

BAT RINGING

Mrs S. Sowler
Box 142
UMKOMAAS
Natal 4170

Ornithologists may like to forget that although the class Aves contains the majority of species of airborne vertebrates, it does not contain all. The class Mammalia also has its fair share, mainly in the order Chiroptera. Bats are not so varied in appearance as birds, but they do have a wide variety of feeding habits and like birds, in any ecological study, it is necessary to mark them in some way.

The smaller microchiroptera can easily be ringed by slipping an Incoloy U-shaped bat band around the forearm and squeezing the two edges together. This then slips up and down the humerus without falling off or causing injury.

Marking the larger megachiroptera is much more difficult. These are the fruit bats of which we have two common species in South Africa. They are; Epomophorus wahlbergi, Wahlbergs Epauletted Fruit Bat and Rousettus aegyptiacus, The Cape Fruit Bat. Their forearms have a much wider section of wing membrane attached to the upper edge. In order to put a band around the forearm, a parallel slit must be made in the forearm next to the humerus. I have used both the bat bands and now the bird bands for this job. The problem with the former is that the bat tends to squeeze the band with its teeth and so cause injury to and inflammation of the wing.

Catching fruit bats is obviously a nocturnal occupation and I envy all you bird ringers who can detach your birds from mist nets in reasonable light conditions. I struggle in the bush, often standing up to my calves in water, trying to free a fighting, squawking, finger-biting bat out of a net, by torch-

light!

I sling my mist nets across streams in a clearing in the forest at about dusk and wait up to five hours for a capture. Sometimes nothing blunders into the net and sometimes, particularly if I get a vociferous individual, (affectionately called a "squeaker"), as many as ten may deposit themselves into the net pockets.

Bats are not the only creatures which may fly into the net. I have had wagtails, Natal robins and three species of kingfisher, including one Giant Kingfisher whose dagger-like beak I underestimated!

However the worst mistake I ever made was with a Wood Owl which tangled itself up in the fine mesh. I had never handled an owl before and promptly set about freeing it in the same way I do with a fruit bat - feet out first. I gently got hold of a foot in order to disentangle it, when I was shocked to feel sharp pains in my hand as the talons sank in. It took several minutes for the bird to relax sufficiently for me to snatch my hand away. So that was one useful lesson learnt; owls have strong feet and very sharp claws.

I have been banding fruit bats now for twelve months, resulting in a total of just over three hundred bats caught with a 6% recapture rate. A short while ago I recaptured the sixth bat I had ever banded. Exactly one week later in the same place, I caught the seventh! Quite a coincidence.

So please, if you see any fruit bats with bird rings round their forearms, don't be alarmed, they're mine!