COMMENTS ON "POTENTIAL PROBLEMS IN AGEING AND SEXING SOUTHERN AFRICAN PASSERINES"

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It was with great expectations that I started reading the recent paper on potential problems in ageing and sexing southern African passerines (Dowsett 1987, Safring News 16: 17-20) because I thought it might give me some pointers. I am sure that the paper intended to be useful but to me it turned out to be confusing. I must put the record straight regarding some matters mentioned in it.

Firstly, to make a statement such as "The only safe assumption to make is that birds are sexed correctly if a cloacal examination is made in the breeding season...", is a bit much to swallow (the verb - we will come to the flying kind later). In an attempt, and I must stress attempt, to sex Whitebrowed Sparrowweavers *Plocepasser mahali* (Earlé 1983, Safring News 12: 3-5) a cloacal examination could not have added to the findings as only the dominant male and female of each colony are breeding even though it is the 'breeding season'. Non-breeding adult Whitebrowed Sparrowweavers can thus not be sexed during the 'breeding season' by a cloacal examination. Knowledge of the general biology of the species, e.g. social behaviour and breeding, might often be the important factor.

I have no idea how to sex flycatchers, wagtails, larks or most of the other bird families (although I would like to know how it should be done) but ask me about some of the swallow species that I have studied over the last few years and I can tell you. It is unfortunate that Dowsett (*op. cit.*) (second paragraph on page 19) creates the impression that I only suggested that South African Cliff Swallows *Hirundo spilodera* can be sexed on broodpatch criteria. After handling close on 20 000 Cliff Swallows over the last five years or so, I am quite sure that Cliff Swallows can be sexed from mid-September to mid-March on broodpatch criteria alone. All Cliff Swallows with a clear broodpatch can be sexed as females. The same applies to some other swallows that I have worked with, although it is a little more tricky. All individuals with featherless broodpatches are still females but this only applies to mated females, as most of them are.

If one takes the Greater Striped Swallow *H. cucullata* as an example, the following would apply: early in the season (September/October) there are some females, mostly first-year birds, that do not occupy a nest and these will not show a broodpatch until they have mated. However, during this early part of the season, unmated birds can be sexed relatively easily as males have significantly longer tail streamers than females.

Later in the season (December/April) birds cannot be sexed by tail-length as wear reduces the length. The females of all three swallow species that I have studied intensively over the last few years (the South African Cliff Swallow, the Greater Striped Swallow and the Redbreasted Swallow *H. semirufa*) have open broodpatches for at least six months of the year. This is because breeding takes place throughout this period. A single Cliff Swallow pair can successfully raise up to four broods per season while the Greater Striped and Redbreasted Swallows habitually raise two, and sometimes even three, broods.

The quoting of Svensson (1984) by Dowsett to show that "Functional brood patches are evident only from just before the start of laying and incubation to shortly after the young leave the nest" is quite inappropriate for probably most southern African birds and definitely so for the swallow family.

In closing, it is well to bear in mind that each species is different from the next, and generalisations based on experience with northern hemisphere birds should not be extended to include birds of the southern continents.

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