

THE TORCH AND HANDNET METHOD OF WADER CAPTURE

By: Karl Z. Edwards,
Constance Road,
Charlo,
PORT ELIZABETH.

Introduction:

The use of torch and handnet for the capture of both diurnal and nocturnal waders is not a recent innovation, although it has been largely overlooked in South Africa. Its utility to the wader ringer lies in the fact that large numbers of otherwise uncatchable terrestrial waders such as Dikkops, Plovers and Coursers can be caught with the minimum of difficulty. This method has also been proved useful in improving the catches of shorebirds, like Blacksmith, Kittlitz, Chestnut-banded and White-fronted Plovers, as well as Snipe, Curlew-sandpiper, Knot and Turnstone. The success of this method is shown by my catch of over 350 waders during the past seven months alone.

Equipment:

The most essential article of equipment is a powerful 6-cell flash light, fitted with a pre-focussed bulb. The important factor concerning any flashlight, is that it must throw a concentrated beam. Most torches tend to throw out a scattered light, and are only effective when the batteries are fresh. The fault is more often to be found in the structure of the bulb, rather than the torch itself. The best procedure is to take the flashlight to the shop and try out a whole series of bulbs (7,5 volt for a 6-cell torch) until one is found that gives a concentrated beam. The ideal torch to use is a Japanese-made Nikkolite yachting torch, which does not seem to be on sale in South Africa anymore, although a similar model is for sale here. Sealed beam torches are also fairly good, especially if one has the added advantage of working from a vehicle. For pure footwork they are a bit too weak, and do not have half the range of the Nikkolite.

Once one has a torch, the rest is easy. The ideal "all-weather" net ought to have a light wooden handle from 5 to 6 feet in length, with a fairly heavy wire loop (about 2 x 1,5 feet diameter) with a small bag made of half-inch mesh or larger. A long-handled net of these dimensions has both range and accuracy. The large mesh causes little wind resistance and enhances manoeverability in rough weather. The West-coast wader ringers have brought out large diameter, short-handled nets for the specialized purpose of netting roosting flocks of Curlew-sandpiper and Knot on dark, misty nights. Under ideal conditions, as many as 120 waders of both species have been caught and ringed on Langebaan beach in a single night. Handnets can thus be adapted to suit local conditions.

To those who walk long stretches of beach, golf-course or airfield it is best to take a skeleton ringing kit in a separate bird-bag. The kit ought to consist of 3 spring balances, weighing bag, several sizes of rings, pliers, ruler, calipers, notebook, pen, an additional torch for ringing with, and spare bulbs for both torches. The best procedure with equipment is either to leave it in the hands of a helper who follows up behind, or drop it to the ground inside a conspicuous white bag. It is always best to catch pairs or parties of birds before commencing ringing. In the case of White-fronted Plovers, one can carry several bags containing up to 30 birds, whereas with Dikkops, only 4 or 5 can be dealt with at a time. It is wise to ring our indigenous waders as soon as possible after catching just in case they are brooding or feeding young.

Weather and Locality

For coastal birds it is imperative that catching takes place on very dark and moonless nights, the best conditions being a heavy fog or mist which tends to keep the birds on the ground.

The terrestrial waders are also caught most easily on moonless nights but the moon always brings more birds out to feed, and catches can be correspondingly better. The best times to catch are while the moon is waxing to half, or waning from half. Full moon is too bright, and one has to limit one's catching time to moon-rise or moon-set.

Except along sandy shores, very quiet nights generally prove poor for wader hand-netting. Over short grass, for instance, the sound is magnified, and the approach has to be extremely silent for a catch to be made. Ideal conditions are a light breeze which both keeps the dew off the grass and brings the birds out to feed.

Hunting grounds for waders at night are sandy beaches, golf-courses, aerodromes, playing fields, dirt roads, burnt-off veld, salt pans and the borders of dams and pans. Over such terrain one is likely to catch anything from Caspian Plovers to Ethiopian Snipe.

The Catch

The actual netting of the bird involves several stages. Upon locating the bird one must drop everything that rattles or creaks - this is usually the spare torch and skeleton kit which is kept in a white bird-bag. Footwear (usually "slip-slops") ought to be kicked off and the approach made barefoot, unless one has a silent pair of rubber soled shoes. Once within about 5 or 6 yards from the bird, the net must be brought over the shoulder and kept elevated just above the torch beam. Nothing at all must come between the beam and the bird. When within netting range, the net must be lowered fairly slowly so as to prevent "swishing", and then quickly the last foot or so. One does not have to pounce at birds, except sometimes on very quiet nights, or with wary species like Crowned or Black-winged Plovers.

Along popular beaches, or in places where there is artificial light, waders are usually more wary and difficult to catch, and even more difficult to recapture. However, naive birds (those not previously captured or pursued) are always easier to net, especially in deserted localities.

Working from a car is especially effective, since the headlights dazzle the bird so much that only a fairly weak torch is necessary for the follow-up to the catch. The procedure is to stop the car as near to the bird as possible, focus the torch, switch out the headlights and approach the victim with one's footfalls muffled by the noise of the engine.

Conclusion

By following the above modus operandi, the ringer can net reasonable numbers of waders that are difficult, if not impossible, to catch by other methods. Although a wide variety of both indigenous and palaeartic waders can be caught, the greatest success is undoubtedly with the Dikkops, Coursers, and Plovers, all of which warrant more study in Southern Africa.