Papers: Techniques

The Pierce Springtrap

Dale Forbes

c/o Dr Colleen Downs, School of Botany & Zoology, Private Bag X01, Scottsville 3209; email: capepolly@yahoo.com

Last summer a few South African ringers met Andy Pierce, a visiting ringer from England. He brought only the bare essentials: one backpack filled with enthusiasm and another with experience (he wore his only pair of shorts and only shirt). It was out of one of those backpacks that a 'springtrap' appeared.

Simple in design (yet surprisingly difficult to describe), the springtrap operates by luring birds onto a meshed base in pursuit of some food (e.g. a mealworm, a cricket or a grape). Any jarring of the bait triggers the trap: a soft mesh cage is sprung over the bird (Figure 1). The initial trap was 270 × 270 mm and we used it to catch Stonechats, Fiscal Shrikes and Cape Wagtails (amongst others). After some field use, we decided to make some more, slightly larger, traps. It was found that the new larger traps (350 × 350 mm) were better suited to catching larger species such as the Olive Thrush.

My main ringing interest is in forest birds. Forest ringing is notoriously slow. I decided to test this unusual little design. Early one autumn morning, after the nets were opened, I ran around placing 13 springtraps in strategic positions: under bushes, in open patches and below low branches. I found that the best

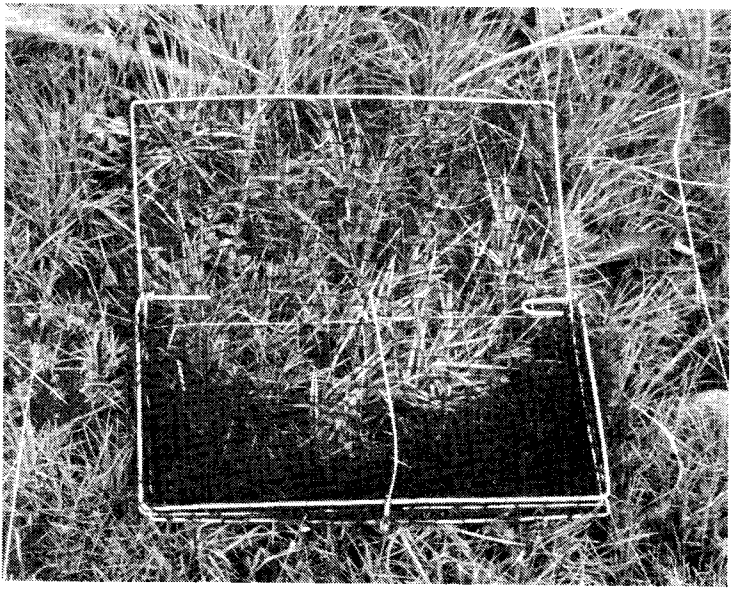

Fig. 1. One of Dale's traps ready for action. (Photo by H.D. Oschadleus.)

way to stimulate mealworm activity was by warming them up (in the mouth works well but then avoid talking as I suspect they may try to crawl down one's throat). After catching Cape, Chorister and Starred Robins, Olive and Orange Ground Thrushes, a Cape Batis and a Southern Boubou I was convinced that the traps were a good idea.

We have also tested the traps in a variety of other habitats. Baited with mealworms, the springtraps are likely to catch any insectivorous bird that feeds on the ground, especially drongos, shrikes, flycatchers, thrushes and robins. Dr Barry Taylor and his sons have also used the same design to catch forest birds as well as Mountain Chats, Buff-streaked Chats and even an Orangebreasted Rockjumper!

There does, however, appear to be an extremely low recapture rate when using springtraps. This is likely to be because the birds become trap-shy: they may associate a worm in a hair-clip with the trauma of ringing. However, at least more birds are being ringed, thus supplementing a mistnetting programme.

A word of caution: as with mistnets, ringers should be very careful with the positioning of the traps. Both ground and avian predators would be attracted to a trapped bird. I suspect that even an Olive Thrush would attack a trapped robin. The springtraps should thus be checked very frequently and one should avoid areas where mongooses and genets are common. Additionally, traps should be anchored as trapped birds have been known to bounce the traps about. It is especially important to anchor the traps if they are placed near a hazard such as a water body or on a ledge. The same springtrap design has apparently also been used to catch moorhens and other large birds (in much larger traps). Bigger traps would almost certainly need to be anchored.

Andy's passion for bird ringing taught me that ringing is not only an exercise of scientific data collection but it is also a sport of cunning and intuition; outsmarting all those target species out there.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr Colleen Downs for the guidance and support she has generously given me over the last few years.