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Magpie Mannikins

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In June 2002 we decided to try and learn a little about the Magpie Mannikin and try to determine its age and movements in its restricted range on the south coast of KwaZulu-Natal. Its range was thought to be from Umtentweni in the south to Anerley in the north, a distance of no more than 7 km, and stretching inland a distance of 2 km. Two ringing sites were found with the general public asked for assistance in finding more and reporting the birds with colour rings. Unfortunately the local bird club told its members not to allow us to use their gardens as they will never see the birds again at their feeders.

We concentrated on two sites, one in Umtentweni and one in Anerley. A total of 27 birds were ringed in Umtentweni and 34 birds in Anerley. We then had a few birds arrive at our own feeder in Sunwich Port a further 1.5 km further north. These birds were then ringed (9 birds), giving us a total of 70 birds to work with. Numerous birds were resighted at the ringing locations with a few of the birds making substantial movements, with birds ringed in Umtentweni being resighted in Anerley and vice versa (distance 6.0 km), and birds from Anerley being seen in Sunwich Port (distance 1.6 km). One bird from the Sunwich Port site was seen at a farmhouse at the back of Umzumbe at a distance of 4.7 km and then the next day it was retrapped in Anerley at a distance of 6.3 km from Umzumbe. This then showed that the range stretched 13 km up the coast and 3 km inland, effectively making their home range double the size to the expected range.

Unfortunately the site in Umtentweni was lost to us as the house was sold and the new owner had very large boisterous dogs. Although we could still use the site it was decided it would be too risky as the dogs would not be locked away and could cause damage to equipment and birds. The site in Anerley was lost as the tree where the feeders were fell over and the new location of the feeders made ringing impossible. Then we moved from the Sunwich Port site to Hibberdene where the birds do not occur. The result was that we stopped the project.

Recently we have moved house again to a farmhouse at the back of Umzumbe, bird feeders were put out and within a few months a couple of adult Magpie Mannikins were seen at the feeder. Later a third was seen and we suspected that we may have had at least two pairs with the possibility of them breeding nearby. This was confirmed later when a total of six adults were seen with numerous youngsters calling in the tree for food. To date 14 birds have been ringed at this site comprising of 4 adults and 10 immatures. There are still at least 10 birds without rings. All birds are frequently resighted at the feeders.

One immature was dramatically lighter than the rest weighing in at 13g where normally the weight is 17-18 g. The bird was dutifully ringed with its sequence of three colour rings and released. The next day it was seen at the feeding table with the left leg dangling. I knew that I hadn't hurt the bird but was still worried. Later the bird was seen sitting in the tree being attacked by other immature birds. Was the bird sick and a threat

to the colony or was it just the “runt”? My mind was put to rest a week later when I saw the bird sitting in the tree putting weight on its left leg. Why it was being attacked is still a mystery.

The whole project is now up and running again and having a good population locally I am able to monitor these birds alone but I am still trying to get assistance from the residents of the south coast. One other problem that we have is that this small bird is able to remove or break the colour plastic rings. This little mannikin has quite a strong bite for a little bird. It is the only mannikin that will bite you hard enough that you feel it while extracting it from the net.

Table 1. Measurements of 89 Magpie Mannikins, KwaZulu-Natal

	Min	Max	Av
Mass (g)	13	22	18.6
Wing (mm)	56	64	60
Tail (mm)	29	44	37.2
Tarsus (mm)	15.9	19.7	17.3
Culmen (mm)	12.5	18.1	15.8
Head (mm)	27.2	30.6	28.6

