

WESTDENE, A BIRD RINGER'S DREAM

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The Korsman Bird Sanctuary, or simply 'Westdene' as it is affectionately known to ringers on the Witwatersrand is probably one of the most perfect heronries as far as bird ringing is concerned.

The 75 - acre sanctuary is roughly circular and is surrounded and protected by a two metre high security mesh fence. In its centre, there is a natural pan which covers about half the area of the sanctuary. In the middle a small rock and earth island has been created, and is fringed with reeds. In addition almost half the perimeter of the pan is covered with stands of reeds and rushes the sanctuary is entirely surrounded by houses and herein lies the main reason for Westdene being a perfect sanctuary. The residents of the rather elite surrounding suburb of Westdene are intensely proud and jealous of their sanctuary. Many of them are members of the W.B.C. and other natural history clubs, and it is they who by their vigilance prevent interference with the bird population.

The potential of the areas was first recognised by Dr. T.S. Daniels, a resident medical practitioner in Benoni and committee member of the Witwatersrand Bird Club. Towards the end of 1948, he managed to have the Benoni Town Council fence the pan and have it proclaimed a sanctuary. In the same year one flamingo was recorded as having visited the pan - an event which created quite a stir in local ornithological circles, but three years later transient flocks of as many as fifty flamingoes were seen.

Another chapter in the history of Westdene was written when in about 1955 it was discovered that the shy and rare Glossy Ibis Plegadis falcinellus which had recently appeared on the east Rand, was found to be breeding in very small numbers. This nucleus of breeding birds grew steadily during the following years and last season about 250 Glossy Ibis pulli were ringed at Westdene. The previous two seasons had yielded one-third and one-half as many respectively, which is an indication of the increase in numbers this species is enjoying on the Reef.

A nest of the Black Heron Melanophox ardesiaca was found by Manfred Schmitt in April 1971. The nest contained three well grown young, one of which was caught and ringed. In March 1972 two Black Heron nests were found in Westdene and five pulli were ringed. These are the first Black Heron nests to have been found in the Transvaal. It is hoped that this will be the start of a permanent breeding colony of Black Heron as it was with the Glossy Ibis.

The most numerous breeding species at Westdene is the Cattle Egret Bubulcus ibis. Large numbers of these birds move into the sanctuary in September and nest building gets under way.

The first pulli are ringed in October with ringing going on into March. As with all the other breeding species at Westdene, numbers have increased steadily through the years, so that at present between 3500 and 4500 Cattle Egret pulli are ringed annually. Recoveries of Cattle Egret ringed at Westdene have been made primarily from Zambia and the Congo Republic. The most northerly recovery is from the northern shore of Lake Victoria in Uganda, and the most long lived, a bird captured alive 15 years after it was ringed.

The first birds to start breeding are Night Heron Nycticorax nycticorax and Glossy Ibis Plegadis falcinellus followed closely by Sacred Ibis Threskiornis aethiopicus. The first pulli of these species are ringed in September, and breeding goes on into March. Sacred Ibis breed in large numbers at Westdene, but are far more successful in dry seasons than in years of heavy rainfall. In dry seasons up to 2000 pulli are ringed. These seem to move about a great deal in early life as recoveries from Zambia, Caprivi, Botswana and Orange Free State indicate. The oldest bird recovered was about 16 years old.

Smaller numbers of Reed Cormorant Phalacrocorax africanus, Grey Heron Ardea cinerea, Little Egret Egretta garzetta, Yellow-billed Egret Mesophox intermedius and Squacco Heron Ardeola ralloides also nest at Westdene during the summer months. The Squacco Heron first appeared as a breeding species in 1969.

White-breasted Cormorant Phalacrocorax carbo and African Spoonbill Platalea alba commence nest building in late March, the first pulli being ringed about April. Breeding continues throughout the winter months until October. The number of White-breasted Cormorant pairs nesting in Westdene is limited by the number of suitable nesting sites. While they do sometimes build their nests on the ground of the island, they seem to prefer to build on the rocky outcrops which protrude from the surface of the pan when the water is not too deep. The numbers of African Spoonbill on the other hand have increased greatly over the years.

Black-headed Heron Ardea melanocephala breed throughout the year at Westdene, but there is a peak of breeding activity during the winter months. About the same number of Black-headed Heron are ringed annually as are Glossy Ibis at Westdene, but this is probably due to the flagging of effort during the very cold winter months when there is little pleasure to be had from wading in icy water up to one's waist.

Grey-headed Gulls Larus cirrocephalus are the only other species which nests in numbers at Westdene. Nesting sites are variable ranging from dry-land rocky outcrops, bare ground, short grass, long grass over dry ground or water, in rushes, on the centre island to rocky islets surrounded by water. Breeding has been recorded in all months from March to November, but mostly during the winter. Many ringed birds from Westdene have been recovered in the Orange Free State, particularly the dams around Welkom. More spectacular recoveries come from as far afield as 160 km north of Salisbury to the north, Gordon's Bay in the south, Angola in the west and Lourenco Marques in the east. But there is evidence that these birds do return to breed in the colony where they were originally hatched.

The pan in Westdene totally depends on rainwater for its water supply, and because of its geographical situation it is unable to discharge excess water. The whole area is situated in a great basin and rain run-off from the surrounding streets and properties can be substantial in wet weather. The last time that the pan dried up completely was in 1963, but in one day in early 1972 after a fall of 200 mm of rain, the water level rose by more than a metre. Though these are extreme cases, fluctuations of up to 250 mm in the water level are not uncommon. This can have disastrous effects on the nesting success of birds like Sacred Ibis, Glossy Ibis and Grey-headed Gulls which build their nests close to the surface of the water. The Sacred Ibises were the only birds which appeared to try to beat the rising water by adding nesting material to their nests, but did this in such a way that many of them succeeded in burying their young under mounds of wet vegetation.

Nevertheless Westdene, with its water level varying between knee and thigh depth remains a ringer's paradise par excellence where conditions for ringing are about as near perfect as one could wish them to be.

For those ringers who have never worked a colony of egrets, ibises or herons in a reedbed, I would like to include a few hints on how to go about this operation. Quiet, orderly, efficient operation is imperative, and can be achieved whether the ringers work individually or in groups. Two or three ringers working together have an advantage over a single ringer in that they can surround a nest or group of nests and so reduce the possibility of the inhabitants escaping over the surrounding reeds or into the water.

Cattle Egrets, Little Egrets, Yellow-billed Egrets and Squacco Herons are easily approached up to the age of about three weeks, whereafter they become increasingly nervous of any disturbance. Ringing in colonies of these species should start when the oldest pulli are about two to three weeks old. This first operation will be the easiest as there are no pulli old enough to jump out of their nests. On subsequent visits the ringer or ringers should move slowly through the colony to enable the older chicks, which will have been ringed on previous visits, to move slowly out of the path of the ringer without panicking into plunging into the water. Inevitably some of these 'branchers' will fall into the water, and should be caught and replaced on or near their nests if they don't immediately achieve this on their own. A very effective way of calming 'branchers' is to replace them on their nests with their heads tucked under their wings, and to cover them gently with the hand for ten or fifteen seconds until they have settled down, then to withdraw quietly. By visiting a colony fortnightly, the ringers should be able to ring every pullus, and casualties should be nil or negligible.

Sacred Ibis, Glossy Ibis and Spoonbill are treated in the same way as the egrets and small herons, but as Sacred Ibis and Spoonbill tend to tear down the surrounding reeds and thereby denude the vicinity of the nests of all cover, the ringer has great difficulty in approaching unobserved, and without causing the pulli to panic. As these pulli are fat and waddle with difficulty, and therefore often experience great difficulty in regaining the sanctuary of their nests which they so readily abandon when disturbed, it is absolutely essential that Sacred Ibis and Spoonbill pulli which dive overboard be returned to their nests and calmed before the ringer proceeds. Glossy Ibis on the other hand have very precocious pulli which tend to leave the nest early and roam about the reedbed in a most independent manner. They have the charming habit of feigning death by lying on the nest with the head on its side and resting on the nest and are easily ringed at this stage. Even when they are old enough to jump out of the nest, Glossy Ibis pulli are readily calmed by the 'head under wing' method. Here again fortnightly visits for ringing are most successful.

Of all the colonial reedbed-nesting species, the Night Heron is the calmest and most easily approached of all. The pulli invariably crouch quietly in the nest and regard the ringer through their golden, reptilian eyes without panic. On the other hand the cormorants are the most impossible of all. When young, the White-breasted and Reed Cormorant pulli can be approached and ringed without fear of them going overboard, but when they are older they become quite impossible to approach without panicking the whole colony into the water. Once they have gone into the water the pulli dive and swim off under water so that they are impossible to retrieve. I have little doubt that cormorant chicks that go overboard - particularly Reed Cormorant nesting in reeds - have little hope of regaining their nests safely once they have abandoned them; and for this reason I avoid ringing large cormorant pulli.

Grey-headed Gull pulli will hide in water-grass or between rocks on the waterline when the parents' warning cries announce the approach of danger. It is a simple matter to work systematically through the colony, finding and ringing the hidden pulli, and replacing them in their hiding places. Great care should however be exercised to

avoid standing on the well camouflaged chicks and eggs. In ringing parties under my control it is forbidden to run under any circumstances. If an escaping chick cannot be caught by walking after it, then it is allowed to escape. If regular visits are made to the gull colony, any chick which cannot be caught by walking after it, should already have been ringed on a previous visit.