

RINGING ON THE KAROO

By: J.M. Winterbottom,  
c/o FitzPatrick Institute,  
University of Cape Town,  
RONDEBOSCH, Cape.

It has for long been realised that the two most profitable lines of bird ringing in South Africa are the ringing of northern-breeding migrants and the regular ringing of birds in the same place, week after week, month after month and year after year. Sometimes the two can be combined, as with

waders at Rondevlei and swallows on the Witwatersrand. For ordinary land birds, however, regular ringing in the same place has been attempted rather rarely, though the value of the results has been well shown by Mrs. Rowan's analysis of Mr. R.A. Reed's ringing at Bryanston. Such regular ringing, however, has hitherto only been done in urban and suburban environments. In 1971, I decided to try what could be discovered in a completely rural area and to see how the results of this compared with those from more urban areas. It is too soon to draw conclusions yet but some account of the actual process and the problems involved may be of interest.

The site of my ringing is a farm called Tabakland, in the Prince Albert District of the Cape. The farm is inhabited only by one coloured family. It lies some seven or eight miles from the hamlet of Klaarstroom and about 25 miles from the small townships of Prince Albert and De Rust. It is in the valley of the Groot Rivier, a small (despite its name) but almost perennial river, between the Swartberg Mts. to the south and the Witteberg Mts. to the north. The valley itself is mostly under irrigation, chiefly lucerne but also orchards of peach, apricot, plum, fig and walnut; and the stream-banks are lined with trees and bushes, mostly Acacia and Rhus, but in one place with a dense stand of poplars, which is virtually birdless. There are two small dams.

The surrounding veld is karoo, of the type called by Acocks, Karroid Broken Veld; but since no attempt has been made to catch a few scattered birds there, this need not be further considered here.

I had intended to use both nets and walk-in traps to catch the birds but, owing to the fact that it proved impossible to discover any place where ground-feeding birds concentrated, the latter method proved fruitless.

Ringing was carried out for a week every month. I soon found that it was necessary to move the nets to new sites every day, since the birds quickly got used to avoiding them. Even on the best sites, the second day brought in a very small catch. Then, too, the bird concentration points changed from month to month. When the peaches or figs are ripe, the orchards proved most rewarding sites; at other times, the stream-bed yielded most birds; when the Cape Weavers were nesting in a reed-bed in one of the dams, nets on the dam wall were profitable. In February and March, 1973, there were good rains and this changed the whole pattern of bird distribution by providing food all over the veld. If one found a flock feeding in one particular place and erected the nets there, the birds, of course, departed. Prior to the rains, however, they soon returned because there were few other feeding places equally good; after the rains, there were so many other good sites available that they did not need to and our total successful captures sank to a very low level.

Owing to the wide dispersal of water, in the irrigation canals, river, dams and tanks the setting of nets at water, which I had found so profitable in South West Africa, was useless at Tabakland, even during the drought.

Another trouble was wind. On at least four days out



Succulent mountain scrub above Welwelkloof.

of six, it was calm until about 10 a.m., when a wind sprang up which, at best, made the nets deplorably visible and at worst, blew them down, all too often into thorny vegetation from which they were disentangled with difficulty.

Four species made up 73 % of the catch - Cape Sparrow, Pale White-eye and Cape and Masked Weavers. White-backed Mousebirds (despite their ability to disentangle themselves from the net) and Cape Robins were the next most numerous of the 42 species caught to date. One of the rarer species caught was a Lesser Honeyguide and another was Levaillant's Cisticola, these, in each case, being the only records for the Prince Albert District.

For scientific analysis, it is the recaptures, rather than the totals ringed that are important. The overall average is 12 % of the birds ringed; but this is tending to increase and in the first five months of 1973, 14 % of the birds caught had already been ringed. The oldest bird so far recorded is a male Cape Weaver, recaptured for the second time 578 days after it was originally ringed.

Tabakland farmhouse, from the south.

