

LANIOTURDUS

Volume 47 No 4

November 2014

Namibia Bird Club



since 1962

Journal of the Namibia Bird Club
www.namibiabirdclub.org

Ringling with Poles: Barberspan Ringers Conference 27 November 2013 to 03 December 2013

Neil Thomson

batqs@afol.com.na

All photographs in this article are © Neil Thomson

At first glance the title of the conference, Ringing with Poles, did not seem to make much sense. Anyone who has used mistnets to capture birds will know that it is well-nigh impossible to use them without poles. Reading further though, it became apparent that the conference was presented by SAFRING in conjunction with Akcja Baltycka. The names of the members of the Gdansk ringing team (Magda Remisiewicz, Krzysztof Mus, Krzysztof Stepniewski, Katarzyna Stepniewska, Justyna Szulc and Aleksandra Niemc) left no doubt whatsoever that the Poles in question were Polish ringers and not devices to hold up mistnets.

After arriving at Barberspan on 28 November 2013 and introducing ourselves to those already there Gudrun and I had the opportunity to inspect the wader traps along the pan shoreline and we got to ring a couple of the small waders caught.



The conference proper started in midmorning the following day after a planned early morning ringing session. The weather, however, did not play ball at all with a howling

northerly wind relocating the top soil of the Northwest Province's maize fields to the Free State's maize fields which made mistnetting almost impossible.



The conference opened with a display of various types of bird traps made by Shonie Rajmakers. I was sorely tempted to buy a raptor trap but as I do not have a license to use a bal-chatri I thought it better not to do so until I had discussed raptor ringing and raptor traps with Holger Kolberg who is responsible for the issuing of ringing permits in Namibia.

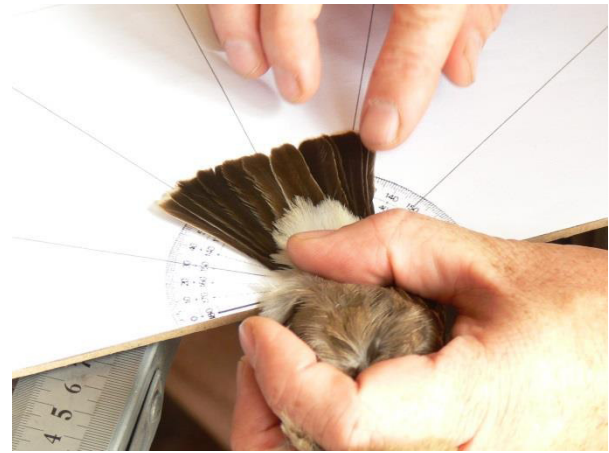


A wide variety of papers was presented at the conference; too

many to mention in detail here but Kobie Raijmakers presented two excellent papers on the identification of short-tailed cisticolas and reed-bed warblers. Unfortunately no handouts were available and there was just too much information to take in particularly as several of the species do not occur in Namibia. A number of papers dealt directly or indirectly with moult and these brought home the importance of recording moult scores, something which was almost incomprehensible to me when I started training as a ringer.

Derek Engelbrecht gave a talk on his use of camera traps particularly at the nests of ground nesting larks. In addition to the expected results regarding frequency of feeding and prey fed to nestlings the traps also produced some unexpected results such as the cannibalism of a dead chick by a parent bird and the predation of a nest on the ground by a boomslang which had been regarded as purely an arboreal predator.

Steven Evans presented his work on the use of birds' tails in flight and we were later able to observe him tracing the wings of birds and measuring the tails opened to varying degrees.



Ali Halajian who works on ectoparasites (generally hippoboscid flies, ticks, lice and mites) described the various methods of collecting them. We were able to observe his use of fumigation jars to catch parasites. These are jam jar sized glass jars with holes in the lids. The jars are lined with plastic bags into which wads of chloroform soaked cotton wool are placed. The head of the captive bird is put through the hole in the lid and the bird is held in place by a flexible (and presumably airtight) collar. The lid is then screwed onto the jar with the body of the bird suspended inside where it is left for about ten minutes while the ectoparasites drop off. The bird is then kept in a birdbag for a further ten minutes or so for the numbing effect of the chloroform on the legs to wear off before it is released. Ali has discovered and described at least three species of louse new to science from ectoparasites caught in this manner.



Magda Remisiewicz gave a very interesting presentation entitled Wader Kamasutra which dealt with the breeding behavior of several species of waders ranging from monogamy to polygamy and polyandry and various combinations of these when more than one clutch is laid in a season.

What was of particular interest was watching the Polish ringing team at work. Magda Remisiewicz measured waders largely the way we measure birds using a stopped rule to measure the wing length and calipers to measure head length, culmen and tarsus. In addition she checked the birds for fat and moult in various places in addition to the primary flight feathers. She also checked the plumage of the Little Stints for vestiges of breeding plumage in order to separate adult from first year birds. The passerine ringing squad used some very different techniques which have been developed while ringing huge numbers of birds along the Baltic coast during the autumn migration. They work in teams of two with one ringing and one scribing. The ringer holds the bird in the right hand and the ring is applied with the pliers in the left hand irrespective of whether the ringer is right or left handed. Only one instrument is used for all measurements, this being an unstopped rule. The wing length,

wing formula, Kipps Index (the distance between the tip of the longest primary and the first secondary) and the tail length are all measured with this rule. The method of measuring the tail is very different from the method we use inserting a rule between the rectrices and the undertail coverts; they measure the top of the tail in a way that looks as if they are bending the bird in half. What was really impressive was the calibration of measurements. These ringers are trained in extreme accuracy of measurement and if a bird is measured by more than one ringer the measurements taken by each ringer will be exactly the same. Having observed this degree of accuracy I cannot help wondering whether the measurements taken by most ringers in southern Africa are of any value at all.

In addition to the formal presentations there was also plenty of opportunity to socialize and talk informally about ringing and capture techniques etc. One rather amusing anecdote concerned a trainee ringer who, after processing a Thick-billed Weaver, decided to kiss the bird (in Namibian terms this is probably tantamount to kissing a crocodile) with the net result that it was touch and go as to whether the lip would need stitching.

After several days of howling winds the rain started, further limiting the ringing opportunities so we had to settle for a bit of birding and atlasing instead. On the last morning we got up early and opened our nets in the garden of the guesthouse where we were staying with fairly good results including a number of what someone had dubbed the "Picasso bird" (Crested Barbet) on account of its strange colour scheme. These birds are really laidback in the hand,

hardly deserving the name “barbet” when compared with their extremely aggressive Black-collared and Acacia Pied Barbet cousins.

All in all I think that the conference was well worth the effort to get there and in addition to learning a lot we made many new contacts among the South African and Polish ringers.

