\+ : 10-12 g
++ : 15-16 g
+++ : approx 25 g

A tame Rock Kestrel weighing 200 g was fed on mice cleaved in half. Before cleaving the mice weighed 30 g. The bird was able to consume 1½ mice and then had a visibly bulging crop. Allowing for some loss in the butchering process it can be estimated that the bird ate between 35-40 g.

Observations on isolated birds are of limited value but other ringers may be able to add their own observations and allow a more valid picture of what crop contents means in terms of mass.

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HAND NETTING AT NIGHT

Frank von Maltitz.

The technique of catching birds such as nightjars, coursers, plovers and some waders at night by means of a torch and hand net is not new. However, there would seem to be so many mis-apprehensions about the technique that a description of the method used by us may be of interest to ringers interested in trying this system.

The Marsh Owl Asio capensis has the dangerous habit in the Transvaal of sitting in the road at night, and can be netted quite easily provided there is no moon. The cars are driven at a reasonable speed, so that the owl can be spotted when still so far away that the speed can be reduced to a crawl, and the owl is not frightened away on the final approach. The distance at which it is necessary to stop the car has to be found by experience - it varies from night to night and with different groups of owls, is apparently affected by the amount of wind, and is much closer than one would expect.

It is not necessary to use a powerful torch, as the idea is not to dazzle the bird but to provide a light barrier behind which the trapper is not visible to the bird. Indeed, we have on occasion used a rather weak two-celled torch such as is kept in the cubby-hole by the average motorist.

When the car is close enough, it is stopped with the engine running to mask any noise made by the operator. The headlights are left on while the operator leaves the car and switches on the torch, (taking care that the inside lights of the car do not go on during the operation) but they must be switched off as soon as he has left the car and begins his approach. The torch is held at arm's length to obviate the possibility that his feet penetrate the light barrier formed by it - if the owl suddenly looks down towards one's feet it is a sure sign that the torch is not being held far enough forward, and that the feet are showing. The feet should be bare to reduce the noise of approach as much as possible, and it is sometimes wise on gravelly roads to increase engine speed slightly to provide additional cover.

The owl normally shows no sign of being aware of either the car or the ringer, and continues an apparently casual examination of the surrounding landscape. If it appears nervous, it is best to move forward only when the owl is not looking directly towards the ringer.

It is not wise to take a wild swipe at the bird as soon as it is within range. A handle of about four feet in length (1,2 metres) is adequate, with a net diameter of about half this. When the ringer is within easy reach, say 1,5 to 2 metres, he waits until the owl is looking in the other direction and then merely places the net over it. There is usually a slight squeak of astonishment on the part of the owl, and then the inevitable struggle to escape.

The net itself should be pressed over the bird to control it while it is being extricated, and gloves are not necessary.

The technique is quite fascinating, and is an ideal introduction to bird ringing for any member of the public, who can watch the whole operation from the car. We used it once to catch a Temminck's Courser outside our hotel in the middle of Potgietersrust - luckily there were no street lights!

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