

WHITE-EYES REVISITED

A. J. F. K. Craig

More than 18 500 Cape White-eyes *Zosterops pallidus* have been ringed, and in 'Focus on white-eyes' in *Safring News* 14 (1) (1985) some of the findings were reviewed. I can add some information from my own ringing results.

In the Grahamstown area I have ringed 163 Cape White-eyes in the past four years. There have been eight retraps, one bird more than a year after ringing and two birds more than two years later. However, I had ringed 100 birds before I got my first retrap, and then the bird had been ringed just a few days previously. One bird has been recovered, a notable adventurer which was found two years and three months after ringing at Patensie, 164 km to the west. This breaks all records, as the greatest distance previously recorded between ringing and recovery sites for this species was 31 km (Prÿs-Jones 1985). So at least some white-eyes cover a lot more ground than we had imagined.

Wing-lengths and weights of the birds ringed are summarized in Table 1. Since I was using a 50 g spring balance, I have not attempted to examine daily or seasonal variations in weight. The measurements are very similar to those reported by other ringers in the Cape Province (Dowsett 1985; Whitelaw 1985).

TABLE 1

WING-LENGTH AND WEIGHT OF WHITE-EYES *ZOSTEROPS PALLIDUS*
FROM THE EASTERN CAPE

| | NO. BIRDS | MEAN | RANGE | S.D. |
|---------------------|-----------|------|-------|------|
| WING-LENGTH (mm) | 161 | 58,9 | 55-63 | 1,8 |
| WEIGHT (g) | 157 | 12,0 | 10-15 | 1,0 |

The grey-bellied and green-bellied forms of the Cape White-eye overlap in the eastern Cape (Skead 1967). In Grahamstown I have seen flocks which contained some green-bellied birds only twice in ten years, and I have ringed one bird with a green belly. This colour form is commoner in the mountain forests, as at Hogsback. Perhaps someone with an avicultural bent can breed the birds in captivity, and investigate the heritability of plumage colour in this species.

With regard to moult, birds in this area renew their primaries from December to May, though there are a few individuals with wing-moult in early spring (Table 2). These totals include eastern Cape specimens in the Albany Museum. The flight feathers are apparently replaced after the breeding season, as found in other studies (Prÿs-Jones 1985). Tail moult coincides with wing-moult, but head and body feathers are often moulted at other times of the year. I have not found any cases of interrupted moult in this species (cf. Dowsett 1985).

As noted by Whitelaw (1985), white-eyes frequently feed on figs. Ian Waters, a student investigating bird dispersal of the indigenous fig *ficus burtt-davyii*, found that white-eyes were frequent visitors to fruiting trees, but swallowed squashed bits of fruit pulp and seldom ingested seeds. Birds kept overnight with an abundant supply of figs lost weight, and insects are probably essential in their diet.

TABLE 2

PRIMARY MOULT IN WHITE-EYES *ZOSTEROPS PALLIDUS*
FROM THE EASTERN CAPE

| | MONTH | | | | | | | | | | | | TOTAL |
|--------------|-------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| | JAN | FEB | MAR | APR | MAY | JUN | JUL | AUG | SEP | OCT | NOV | DEC | |
| NO. OF BIRDS | 12 | 22 | 1 | 62 | 13 | 4 | 8 | 9 | 52 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 196 |
| NO. IN MOULT | 5 | 14 | 0 | 39 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 64 |

In my ringing, white-eyes are an incidental catch, often as singletons but occasionally in a small flock. The composition and movements of these flocks would be well worth a special study. In Australia the Silver-eyes *Zosterops lateralis* on Heron Island have been under observation for more than 20 years (Catterall et al. 1989), but one shouldn't assume that their findings will apply to our birds. After all, Heron Island covers only 16 hectares!

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