

DIGITAL *discovering*



THOMSETT/BAHAA-EL-DIN

Digital photography has taken the art of bird photography into a new realm of science; photographs can now capture flight and freeze movements to reveal behaviours and patterns previously unrecorded and often unexpected. It also has another use little appreciated by birders and photographers: the recording of rings and ring numbers on wild birds.

In the past couple of years, we have had the opportunity to photograph many raptors in the wild, using digital cameras. On closer inspection, our images of three birds revealed not only the rings they sported but enough of the numbers to divulge their individual identities and histories. No special tricks were used to enhance the images involved – they were simply enlarged to reveal their details.

The first was a Rock Kestrel that bred on South Africa's West Coast in an old barn belonging to Dan and Graham Bull. These Honorary Rangers of the West Coast National Park told us of the

Above The colour-ringed and resighted Lappet-faced Vulture in Namibia.

birds and we ringed the adults and four youngsters in late 2006. Several months ago we returned to check on their progress and managed to photograph a kestrel which was sitting obligingly on the ledge of the barn. The bird, accustomed to Dan and Graham going to and fro, allowed a close approach and helpfully put its best foot forward while studying our progress.

Enlarging the image, without recourse to Photoshop, the last two digits of the number (–20) were clearly visible. This allowed the kestrel to be identified as the adult female (and not a youngster as we had first thought), which had been ringed in October 2006 and was still present some three years later, breeding with her mate, also ringed, at the edge of Langebaan Lagoon.

The second instance was a more spectacular find: a ringed Osprey. On 17 December 2008, en route to the De Hoop Nature Reserve near Bredasdorp, Western Cape, we encountered and photographed an unusual sight: an Osprey on a telephone pole. By edging closer, we managed to stop opposite the bird, continuing to photograph it all the while.

However, it was the first images taken of the bird from the front that delivered the surprise when we downloaded our photographs that evening. They revealed that the bird was ringed and by chance we were able to see enough of the metal ring to read the entire number (44743). The only section not visible was the prefix of the alphanumeric code that indicates the size of the ring. While this is not really important to identify the bird, it is to know whom to notify of the bird's appearance.

Using an international raptor list-server, we traced the bird to the Finnish Bird Ringing Unit at the University of Helsinki, Finland. They informed us that the ring was indeed one of theirs and that the bird had been ringed as a nestling on 9 July 2008, near

Oulu, Finland. The distance between the site of ringing and the site where we observed it was 10 986 kilometres and the time elapsed between ringing and resighting was a mere five months and eight days. In addition, according to the South African Bird Ringing Unit, this is only the fifth re-sighting of a ringed Osprey in South Africa and it is the most southerly sighting of the five records.

The third instance was a Lappet-faced Vulture photographed near Halali, Etosha, on 17 April 2009, during an African raptor expedition from East Africa through to South Africa by Simon Thomsett and Laila Bahaa-el-din. 'We were looking at a lioness when the Lappet-faced Vulture flew overhead and we managed to take five images. We went back to lion watching and, on checking the photographs that evening, we were very surprised to see the bird was colour ringed, with a combination blue over yellow over orange on one leg and metal over blue over green on the other.'



KEVIN SHAW

The sub-adult Osprey photographed on a telephone pole near Bredasdorp, in the Western Cape. Inspection of photographs revealed a ring (not apparent in this image) and the number 44743. This was sufficient to identify the raptor as a Finnish-ringed bird that had flown almost 11 000 kilometres.

About three days later, Thomsett and Bahaa-el-din were staying with raptor-ophile Peter Bridgeford, noticed a photograph of a colour-ringed vulture on his wall and pulled up their photograph of the Lappet-faced for him to look at. To their combined amazement, it was the same bird ringed as a nestling just less than 10 years previously at Kriessrus, Namib Naukluft Park. As Bridgeford is Namibia's foremost vulture expert and ringer this shouldn't have been a surprise, but he was unknown to these visitors from East Africa. The bird had flown 478 kilometres to Etosha and, to Bridgeford's delight, it was his first ring return from a living bird rather than the more depressing standard report of a dead vulture poisoned or found drowned in a farm reservoir.

All three records indicate that digital photographs of wild birds have an unsung use. By looking for and enlarging images of birds and the rings they carry, we can enhance our knowledge of movements and residency in wild birds. Not all will reveal this degree of detail, but a good camera, a steady hand and patience may bring previously unseen surprises and rewards.

ROB SIMMONS, FITZPATRICK INSTITUTE, UCT; KEVIN SHAW, CAPENATURE; LAILA BAHAA-EL-DIN AND SIMON THOMSETT, AFRICAN RAPTOR EXPEDITION, NAIROBI



ROB SIMMONS

The ringed Rock Kestrel, photographed sitting in the barn entrance near Langebaan, where it bred. Enlarging the photograph revealed the ring's last two digits (20), which enabled it to be identified as the breeding female and not one of the youngsters.



The ultimate
visual experience



Inspired Optics

The silence of nature resounds with life. Victory FL binoculars are designed by Carl Zeiss to inspire discovery. The high-performance objectives with FL glass focus on the distant scenery with detailed perfection. Bright images are enhanced by the powerful contrast of colour and texture. The result is an unrivalled visual experience.

www.zeiss.co.za



For information on Dealers and Specifications Please visit:
www.zeiss.co.za
Or call:
(011) 886 - 9510



We make it visible.