

FIVE YEARS OF WAGTAILING

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On the tenth day of the tenth month of 1981 some two and twenty wagtailers joined together to share bread, cheese, wine and wagtails. Naturally Schultz at 2 m was able to recount the tallest tales, while Lawes was able to argue that it was his love of wagtails that drove him to totally immerse himself in their study and aquatic habitat. This is probably why his friends and family are loath to lend him their optical equipment. With Hilton-Taylor's tendency for botanising we all feared a flowering tree that might totally impede our progress.

An enjoyable fifth anniversary party was had by all, with the exception of the wagtails! They had a rather damp and cool night with no slide show.

Well why should we be studying the Longtailed Wagtail *Motacilla clara* at all, let alone for five years? While my wife Andrea and I were living in Cape Town with our children in 1975, we decided to return to our home in Westville, Natal. I cast my mind around looking for a suitable bird to study on my return. The bird had to meet a number of stringent requirements, viz:-

- (i) It had to be catchable (this excluded birds such as the Indian Myna *Acridotheres tristis*;
- (ii) Once caught it should not do too much damage (this eliminated the Spotted Eagle Owl *Bubo africanus* and the Thickbilled Weaver *Amblyospiza albifrons*);
- (iii) It had to be catchable in a non-baited trap (after helping C.Heyl analyse 55 000 capture/recapture records I did not want to suffer data pollution again);
- (iv) It had to be close to home (otherwise you'd spend half your time crawling on your knees to Safring for travel grants);
- (v) The bird had to be so tame that you could see its colour rings (my M.Sc. dissertation on capture/recapture had convinced me that all capture/recapture studies are admissions of defeat);

- (vi) The bird had to live in a quiet, cool and beautiful habitat (I was to work in a soap factory so needed a change when studying my bird);
- (vii) The bird had to be resident (no point in putting effort into a bird which pushes off for half the year). Anyway there are so many Homosaps (sub-species Homosap pomius whynguss) rushing around after migrants that someone had to work on the residents.

With these criteria in mind I went to Mr. Mike Cottrell, who had founded the Palmet Nature Reserve on our very doorstep and who was at that time at U.C.T. reading for an M.A. in Environmental Studies. He suggested the Longtailed Wagtail or the African Black Duck *Anas sparsa*. As Professor Siegfried (et.al) was studying the latter, I knew that I could not; it just would not do if an amateur showed up a professional, so I came to choose the wagtail.

Now you must understand that this is no ordinary wagtail. It is a bird of elegance and beauty. It is a perfect jewel in an emerald and green arboreal and riverine setting. It has been a joy to study, its grace of movement, gentle wagging tail and occasional trill, all enough to soothe the savage brow of a man from a soap factory.

The study started with some preliminary marking attempts with the help of my wife and Jean Senogles. However, it was apparent that I needed a little "labour", some brute force to carry poles and other equipment. Mike Cottrell had told me that he had two young schoolboys keen on birds - Dale Schultz and Craig Hilton-Taylor. They were not keen, they were nauseating! They would ring me up at 4 a.m. "Hello, are you up yet?" (How can you answer that?) Ah! those were the days "Mr Piper, Sir!" All that's now gone. Dare to arrive at one of their houses before 8 a.m. and you will find them nigh unto death, sleepwise. Well anyway, on the tenth day of the tenth month of 1977 we started the Longtailed Wagtail project.

What have we learnt in the first five years?

- (1) It takes a long time to learn how to observe and know your bird (no student should be allowed to do a Ph.D. without first doing an M.Sc.).
- (2) People who live along an exquisite wagtail river like the Palmet do not share your love of the bird, well not at 4.30 a.m. (moral - keep the boys' enthusiasm in check!).

- (3) Longtailed Wagtails only live along rivers and they only breed in cliffs. (When they breed in people's flower pots or in trees, it's just to spite the people studying them).
- (4) They mate for life. However if there are no children then annulments are available and wife/swopping can commence.
- (5) Mated pairs are highly territorial and never (well hardly ever) leave their linear territories which are defended and almost totally used for foraging and, within which, breeding takes place.
- (6) Territorial encounters between adjacent pairs are rather like the U.S.S.R./U.S.A confrontations at the U.N., lots of raising of feathers, puffing up of chest, posturing and shrill calling. However, no blood is spilt.
- (7) House owners only let their dogs out at 7.00 a.m. on week-days and 9.00 a.m. on Sundays. (Good guidelines for picking fruit!!).
- (8) One property owner does not approve of people who net birds and trespass on his property. (May he soon become a recovery!) (Heaven only knows why. He's known me for 30 years. As a child I hovered at death's door in a sandpit in his backyard. Perhaps I recovered too soon? - I'm told I was a truly vile child). He even pulls nets down and throws them in the river! (May his wife have accelerated ring loss and show stress bars).
- (9) They lay one to four eggs, usually two or three. Both birds incubate and feed and the productivity is high. Generally only one clutch is laid but replacement clutches are possible.
- (10) The major mortality takes place after the mid-summer dispersal.
- (11) Adult survival is high. Higher when calculated from colour ring resighting than from recaptures.
- (12) The data for the social behaviour, territorial dynamics and breeding biology come largely from colour-ringed birds.

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In the five years that we have been looking at wagtails we have learned how to learn. We view the next three or four years as the period in which we can build on our foundations.

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The author and his colleagues. From left to right, D.M.Schultz, S.E.Piper, M. Lawes and C. Hilton-Taylor