

RINGING AT OLIFANTSVLEI

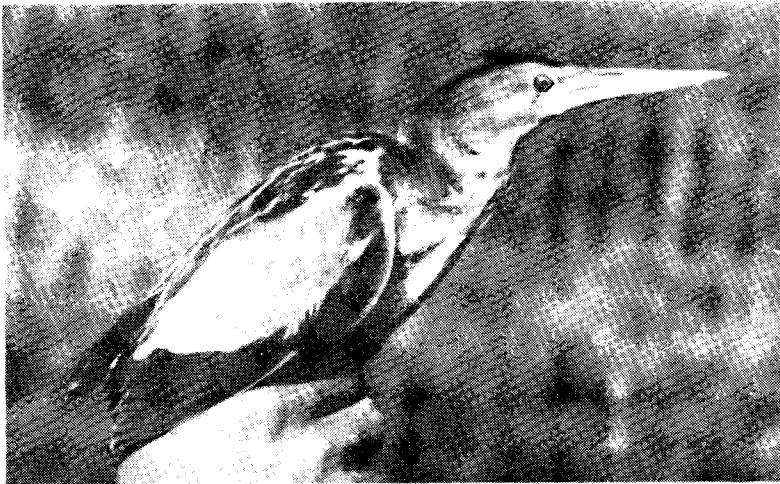
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Olifantsvlei Nature Reserve is situated south of Johannesburg on the Klip River; the actual Nature Reserve is the vlei area adjoining the river. It is administered by the Johannesburg City Engineers Department and is part of a large tract of land that includes both sewerage and agricultural operations by the Department.

With imagination, one can visualise what the whole Klip River Basin must have looked like years ago - a vast area of marshland with countless thousands of water birds and big game strewn over the whole area. Today it is just a remnant that is preserved. Being a Pommy expatriot, it reminds me of Wicken Fen in England, a tiny area preserved by the Nature Conservancy of what was once the vast area of Fens of Lincolnshire and Norfolk.

Permission to start a ringing project was granted in 1974 and ringing operations have been in progress with varying intensity up to the present. Capture of the Rallidae was the objective, and a long line of walk-in traps was established extending deep into the *Phragmites* reed beds. In this wetland 'forest' it is like being in another world; Black Crane *Amaurornis flavirostris* and Cape Rail *Rallus caerulescens*, being very inquisitive, approach to almost touching distance to investigate the strange intruder. The Water Mongoose comes crashing through the reeds, coming to an abrupt halt when, within a few feet, sudden awareness of a human presence sends it hurtling away again. Two of these moongoses were caught in traps and had to be released by opening the trap door with a stick, to avoid the teeth.

The three main species caught were Black Crane, Cape Rail and Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*. About forty of each of these species were ringed. Irregular captures were the rare Little Bittern *Ixyobrychus minutus*, Dabchick *Tachybaptus ruficollis* and Purple Gallinule *Porphyrio porphyrio*. At first recaptures were frequent, but became steadily less, and after about four years recaptures of the original ringed population ceased. Two possible reasons for this are the high mortality due to winter burning of the reed beds and the dispersal of birds over the vast extent of reed beds coupled with the relatively small area covered by the line of traps. By 1977 trapping of rails was phased out. Also, one of the original aims of the project was to catch the lesser-known Rallidae such as Baillon's Crane *Porzana pusilla*, Spotted Crane *Porzana porzana* and the fluff-tails *Sarothrura* Sp. These were not caught or sighted during



Little Bittern caught, ringed and photographed by Mike Fagan at Olifantsvlei Nature Reserve

the period. However, existing data will be scrutinised to see what can be published.

When the walk-in traps were first started, mist nets were erected along a causeway through the reeds, and anything caught was ringed. I must admit that this was only started to give one something to do in view of the comparatively small numbers of rails caught and processed. In time, I realised that all the five 'reed bed' warblers were regularly caught in proportionate numbers - African Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus baeticatus*, Lesser Swamp Warbler *Acrocephalus gracillirostris*, African Sedge Warbler *Bradypterus baboecala*, European Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* and Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*. Our friend from the 'Last Outpost', Steve Piper, please note: a ratio of three to two in favour of the residents, although this 'Homosap pomius whynguss' (Safring News 11: 5-8) will admit to a certain interest in the Palaearctic migrants.

And so interest was now directed towards warblers. Evening ringing was started; it was more profitable than spending the whole day, as is always the case with reed-bed catching. To

date, a lot of data has been amassed on moult, weights and populations (Fagan in prep.), of which little has been documented for southern Africa. This forms interesting comparisons with the work of ringers in East Africa and Malawi.

I have other plans in the offing for pursuing Rallidae again elsewhere in the Transvaal, and I am hoping for more success with this little-known group of birds.

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I have been inspired by Hanmer's paper (1981) to produce some figures from my own ringing records from Klaarstroom in the Karoo (See Table 1).

I started ringing in January 1971, over three years before Hanmer began. In my study, nets were only set for 5 or 6 days a month using two or three nets at a time. Hanmer tabled lists of 117 birds of 56 species and 19 families or sub-families, these being the three oldest birds of any species which had been ringed over 4 years before the last recapture, though in many cases only one or two individuals qualified. My own records under these conditions amounted to 22 birds, belonging to 11 species of 9 families or sub-families. All but one of the families, the Zosteropidae, are also represented in Hanmer's list but only two species, the Southern Crombec *Sylvietta rufescens* and the Masked Weaver *Ploceus velatus* belong to both lists. Whereas Hanmer's list includes 11 Sylviidae and 9 Ploceinae, mine includes only one of each family or sub-family except the Sylviinae and the Ploceinae with two each.

The oldest bird ringed at Klaarstroom was a Masked Weaver almost 8 years old. Two Fiscal Shrikes *Lanius collaris* were also over 7 years old when last retrapped. Hanmer, with a shorter