

While catching estrildids for the Museum's Aviary along the Vaal River in *Acacia* veld at the farm Modderfontein, near Bothaville (27°25'S, 26°20'E) on 17 February 1994, a single individual of this species was captured alongside a few Willow Warblers *Phylloscopus trochilus*.

The first impression was that of a warbler, and I confused it with the greyer form of the Willow Warbler. Then I realised that this was the same species that I had caught a few years ago. The bird was photographed, measured and notes about its plumage were taken before it was ringed and released. Back at the Museum the two specimens were re-evaluated and compared with other similar-looking birds such as Willow Warblers and of course Karoo Chats! I then came to the conclusion that the bird was a Whitethroat, a relatively rare bird in the O.F.S. and a new bird for me (although I have mistnetted three on one day five years ago).

The distinct features of the Whitethroat are their dark brown wings, the outermost tail feathers (and 5th tail feather) which are edged whitish, and their whitish underparts. This bird was possibly a female as its head

was brown and not brownish-grey as in males. The bird's breast was also buffy, looking like a small breast band. The measurements taken (Table 1), also correspond with the other Whitethroat measurements of the O.F.S. (e.g. Du Plessis 1992) and those of Maclean (1993).

This observation serves as a warning to bird ringers not to be too relaxed about their bird identification skills when it comes to difficult groups such as warblers. I consider it important to make detailed notes and measurements (and photograph the bird) before releasing any ringed bird which presents identification problems. Care must therefore be taken not to confuse similar-looking species and detailed measurements must be taken to eliminate such errors. Ringers are always learning and should accept their errors and publish their corrections where appropriate.

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RAPTOR RINGERS' REVELATION

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On driving around in the Wellington district, the idea was born – raptors also need to be ringed. What follows are some of the trials, tribulations and frustrations that we put ourselves through to diversify into raptor ringing.

The Trap

We knew that raptors were caught on a Balchatri trap but what did one look like? Nowhere in our books was there any description, so we set the phone wires buzzing. Results were confusing: "It must be rectangular in shape with a curved top"; "Cone shape works better"; "No, it must be round like a pancake, or perhaps a better description is like a space craft!?" Well, giving it a lot of thought and considering the material we had on hand, we decided to construct a cone trap.

The Loops

The trap had now been built, with many fingers bloodied by cuts and scratches from the wire. We started to attach the fishing *line loops*. Some people say only seven loops per side, others say 12, but the majority say the more loops the surer you are to catch. We decided on lots of loops and our trap now looks as if it has got a fishing line coat covering it.

The Bait

The experts say 'No matter what colour the mouse is, it must be well trained'. Well, a statement like that made our imaginations run wild. There you are with a small whip in your one hand and a cardboard picture of a Blackshouldered Kite in the other. As you bring the picture closer you crack the whip and teach the mouse to do a double backward flip with a full turn to land in the centre of the trap where it must wash its face, sticking out its tongue often at the bird. In the end we just got hold of any mice we could and hoped for the best. We must admit that some mice are better than others and then you get some that are not stupid, it's just that they have no brains.

The First Drop

Out we go to try out the trap and within a minute you realise that something no one told you about was to wear long pants, because all the cut-off wire ends are now quietly digging into your legs. Five kilometres down the drag and we find our first bird, but because you have to drop with the passenger door away from the bird we have to pass and do a U-turn and come back. At 40 kph we make for the bird and the signal to drop is given. When we stop 200 m down the road the trap is still fixed firmly to my sweaty paw – Lesson No.2 – you can't make a drop with a seat belt on! Back and around we go again and when we stop the trap is once again in my hand, this time because one of the loops attached

itself to the window winder. Back we go again, but the bird is now so dizzy from this doing circles in front of it that it drunkenly departs.

On we went to the next bird which we dropped for and trapped without any problem, but Lesson No.3 was sorely learned. When you see a Steppe Buzzard you notice a vicious beak but no one mentions its long talons. I do not know who had a sinking feeling when he grabbed hold of my hand with a vicious left hook. Francis battled for ten minutes to release my hand from his clutches and after being ringed the bird flew off leaving me looking battle-worn and literally a 'bloody' mess. The worst part was the tetanus injection I had to receive the next day!

The Ceres Incident

With the trap working well we decided to visit the town of Ceres to see what birds it had to offer. Just after leaving the town on a farm road, we came across a Blackshouldered Kite (BSK) and made a drop. After doing a turn we were just settling down to wait when two children on one bicycle come out of a farm road and made their way towards us, and the trap. We thought that was going to be the end of that drop. But the bird saw its lunch about to be stolen from under its nose so down it came and promptly got caught as the children peddled past with wide eyes. After ringing the bird we travelled on and shortly after passing the cyclists we made another drop and the incident was repeated.

A short time later a third drop was made, but this time the bird did not come down and when the children got to the trap they stopped. They held a short discussion and then looked at the bird and said something to it which caused the bird to fly away. They then climbed onto the bicycle and with a big smile and a wave they peddled on but somehow the 'spell' was broken and we did not catch another bird that day.

New Year's Day

A week just before New Year, Francis took possession of a brand new station wagon – “The perfect vehicle to do raptor ringing with”. The New Year's party was a great bash and at 7h00 (an hour late) we took off with sore heads into the blinding sunshine to do our thing. Two drops were made and two more birds had rings on them and what a pleasure it was working from the new station wagon. Another drop was made and at the turn distance there was a convenient farm entrance which we reversed into and settled down to wait. A few minutes later there was a hoot behind us from the farmer who wanted to get through his gate which we were blocking. As we moved forward there was a strange sound and the wagon suddenly tilted forward at an angle. Inspection revealed that we had driven into a beautifully concealed ditch next to the road and worse still, we were still blocking the gate. Fortunately the farmer was in a good mood and went off to fetch his tractor and pulled us out. We eventually arrived home for our New Year's lunch (late again). And when we walked into the house, Francis presented his wife with a bent and buckled number plate as a peace offering.

The result of that morning's ringing was three Steppe Buzzards, one damaged new car and hot tongue and cold bum – What a life!

On another New Year's Day we had made a drop for a Steppe which was perched in a tree. Shortly after the drop it started to drizzle and the bird moved from the tree to a fence post. It started to rain harder and the bird moved to the top of the trap where it stayed until it stopped raining. Meanwhile the mouse tucked itself under the bird and remained dry. After the rain had stopped the Steppe moved back to the fence post where it preened itself before returning to get itself caught and ringed.

Finally

One thing we have noticed is that when a Steppe Buzzard finds himself with a loop around his leg he looks around with a 'sheepish' look on his face and only then tries to fly away. The above are just a few of the incidents that have happened to us since we got the urge to do raptor ringing and we hope this will encourage you to dust off your traps, start training your mice and add a ring to a raptor.