

BEHAVIOUR CHANGES IN RETRAPPED BIRDS

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On being caught in a mist net, most birds struggle to free themselves and continue to struggle while being released from the net and while being handled for examination and ringing. Different species tend to have slightly different habits; flycatchers and sunbirds struggle frantically, but would never think of biting, canaries lie passive and sing, small kingfishers lie still, but swing their heads from side to side, doves and cuckoo-shrikes cry or mew and may hold a wing vertically between efforts to escape, shrikes and weavers bite, herons and Giant Kingfishers Megaceryle maxima try to stab your eye out, and so on. However, individuals caught for a second time (or third or fourth) time, often show changes from normal species behaviour.

Generally a bird is more passive when recaptured and it is sometimes possible to know a bird is a retrap before the ring is seen. This applies particularly to bulbuls and robins and also to many weavers, females especially. They are seldom as tangled in the net as is a "new" bird, struggle less while being removed and do not bite, or bite less while being removed and do not bite, or bite less while being handled. There are some species which bite first time and are so furious at being caught again, that they bite even more fiercely; male Spotted-backed Weavers Ploceus cucullatus, various shrikes and the Fork-tailed Drongo Dicrurus adsimilis. It would appear that being caught a second time is much less traumatic than is the initial trapping. This is very obvious in the Sombre Bulbul Andropadus importunus which is liable to go into shock when handled and may actually drop dead, but this never happens at second capture, even if it is a couple of years after the first.

The species whose behaviour alters for the worse (from my point of view) are mainly predators and possibly fairly intelligent, which might account for their being less frightened and more angry at second capture, but I have never been bitten by a Red-billed Firefinch Lagonostica senegala and many tiny species which do not normally bite, attempt to eat me when we meet again. Kingfishers invariably bite when recaptured, although they seldom struggle and an immature Brown-hooded Kingfisher Halcyon albiventris caught eight times in two

months, became positively vicious. Perhaps the nastiest personality change occurred in the Grey Hornbill Tockus nasutus, who was a perfect gentleman the first time we met (although he did struggle until released from the net and clutched to my bosom) and lay quietly on the table while one-handedly I ringed, weighed and measured him. Two months later, upside down in exactly the same net, his fury knew no bounds. He waited (quietly) until he had been disentangled and then bit. I was so surprised I nearly dropped him. Checking his state of moult proved impossible by myself; it needed two strong hands to control his body and immobilize that toothed nut-cracker of a beak. I hope I do not catch him again.

On the other hand, a Squacco Heron Ardeola ralloides, whose beak proved a menace the first time, was quite docile the second time (about half an hour after being ringed and released!) and a young male Little Sparrowhawk Accipiter minulus, caught while stealing birds from my nets, bit as hard as he could (which was not very hard) and drove his needle sharp talons into my hand the first time, but at the next four captures was completely resigned to being handled, sat on my arm afterwards for a few seconds and then flew straight back to the nets to see if lunch was waiting.

It would seem that most retrapped birds have a feeling of *déjà vu* and are resigned; possibly they are also aware that nothing terrible is going to happen. This applies to both timid and bold species, as practically all retrapped birds struggle less in the net and their behaviour in hand suggests that they are too annoyed at being caught again to be particularly afraid; the timid become bold and the bold, impossible, although there are always some exceptions.

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