FOREIGN NEWS

Compiled by Cynthia Best

BIRD RINGING IN TANZANIA

Miombo No. 9, December 1992, the newsletter of the Wildlife Conservation Society of Tanzania (WCST), has published an overview of the 12 years of ringing that have been achieved in that country. 22,000 birds of 442 species have been ringed between 1981 and 1992, many of them Afro-tropical or Palearctic migrants. As yet no recoveries have been reported away from capture sites.

The ringing efforts highlighted in this overview are as varied in location as in objectives. More than 29 different locations are listed, most involving numerous specific sites. The habitats range from montane and lowland forest, through miombo woodland, open bush thicket and upland grassland, to riverine forest and marshes, coastal forests and offshore sand islands.

Some of these ringing efforts are ongoing while others have had specific timespans and goals.

A project to determine altitudinal movement of certain species was undertaken on Mount Kilimanjaro. A four-year study on the effects of fragmentation on bird population was carried out in the eastern highlands. Another study targeted a new species, the Kilombero Weaver *Ploceus burnieri* to obtain biometric and biological data. Rare African migrants were ringed in the course of a four-year study which involved monitoring a migration station for Afro-tropical migrants. On Latham Island, an important seabird breeding site near Dar es Salaam, 143 Masked Boobies *Sula dactylatra* were ringed.

Exciting discoveries have been made, such as a new Francolin, a new population of Swynnerton's Robin *Swynnertonia swynnertonia* and new distribution records for Sokoke Pipit *Anthus sokokensis* and the Iringa Ground Robin *Dryocichloides lowei*. Other species of note included the African Pitta *Pitta angolensis*, Bartailed Cuckoo *Cerococcyx montanus* and East Coast Akalat *Sheppardia gunningi*. The breeding grounds of the Spotted Ground Thrush *Turdus fischeri* provided another highlight.

A wide cross-section of ringers have participated in these endeavours. In addition to the body of committed WCST ringers, numerous foreign ringers took part as members of expeditions from Cambridge University, the Zoological Museum of Copenhagen and the RSPB, and ICBP-sponsored teams from Denmark and Germany.

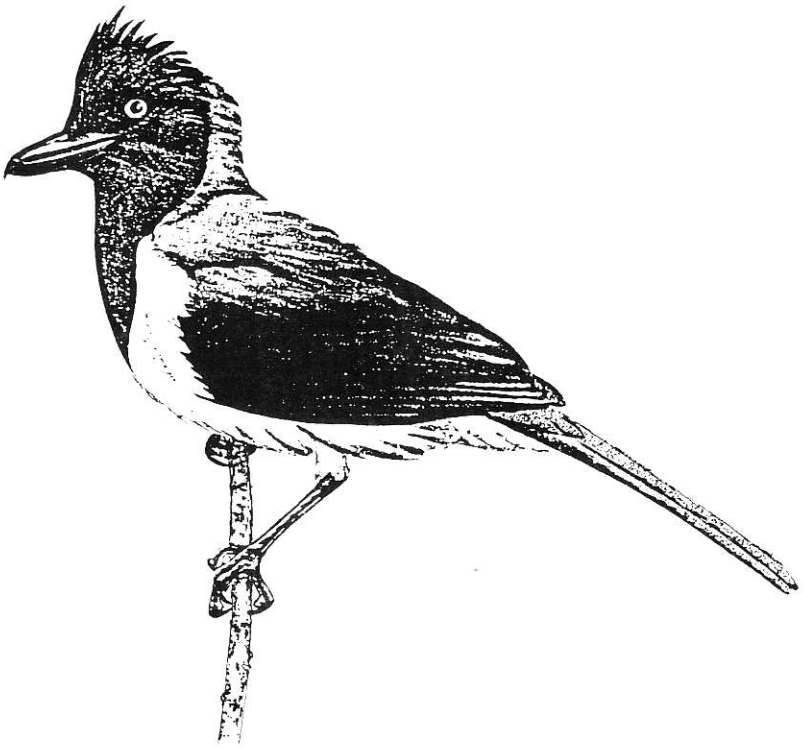
Ringing in Tanzania is coordinated by the East African Ringing Scheme, P O Box 15194, Nairobi, Kenya with Graeme Backhurst as Ringing Organiser. All rings are marked **Nairobi Museum**. A database of all Tanzanian records is being compiled in Dar es Salaam by Liz and Neil Baker, the authors of this report.

A TONGUE-TINGLING TAIL

In 1990, deep in the forests of Papua New Guinea, John Dumbacher, a PhD student from Chicago, was freeing a "pretty feisty" songbird from nets he had set up to catch Birds of Paradise. As he sucked the scratch resulting from this encounter, he experienced sneezing and a burning sensation in his mouth, followed by numbness. He had been handling the Hooded Pitohui *Pitohui dichrous* and was to find out that he had just discovered the first poisonous bird on record.

The locals already referred to the Hooded Pitohui as the 'rubbish bird', which could only be eaten if it was skinned and boiled. Dumbacher decided to investigate whether the toxin was generated by the bird itself when he experienced the same effect upon pulling out a feather and licking it. Chemical analysis showed the toxin to be a steroidal alkaloid, almost identical to that found in poisonous dart frogs *Phyllobates* (Dendrobatidae) in the Amazon. The skins of these Columbian frogs are used for poisoning blowgun darts. The pitohuis and the dart frogs are the only organisms in the world known to contain this particular batrachotoxin.

The toxin is concentrated primarily in the skin and feathers of the bird and an extract from just 10 milligrams of the bird's skin proved lethal. In view of their phylogenetic and geographical separation it seems that the ability of both the frogs and the birds to synthesize this alkaloid was independently evolved.



The findings were reported in *Science* Vol 258, No. 5083: 799-801 (October 1992). This poisonous songbird is the first known example of chemical defence among birds, in this case probably to avoid predation from hawks, snakes and arboreal marsupials. The Pitohui is also relatively brightly coloured with strongly contrasting black head and rufous wings and body, and emits a strong sour odour. These characteristics may play a role in educating predators about prey noxiousness. Thus the discovery of this toxin in the Pitohui expands the known possible antipredator adaptations in birds to include chemical defense.

[*Ringers who wish to find out if any African birds have developed similar defences can quickly check by sucking the tails of mistnetted birds before release* ... **Ed.**]

HOW TO UNCRAMP A *CALIDRIS*

Leg cramp mostly occurs in large and long-legged wader species under conditions of thermal stress. A successful catch of waders can come to a problematic end, with birds fluttering over the ground, unable to walk or take off.

Physiological studies indicate that leg cramp is caused by impaired blood supply. Attempts to save cramped birds by massaging their leg muscles or suspending them in a sling have met with only limited success. Theunis Piersma, Anne-Marie Blomert and Marcel Klaasen of the Netherlands have encountered the problem of leg-cramped waders several times during wader-capture activities in Mauritania. In *Wader Study Group Bulletin* No. 63, December 1991, they report on the use of valium to relieve these cramps under field conditions and in laboratory trials.

In Mauritania, in March 1986, two leg-cramped Knots *Calidris canutus* were administered one human valium tablet of 5 mg dissolved in water and minced with food pellets. Both birds recovered overnight and stayed in perfect condition.

In January 1991, Les Underhill and co-workers caught 10 Knots at Langebaan Lagoon and put them on a plane from South Africa to Amsterdam. There they were released in a large indoor cage at room temperature with running fresh and salt water. Two birds developed leg cramp. They were force-fed 1.0 mg of valium with 0.5 ml water and a protein-rich food pellet. These birds sunk into a deep sleep but the next morning, 11 hours after treatment, they were walking around again and remained healthy thereafter, under observation in captivity.

These observations suggest that valium can be an effective remedy for leg cramps in waders. It appears to have no long-term negative effects, although its impact on the orientation of birds about to depart on long-distance migrations is unknown.

The authors suggest that waders between 20 g and 90 g be treated with 0.25-0.5 mg of valium and larger species with 1 mg. The birds should be kept in a warm dark place during sleep and should usually be ready for release in 10-12 hours. It is advisable to give the birds fresh water to drink before release.

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SPANISH BIRD RINGING IN 1991

The report on the 1991 ringing campaign in Spain was published in *Ecologia* No. 6, 1992.

This report, produced by ICONA (National Institute for Nature Conservation), shows that in 1991 a total of 116 081 birds of 300 different species were ringed (with rings marked ICONA); of these 84% were full grown birds. This brings the grand total of birds ringed in Spain from 1973 to 1991 to 1 349 605; 7 834 recoveries have been reported, indicating an overall recovery rate of 0,58%.

A total of 114 ringers and ringing groups contributed to the ringing effort of 1991. However the ringing totals for that year are incomplete, because two ringing groups had not submitted their ringing data in time [*does this sound familiar?* – **Ed.**]

A total of 1 134 ICONA-ringed birds were reported in 1991. Those migrants recovered or controlled in Africa were nearly all found in West Africa between Morocco and Senegal.

RESULTS OF BIRD RINGING IN 1990 IN CROATIA

The Zagreb Ringing Scheme reports in *Larus* Vol 43, 1991 that 20 302 birds of 181 species were ringed in 1990. The Grand Total since 1910 is 489 660 birds of 283 species. 136 Croatian ring recoveries of 30 species, and 61 foreign ring recoveries of 22 species were recorded. European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* was the most frequently reported bird with 30 ring numbers listed. Only two of these were recoveries; there were 37 retraps of the remaining 28 birds. Nearly all of these were controlled as breeding birds in nest boxes.

NEWS FROM THE ISRAEL BIRD RINGING CENTRE

The *Ringer's Newsletter* No. 6, November 1992 contains the ringing summary for northern Israel in 1991.

Species ringed include 55 European Swallows *Hirundo rustica*, 1 678 European Reed Warblers *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*, 15 European Marsh Warblers *A. palustris*, 38 Great Reed Warblers *A. arundinaceus* and 96 European Sedge Warblers *A. schoenobaenus*.

Amongst the latest ringing recoveries were three European Swallows ringed in October 1989 at Barquet and recovered in Lithuania in August 1990, Czechoslovakia in May 1991 and Russia in May 1991 respectively.

Two Eilat-ringed European Swallows are also of interest. One ringed in April 1989 was recovered in Sweden in June 1992. Another ringed in April 1992 was controlled in Botswana by Bennie van den Brink of the Dutch ringing expedition (see article page 27).

A short article by Kobi Merom on the Basra Reed Warbler *A. griseldis*, states that this species was trapped and ringed 5 times in Israel between 1984 and 1992 (see page 36).

SWEDISH RINGING REPORT OF 1990

The 31st Report of the Swedish Bird Ringing Centre shows that 349 921 birds were ringed in Sweden in 1990. This creates a new record for the annual ringing total achieved in that country. This total does not include 250 hand-reared birds that were also ringed during that period.

Amongst the recoveries of Swedish ringed birds some notable examples of elapsed times included that of an Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea* recovered on Bloubergstrand, Cape Province, South Africa, almost 26 years and 116 days after it was ringed in Grötlingboudd as a nestling. It must have flown over 500 000 km on migration in its lifetime. A Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* was controlled in Belgium only 5 days after it was ringed in Sweden, indicating that it had travelled at an average speed of 261 km per day whilst on migration.

The recent expansion of the Whitebreasted Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* population in the Baltic continued during 1990 with the numbers of cormorants ringed and recovered being the highest so far. The number of known colonies has increased from 2 to 11 between 1986 and 1990.

Swedish participation in the Acroproject was ongoing with a new total of 17 ringing sites at which 9 740 Reed Warblers and 2 740 Sedge Warblers *A. schoenobaenus* were ringed between July and September, just before the beginning of their autumn migration.

BIRD RINGING IN PORTUGAL

The Portugese Ringing Scheme is operated by the Centre for the Study and Protection of Migratory Birds (CEMPA). A grand total of 111 650 birds of 202 species have been ringed since the initiation of ringing activities.

CEMPA has compiled a report on the Portugese and foreign ring recoveries recorded between 1977 and 1988. There were 1 058 foreign-ringed birds of 90 species recovered in Portugal. All of these were from Europe (except 2 Dunlins *Calidris alpina* from Morocco) and 58% came from the UK, Belgium and Holland.

An evident omission is a Knot *Calidris canutus* ringed as an adult at Langebaan, South Africa on 10.11.74 and recovered at Pontes-Setubal, Portugal on 08.05.81.

116 CEMPA-ringed birds of 33 species were recovered in countries other than Portugal, nearly half of which were found in 4 regions: the Canary Islands (16,5%), UK (14,4%), Morocco (10,8%) and Spain (5,1%). 22% of all the CEMPA recoveries, involving 8 species, were reported from Africa.

This included one Knot which was ringed in Portugal in June 1978 and was recovered at Langebaan, South Africa in February 1979. 14 White Storks *Ciconia ciconia* were found in Morocco, Mali and Nigeria. They formed 14% of the species recovered, and European Reed Warblers *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* made up a further 10%

TWILIGHT OF THE BASRA REED WARBLER ?

The future for the Marsh Arabs and the wildlife in a 17 000 square kilometre area of wetlands in Iraq looks equally tragic if a report entitled **Draining life from Iraq's marshes** (*New Scientist* No. 1869, 7 Apr 1993) is well founded. The International Wildfowl and Wetlands Research Bureau describes these marshes as the most important wintering site for migrating birds in the whole of western Eurasia. The marshes also happen to be the sole breeding site of *Acrocephalus griseldis*, the Basra Reed Warbler, which migrates south to winter in Africa. Though seldom travelling south of the Zambesi (Digby Cyrus caught one near Richard's Bay a few years ago), it is a common migrant to East Africa and Dale Hanmer ringed 112 B.R.W.'s at Nchalo in Malawi and had a 21.4% return rate (*Safring News* 18: 33-42, 1989).

The marshes in southern Iraq rely on floods of the Tigrus and Euphrates. These rivers overflow with rain and melting snow brought down from their Turkish head-waters every winter and spring. But now an array of sluices, embankments and canals have been constructed to 'reclaim' the marshes. According to the report the motive is political, and a deliberate effort to destroy the way of life of the Ma'dan people (the Marsh Arabs) who live in reed houses on artificial islands in the marshes and allegedly harbour refugees from Saddam Hussein's regime in Baghdad.

The *New Scientist* report includes infra-red satellite photographs taken in 1991 and 1992 which reveal marked diminution in water areas in 1992. Now, "instead of moving themselves and their goods by boat, the Ma'dan are often having to struggle through hip-deep mud on foot" according to one observer.

Ringers within the normal range of migrant Basra Reed Warblers may be able to monitor the likely decline of this species if the draining of the Iraqi marshes continues. For the sake of this rare Reed Warbler, and not least for the well-being of the Marsh Arabs (read Wilfred Thesinger's **A reed shaken in the wind**) let us devoutly hope that these marshes will not be totally lost.

Terry Oatley
