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THE THIRD RECORD OF A COMMON WHITETHROAT *SYLVIA COMMUNIS* IN KWAZULU-NATAL

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This article describes the third ringing record of a Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* in Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN), South Africa. It also reviews the distribution of the species across the southern African region as shown by the trapping records held by SAFRING.

In February 2005, I visited White Elephant Lodge (WEL), which forms part of The Pongola Game Reserve in KwaZulu-Natal. The 2006 ringing sessions at WEL were my third at the site, following short visits in 2004 and 2005. As well as producing a broad range of Afrotropical species, the site has produced a good selection of Palearctic migrant species including European Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris*, Icterine Warbler *Hippolais icterina*, Olive-tree Warbler *H. olivetorum*, Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* and Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*.



Figure 1. Patrick extracting from the nets at WEL (left) and the Common Whitethroat caught at WEL on 12.02.06 (right)

On 12 February 2006 a warbler was extracted from a mist net by Patrick Thabete, one of the rangers at WEL. Returning to the ringing table and looking somewhat perplexed, Patrick described the bird to me as “something different”. Knowing that his identification skills rarely failed him, I knew that it had to be something unusual. And so it proved to be! Fortunately, my experience of the species in the UK (and within Africa in Kenya) allowed me to quickly identify the bird as a female Common Whitethroat.

By referring to a number of field guides for the region I was able to establish that this was a rather unusual record of a species approaching the southern limit of its range in Africa. Subsequent analysis of the SAFRING database revealed only six other records of this species that are further south than Pongola, two in KZN, one in Northern Cape Province and three in the Free State. The southernmost record for the species is at Pietermaritzburg (Table 1), at a latitude approximately 250 km south of Pongola.

Table 1. Details of three Common Whitethroats ringed in KZN by 2007

Ring No.	Date	Age	Ringer	Locality	Coordinates
GA62728	2002-12-31	4	1060	Bisley Valley, Pietermaritzburg	2939S 3023E
AM49833	2005-12-07	3	1060	Spioenkop Nature Reserve	2841S 2926E
AM62514	2005-12-07	4	1287	Pongola Game Reserve	2724S 3153E

In 2007, the SAFRING database held 193 records of Common Whitethroat ringed in the southern Africa region between 1960 and 2006 as follows: Malawi (6); Zimbabwe (14); Namibia (3); Botswana (12); Mozambique (2), South Africa (154). Within South Africa, the breakdown by province is: Limpopo (18 records at 9 sites); Mpumalanga (6,4); Gauteng (80,11); North West (21,9); KZN (3,3); Free State (24); Northern Cape (2,1) (**Fig. 2**).

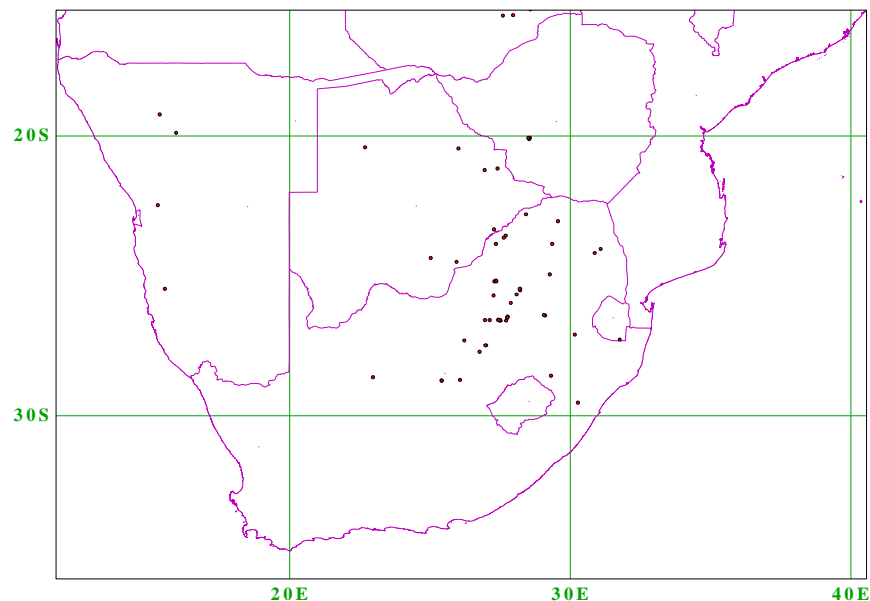


Figure 2. Distribution of trapping records from SAFRING data (to 2007)

The distribution of records within South Africa is of interest, with a distinct cluster of records in the area 30 km SW of Soweto, Johannesburg. Amazingly, 66 records are attributable to just three closely located sites – Houtkop, Boskoppie and Bronkhorstfontein, representing 43% of all the records for South Africa. I am grateful to Kobie Raijmakers for providing further information about these sites; he describes the first two as *koppies* or little hills or ridges or outcrops. Broadly speaking, the vegetation at all sites can be described as *Acacia* thorn scrub of varying density, including (especially at the third site) some open areas supporting tall grassland. The first two sites (Houtkop and Boskoppie) are within 5 km of the Mittal Steel factory and even closer to other light industries. A high degree of site fidelity was recorded for the area, with a number of birds being recaptured at the same site where they were

ringed and with the longest period between trapping being 46 months. These sites had to be abandoned, however, after the ringers were shot at by the locals!

The habitat at WEL where the Whitethroat was caught can be described as fairly typical Zululand *bushveld*, close to human settlement (a safari lodge). There were no field records of the species ever having occurred at the site before.

Three races of Common Whitethroat spend the northern winter in eastern and southern Africa - *icterops*, *rubicola* and *volgensis*. Between them, these races have a breeding range that spans practically the whole of the Palearctic realm, from eastern Europe to northwest China and western Mongolia. The nominate race, which breeds in western Europe, spends the northern winter in the west Africa east to Sudan, and central Africa (Cramp 1992). Most of the Common Whitethroats found in southern Africa are generally considered to be *icterops* (Cramp 1992, Urban 1997), although in-hand and field identification is problematic. Wing measurements between the different races overlap considerably and plumage differences are subtle, especially when dealing with female/immature birds or when feathers are worn. The two races with the more easterly breeding range, *volgensis* and *rubicola* are on average paler than *icterops* and larger (Urban 1997). Individuals with a wing length greater than 75mm (there are 13 in the SAFRING database) are unlikely to *icterops* (Cramp 1992). The Pongola Whitethroat was actively moulting when caught. This, together with the sex of the bird, meant that it was not possible to speculate about its racial origin. However, birds caught in Gauteng, representing approximately half the ringing total for South Africa, are believed to be mostly *icterops* (K. Raijmakers, pers. comm.)

Data extracted from the SAFRING database of moulting Whitethroats (Fig. 3) shows a steady progression from mid-December onwards, with most birds having completed primary moult by the end of March. Most adult *icterops* Common Whitethroats suspend their postnuptial moult on the breeding grounds, resuming active moult after reaching Africa (Pearson 1973, Nikolaus &



Pearson 1991). The Pongola bird was in active moult and had a primary moult score of 36 and was, therefore, fairly well advanced.

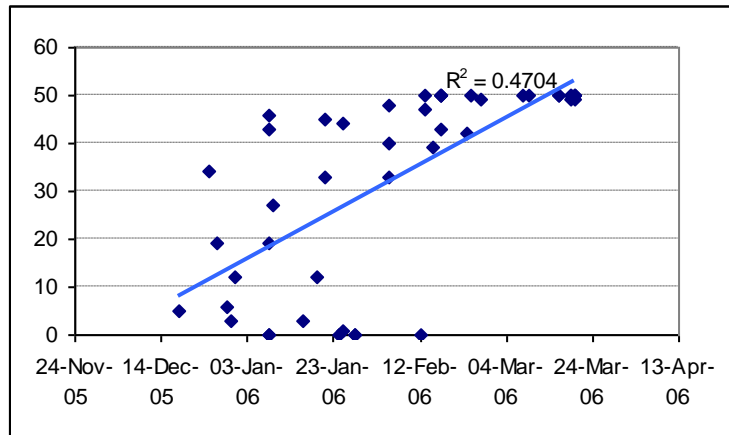


Figure 3. Progress of primary moult of Common Whitethroat in southern Africa from SAFRING data (to 2007)

Additional photographs of the Common Whitethroat caught at Pongola can be seen on the Zest for Birds website, <http://www.zestforbirds.co.za>

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