TECHNIQUES

TRAPPING WADERS AT THE NEST

By: R. Summers,
c/o Percy FitzPatrick Institute,
U.C.T., Rondebosch 7700.

The majority of waders ringed in southern Africa are those which breed in the northern hemisphere. However, Africa has its own set of breeding waders; the Black Oystercatcher, Avocet, Stilt, Snipe and various plovers, whose movements, population dynamics, etc. have received little study. Most ringing of these species has been restricted to pulli whose survival to fledgling status is often low. The lack of full-grown birds probably reflects their difficulty in trapping. The following notes may therefore be of some interest to those intending to study African breeding waders.

I have used the following technique in Scotland, and with two colleagues, have trapped over 100 waders in two seasons. These were mainly Ringed Plover and European Oystercatcher, with small numbers of Redshank, Snipe and Curlew. Also I have caught a few Kittlitz and White-fronted Plovers in South Africa.

DESIGN: To make a trap which will be suitable for birds up to Oystercatcher size, one requires a length of chicken wire 45 x 200 cm formed into the shape as shown in Fig. 1 and then roofed. The final article should approximate Fig. 2. One can make a smaller trap (20 x 120 cm) if only intending to catch small plovers. Four pegs are required to keep the trap in position.

OPERATION: Find a wader nest and place the trap over it such that the nest is in the position as seen in Fig. 1. This is critical. If the trap is placed over the nest so that the latter is near the back or sides, the bird may false-brood outside the trap. Also if the nest is in direct line with the entrance the bird will walk out again. The trap should therefore be placed as shown, and with the entrance facing the ringer's direction of approach. The trap entrance should be adjusted so that it is just wide enough for the bird to get through. Pegs are pushed through the wire and into the ground keeping the trap steady. Then retire.

The "normal" behaviour to the trap by the nest owner is as follows (as seen in European Oystercatcher): once the ringer has departed from the scene the bird reappears in about 5 minutes and lands some 50 m from the trap. It approaches the trap and then starts circling at a radius of 25 m but getting closer and closer all the time. This circling may be interspersed with periods of standing, or short retreats from the trap. After about 15 minutes the bird circles within inches of the trap, sometimes pecking at the mesh. It eventually concentrates its activities near the entrance, as the nest is closest to the trap wall at this point and about 20 minutes later, the bird enters and settles on the eggs.

We gave the bird a moment or two on the eggs and then walked over to the trap. The bird rises from the eggs, moves to the back of the trap and pushes with the bill trying to effect an exit.

Only when the ringer is about 10 m from the trap does the bird panic and start to flap about, so the last few metres should be covered quickly and the bird subdued.

20-25 minutes was the usual trapping time though 4 minutes a record. If the bird is not showing signs of entry after 20-25 minutes (i.e. not concentrating its activities at the trap entrance), the trap must be removed, and 30 minutes must be regarded as a maximum for the bird to be kept off its eggs. Sometimes the drive to incubate will be low (e.g. before a clutch is complete or in hot weather) and one must accept failure.

The advantages of this type of nest trap are that it is simple to make and operate - there are no strings attached. Also the bird is not startled by dropping doors or other moving parts so there is no danger of egg breakage. In all the nests we followed up after trapping the adult(s) no desertions were recorded and we were able to ring the chicks as well.

This trap may also be suitable for other ground nesters, e.g. terns, coursers, etc.

It goes without saying that the knowledge of this technique must remain within the ringing circle. In the wrong hands the elimination of local breeding populations would be quite possible.

Fig. 1

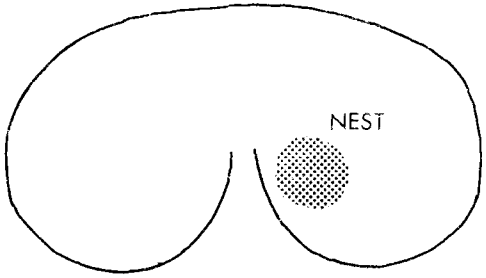

Fig. 2