A better knowledge of bird parasites will increase our understanding of both the life history of the parasite as well as that of the bird. For example, the relationship between parasites might provide important clues to relationships between various groups of birds. Furthermore, a thorough understanding of the occurrence and host-specificity of bird parasites might shed light on the transmission and spread of disease, important to both man and animals. Bird ringers can make a significant contribution to the study of bird parasites by collecting these parasites when handling birds.

7.2 TYPES OF PARASITES

There are two types of bird parasites: ectoparasites and endoparasites. The ectoparasites live on the surface of the host while endoparasites live inside the host body. Blood parasites are endoparasites but they require special collection methods and are too small to be seen by the human eye.

The ectoparasites of birds are arthropods and include various insects, ticks and mites. These arthropods can either live in close contact with the host's body where they feed on blood, body fluid or the feathers (body parasites) or they can spend most of their lives in the nest or roosting place of the host. They are thus not carried around by the host but only get onto it sporadically to feed (nest parasites). Ringers seriously interested in helping with the collection of bird parasites should contact SAFRING.