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Garden ringing: a stock-taking

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Over the past 20 years I have ringed birds sporadically in our garden. It is not custom-built for ringing, with some very tall trees already established when we arrived, so that many flight paths are well above net level. I have used only mist-nets, and have not baited and trapped, nor targeted particular species. The total checklist for the 0.1 ha garden (including only birds which landed within the property or flew across it below the level of the gutters) is now 84 species, with some such as the Hadedea *Bostrychia hagedash* and the Gymnogene *Polyboroides typus* clearly not nettable, and a few once-off visitors like a stray Black Harrier *Circus maurus* and a vagrant Brown-backed Honeybird *Prodotiscus regulus*.

Table 1 lists all the captures to date (from May 1988 to October 2007); the column for recaptures reflects only the number of individuals, ignoring multiple recaptures, while birds which were recaptured, but then finally recovered dead, are listed only as recoveries. My total time investment over these years is probably less than Mark and Kelly Brown (Brown & Brown 2003) reported for their first two years of garden bird ringing, but a brief review of the results seems warranted.

The immediate impression is that most birds are transients, and recapture rates are low. Small flocks of Cape White-eyes *Zosterops pallidus* move through the shrubs at times and tend to be caught in groups. In Grahamstown the white-eyes are normally grey-bellied, but three green-bellied white-eyes have been ringed between May and September; over the same period I have captured birds with a yellow streak in the centre of the belly, which seems to be typical of white-eyes in some of the inland forests such as Fort Fordyce Reserve (near Fort Beaufort, 65 km due North), where all 34 birds ringed earlier this year were of this plumage type. However, we still have no direct proof of interchange between Grahamstown and these inland sites. Two white-eyes ringed in the garden were recaptured elsewhere in Grahamstown, and one ringed in the Botanical Gardens was recaptured here. I have also caught an Olive Thrush *Turdus olivaceus* and a Red-winged Starling *Onychognathus morio* which I had originally ringed at other sites in town.

Two recoveries (a Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis* and a Cape White-eye) were courtesy of local cats, while one Cape Robin-chat *Cossypha caffra* was caught in a rat-trap, to the dismay of one of our neighbours. A Common Fiscal *Lanius collaris* killed a ringed Cape-White-eye in the mist-net, and two Cape Weaver *Ploceus capensis* rings were recovered from Spotted Eagle-owl *Bubo africanus* pellets in a nest-box erected for these birds at St Andrew's College. Most of the other birds found dead appear to have been road casualties, and all recoveries came from the urban area, with 18 of 21 within a 1 km radius of the ringing site and none more than 3 km away as the bird flies.

As discussed in an earlier contribution (Craig & Hulley 1996), at this site Olive Thrushes and Cape Robin-chats seem to behave differently, with the thrushes largely transients. Table 1 shows far fewer robins captured than thrushes, and a higher proportion of robins recaptured. In 2007 I have ringed only two robins, caught in February, and both recaptured in October, when one had a brood patch. One of these birds had also been recaptured during the year, and it had entered my neighbour's house where its ring had been read before eviction. So they seem to be our current local resident pair. Yet over the same period I have ringed five Olive Thrushes, with no recaptures to date.

Common Fiscals include our lawns in their territory, but there seems to be a rapid turnover of birds. One individual was caught several times, and for a few months the resident was a male bird with a conspicuous white eyebrow; this plumage variation is certainly not confined to northern regions of South Africa (cf. Bunning 2006).

There is an interesting contrast between the two mousebird species. For the Speckled Mousebird *Colius striatus* the recapture rate is relatively good (19%), suggesting that the flocks do revisit the garden at intervals. However, this is evidently not the case for Red-faced Mousebirds *Urocolius indicus* with just one recapture to date from more than 60 birds ringed. Sight records certainly suggest that whereas Speckled Mousebirds are present every month, Red-faced Mousebirds are apparently absent for weeks at a time, and may be moving about over a much larger area. For the "Rhodes University ringers" data at all other Eastern Cape sites, the recapture rates show a similar pattern: 23% recaptures for Speckled Mousebirds, 4% for Red-faced Mousebirds, and none to date from 17 White-backed Mousebirds *Colius colius*. With their proportionately short wings and legs, and variable toe orientation, mousebirds often escape from mist-nets, and traps should be used to supplement captures in any study of this group.

A more systematic approach to ringing in a garden could answer some of the puzzles thrown up by these data. Ideally the garden should be planned with flowering and fruiting plants, feeders, water points, net lines and trap sites all coordinated! Domestic animals can be a minor hazard; a Jack Russell ate a captured Laughing Dove causing surprisingly little damage to the net, whereas a Rottweiler en route to greet the postman took out the entire bottom shelf. Overall my garden data have provided a useful complement to information collected at other ringing sites.

References

- Brown M & Brown K. 2003. Garden ringing – a heap of information waiting to be harvested. *Afring News* 32: 2-5.
 Bunning LJ. 2006. A study of the Fiscal Shrike. *Afring News* 35: 13-16.
 Craig A & Hulley P. 1996. What's the difference between robins and thrushes? *Safring News* 25: 51-52.

Table 1. Numbers of birds ringed, recaptured and recovered at 3 Florence Street.

Species	No ringed	Recaptured	Recovered	Longest interval
Little Sparrowhawk	1	0	0	
Speckled Pigeon	1	0	0	
Red-eyed Dove	3	0	0	
Laughing Dove	20	2	2	5 years 0 months
Speckled Mousebird	129	23	2	3 years 2 months
Red-faced Mousebird	62	1	0	4 years 11 months
Brown-hooded Kingfisher	3	1	0	1 month
African Hoopoe	1	1	0	4 months
Black-collared Barbet	6	0	0	
Red-fronted Tinkerbird	2	0	0	
Lesser Honeyguide	4	1	0	2 months
Cardinal Woodpecker	1	0	0	
Fork-tailed Drongo	2	0	0	
Black-headed Oriole	3	0	0	
Cape Robin-chat	14	4	2	5 years 10 months
White-browed Scrub-Robin	1	0	0	
Olive Thrush	35	7	1	4 years 0 months
Willow Warbler	1	0	0	
Bar-throated Apalis	4	1	0	4 months
Neddicky	4	1	0	1 month
Fiscal Flycatcher	1	0	0	
Cape Batis	1	0	0	
Cape Wagtail	2	1	0	3 months
Common Fiscal	29	9	1	3 years 0 months
Southern Boubou	4	1	0	3 years 2 months
Bokmakierie	5	0	1	2 months
Common Starling	20	1	1	1 year 1 month
Red-winged Starling	18	1	1	6 years 0 months
Dark-capped Bulbul	35	2	0	5 years 3 months
Sombre Greenbul	1	0	0	
Cape White-eye	190	11	3	3 years 9 months
Malachite Sunbird	1	0	0	
Grey Sunbird	1	0	0	
Greater Double-collared Sunbird	17	0	0	
Southern Double-collared Sunbird	12	0	0	
Amethyst Sunbird	18	1	1	4 years 1 month
House Sparrow	2	0	0	
Southern Grey-headed Sparrow	26	2	1	2 years 4 months
Spectacled Weaver	2	0	0	
Cape Weaver	152	13	3	5 years 1 month
Village Weaver	58	4	2	5 years 2 months
Southern Masked Weaver	6	0	0	
African Firefinch	3	0	0	
Yellow-fronted Canary	2	0	0	
Streaky-headed Seedeater	3	0	0	
Brimstone Canary	6	0	0	
Total	46 species	913	88	21