

SOME NOTES ON RINGING PASSERINE PULLI

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Passerine pulli are not as often ringed as some colonial breeders like herons or certain seabirds. Thus less information is available on the best time and ring sizes for the different species. Some useful information on this subject was gained while ringing pulli of 24 species during the 1978/79 breeding season on a farm near Pietermaritzburg. This may serve as a general guideline for ringing the pulli of a wider range of species.

The "ideal age" to ring passerine pulli is, as stated in the Bird Ringers Manual, "when the pin feathers are fully formed and not more than about 3 mm of web has sprouted from the tips". It is of course very important to ring the pulli at the right age as their development is generally very rapid and they might jump from the nest if this is attempted at too late a stage. Although some species can be ringed at quite a late stage, it is better to do it as early as possible.

To handle pulli is not always easy because they are so small and out of proportion. A little practice however, takes care of this problem. A second practical problem is that the proximal part of the tarsi is often very thick and thus great care should be taken in fitting the ring distally thereby not injuring the thicker part.

Chin-spot Batis Batis molitor

This species has a fairly long nestling period (17 - 18 days) and can be ringed as late as the 13th day when the primaries have grown to about 5 - 10mm. It is however easier to handle the chicks at about 11 days (the "ideal age") as they are

still quite inactive at this stage. A 2,3mm ring should be used as the tarsi are quite thick and a 1,8mm, which usually fits adults perfectly, can not even close! As all the Batis spp. are of similar size, this will probably hold true for most of these species.

Yellow-eyed Canary Serinus mozambicus and Streaky-headed Seedeater Polioptila gularis

These species have fairly long nestling periods but are early "jumpers" (they scatter from the nest when touched) and should be ringed not later than the "ideal age". The pulli sometimes differ as much as 3 days in age and this can present a problem as they can not all be ringed on the same day. The best advice here is to ring whatever you can and leave quietly. For the Yellow-eyed Canary a 1,8mm ring usually fits well but a 2,3mm can be fitted. For the Streaky-headed Seedeater a 2,3mm should be fitted.

Bar-throated Apalis Apalis thoracica

These pulli can be ringed when the primary webs are about 5mm. Although the nest opening is usually fairly large and the chicks easy to remove, great care should be taken not to damage the delicate nest. On returning the chicks, be sure to keep those ever-grasping feet clear of the rim of the nest opening. The best way to return them is tail first but make sure they do not land on their backs. A 1,8mm ring fits well but it was found in some cases that the tarsi are too thick and it is best not to ring such pulli as a 2,3mm ring is usually too big for adults and might be a hazard in later life.

Cape White-eye Zosterops pallidus

These are early "jumpers" again and should be ringed at the "ideal age" which is around 7 - 8 days. The chicks often damage the nest by pulling out some nesting material when lifted and care should be taken to minimize this damage. A 2,3mm is the best fit as the tarsi are fairly thick.

Tawny-flanked Prinia Prinia subflava

It is often difficult to get the chicks out of the nest as the opening is usually small and tightly woven. Consequently care should be taken to do minimum damage to the nest. It is good practice to support it with one hand while removing the chicks. Remember those ever-grasping feet when returning the pulli. A 1,8mm fits well.

Fiscal Shrike Lanius collaris

This species can be ringed fairly late (12 - 13th day) when the primaries have 5 - 10mm of web. A 3,0mm stainless steel fits perfectly. Some of the chicks in a brood are usually smaller than the others, but ringing can be postponed until the smallest one is at the "ideal age".

Bronze Mannikin Lonchura cucullata and Blue Waxbill Uraeginthus angolensis

Nests of these species are often difficult to reach but otherwise present no problems. The nestling period is long, sometimes more than 20 days, and the chicks are good "sitters". Therefore they can be ringed quite late when the webs from the primaries are as much as 10mm from the pins. One or two chicks are always younger than the rest and it is best to ring the whole brood when the youngest reach the "ideal age". A 1,8mm ring fits well for both species.

White-bellied Sunbird Nectarinia talatala

These pulli should not be ringed later than the 11th day, the "ideal age" being reached on the 9th or 10th day. It is best to support the nest when removing the chicks because the free-hanging rests in particular fall easily if the supporting part is damaged. A 1,8mm fits well.

Nedicky Cisticola fulvicapilla

The "ideal age" is the best time to ring these pulli, as with the previous species. The chicks are often difficult to remove as they sit very closely in the delicate nest and thus care should be taken when removing them. A 1,8mm fits well.

Black-eyed Bulbul Pycnonotus barbatus

The chicks develop very quickly and usually leave the nest on the 12th or 13th day. They should not be ringed later than the 6th day, the "ideal age" being reached on the 7th day. A 3,0mm fits well.

Cape Robin Cossypha caffra and White-browed Scrub Robin
Erythropygia leucophrys

A 3,0mm is a perfect fit for the Cape Robin while the White-browed Scrub Robin takes a 2,3mm. The pulli of both these species are usually very tightly packed in the nest and often difficult to remove. Both should be ringed at the "ideal age".

Fan-tailed Cisticola Cisticola juncidis

If you can find a nest, the chicks should be ringed no later than the 10th day. At this stage the nest opening is quite big and it is fairly easy to remove the chicks. It is important however to keep the feet of the chicks clear of the sides when returning them. A 1,8mm fits.

Two non-passerine species, the Red-chested Cuckoo Cuculus solitarius the the Speckled Mousebird Colius striatus were also ringed. The cuckoo should be ringed with a 4,3mm ring on the 14th or 15th day. Because of the short tarsi of this species, it is difficult to handle and two people may be necessary to do a good job.

The best advice for ringing mousebird pulli is: do not attempt it. If however the exact age of the pulli is known they could be ringed on the 8th day and only on the 8th day. From the 9th day onwards the chicks will jump out of the nest and will fail to settle down when returned. The second reason why ringing of these pulli should not be attempted is that the tarsi are much thinner than those of the adults. Consequently the 4,3mm rings which are normally used for adults slip very easily over their feet. Therefore, if ringing is attempted, the ring should be fitted with a slight overlap.

In some grassland species like Prinias and Cisticolas it is often easier to ring the pulli a day or two after they have left the nest. This is often when one first realizes the presence of the pulli. These young can be caught easily by hand (or hat!) but they must be ringed and released on the spot so as not to put too much distance between them and the adults.

The safety of the brood must always come first, so take care not to damage the nest or the surrounding vegetation and get rid of the faecal sacs some distance from the nest. If there is any doubt whether a chick is at the right age to be ringed - don't. It is not much fun searching for a small hopping bird in long grass.

ANNOUNCEMENT

REQUEST FOR PHOTOGRAPHS

Safring News is desperately short of suitable photographs to make the publication more varied. Correctly exposed colour slides and black and white prints of ringing techniques and activities or general interest shots of birds would be very welcome. All pictures will be fully credited.