

BLUE OVER GREEN, YELLOW OVER METAL,
IS ALIVE AND WELL AND TEN

S.E. Piper

My study of Longtailed Wagtails *Motacilla clara* commenced in the Palmiet Nature Reserve, Westville, Natal (29°49S, 30°55E) in the latter part of 1976 (Piper 1982). In the following year, on 3 September 1977 to be precise, we entered the river valley at the sportsfield opposite the contradictorily-named 'Old New Germany Road'. Our desire was to catch and colour-ring the 'Sportsfield' pair. In addition to the wagtail we also caught three Lesser Striped Swallows *Hirundo abyssinica*, all of whom were ringed using metal rings. The wagtail was fitted with plastic colour rings, blue over green on the left leg and yellow over metal on the right leg; this colour combination is referred to by the shorthand convention: B/G-Y/M.

Exactly a year later, at the same site, one of the swallows was retrapped soon after returning from its intra-African migration, while the wagtail was still holding the 'Sportsfield' territory. We were to realise with time that this was the poorest of the dozen territories along the 7 km study section of the river. The pairs in this territory seldom breed and there is a high turnover of territory holders, so much so that we have called this territory 'Sportsfield Disaster' area!

Yet another year passed with the hero of our tale languishing in this poor territory. Then a series of dramatic events took place which led to a shake-up of the residents in three territories. Downstream from 'Sportsfield' in 'Entrance' territory one of the resident birds disappeared and its place was taken by our hero's mate. Our hero was unable to attract a stable mate and there was a turnover of partners for some months. Then two territories upstream, at 'Fairy Cliff', one of the resident birds flew into a glass-panelled window of a nearby house and was stunned. The house-owner picked up the bird and after recording its ring and colour combination details, released the bird when it had fully recovered. A few days later this bird was seen in the river looking decidedly unwell. It then disappeared from the river system and it was thought to have died as a result of its injuries. Not so! It reappeared some time later in the 'Entrance' territory.

'Fairy Cliff' is known to be productive and it is not surprising that our hero should have sought it out and taken possession of it. (Ah! But how did our hero know that there was a vacancy? Do territorial birds go a-prospecting?). The existing territory holder and our hero then held the territory, and bred in it, until the spring of 1981. Thereafter the original

territory holder was no longer seen and its place was taken by R/B-W/M. Together they held "Fairy Cliff" for just over five years, breeding every spring and summer.

In the first four or five years B/G-Y/M was no more than 'one-of-the-birds', then it started to become clear that it was one of the oldest birds and then two years ago it became THE bird, the oldest of all my marked birds. What is it about the number ten? Why should it be so special for this bird to reach ten years old? I do not know why, but what I do know is that as the count-down to ten years came closer I went out on each week's census walk more and more nervous. Would it be there this week? Would I find it? If I did not, then I'd trudge back up the river, and down again if necessary, to locate it. What was even worse was finding the pair at the bottom end of their territory and have them take fright, perform the 'end-of-territory' dance and fly back upstream before I could sight their colour rings! Finally on Thursday 3 September 1987, directly after my last lecture for the day, I rushed out to Westville and parked as close as I could to 'Fairy Cliff' and went in to find MY bird. What a relief! There HE/SHE/(it?) was. What's more, the tenth anniversary of being colour-ringed was celebrated with a mate change! As Archy, Don Marquis's poetic cockroach punctuationlessly records of Mehitabel the cat (she Cleopatra in an earlier life): -

"wotthell wotthell
my life is so romantic
capricious and corybantic
an im toujours gai toujours gai"

Why should it be significant that I should find a ten-year-old wagtail? It reflects the essential Euro-centric (or is it Palaeo-centric?) view of African ornithologists. In temperate climes it is to be expected that few birds will survive, at most, two or three winters or migrations. The maximum age recorded for a Pied Wagtail *M. alba* in the Palaearctic is 9,9 years (Mead, 1985). However, in the sub-tropics the environment may, for adult birds anyway, be more benign. Thus we should expect more long-lived passerines.

What lessons can be learnt from this anecdotal account of B/G-Y/M? I would suggest three. Firstly, we are not going to unravel the population dynamics of our birds without long-term, detailed studies of individually-marked birds. Secondly, if the survival of breeding adults is so high then this implies that there will be few breeding opportunities and so recruitment to the breeding population may be a much more important phenomenon to study than breeding *per se*, the latter being an overriding pre-occupation of ornithologists in temperate climes.

Also, if breeding adult survival is so high then this means that it should be a focus of our attention from a conservation point of view. Thirdly, by anthropomorphising 'MY' birds I gain an extra impetus to maintaining the monitoring and other dull, routine aspects of the study. As an amateur I have one small advantage over the professionals. I'm free to like my birds, free to form an emotional attachment to them, free to feel for them, their environment and the natural and unnatural pressures to which they are subjected. Not that I go overboard, mind you. I am reminded of a photograph I saw in a newspaper in England during 1986; a man was standing outside a restaurant with a placard which read 'WATERSHIP DOWN: - You have read the book, you have seen the film. Now for four Pounds you can eat the cast!'

I thank D M Schultz and D M Broderick for reading an earlier draft of this note and I also thank all those young folk who, over the years, have helped with the ringing.

REFERENCES:

Piper, S. E. 1982. Five years of wagtailing. Safring News 11 (1): 5-8.

Mead, C. J. 1985. 'A Dictionary of Birds' in Campbell, B. & Lack, E. (Eds). pp 5-7. Calton: T. & A. D. Poyser.

S. E. Piper, Surveying and Mapping Department, University of Natal, King George V Avenue, DURBAN, 4001.

- o o o -