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Editorial

With funding for research projects becoming ever more difficult to secure more and more reliance is placed on the citizen scientist to help collect the data required for research. You and I who participate in atlassing, ringing, wetland counts, raptor road counts etc. are the citizen scientists, the amateurs, who provide much of the data from which the professionals are able to conduct their research.

In a way the wheel has turned a full circle. Some years ago (as far as I am aware around the mid 1970's) the school of thought was that research was purely the domain of the professionals and amateurs or citizen scientists were actively discouraged from data collection. A case in point is bird ringing where a policy was introduced whereby amateur ringing was only permitted if a project was registered. The immediate result of this was that many amateur ringers lost interest and threw in the towel. One cannot help wondering how much valuable data was lost through this short sighted approach. How many birds, that might have been ringed by

Chestnut Weaver Movements in Southern Africa

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The Chestnut Weaver *Ploceus rubiginosus* is found disjointly in south-western and in eastern Africa. The southern race occurs in Namibia, Botswana and Angola. It is a nomadic species and appears to move in response to rainfall in its arid environment (Braine & Braine 1971, Winterbottom 1971). Similarly, in eastern Africa its extensive movements are stimulated by rainfall, and occurrence is seasonal in most areas (Lewis & Pomeroy 1989). There is one published account of a long distance movement. A full grown bird ringed on 6 December 1974 at Ngulia, Kenya, was recovered on 3 May 1975 at Migwani, Kenya, a distance of 213 km (Backhurst 1977); the bird was caught and not released. Here the movements of Chestnut Weavers in southern Africa, based on ringing and published records, are briefly reviewed.

Results and Discussion

The ringing data for Chestnut Weavers was extracted in January 2011. A total of 5108 Chestnut Weavers have been ringed to this date, with 16 reports (11 recaptures and 5 recoveries). Of these reports, two birds were recoveries in Namibia involving long distance movements and the rest moved less than 7 km. Adult BC96737 was ringed on 6 September 2002 at Farm Blydskap by Bernd Brell, and recovered on 4 March 2004 at Ongenga, northern Namibia (Fig. 1, short blue line). The distance moved was at least 284 km and this record was published in a summary without details (Oschadleus & Brooks 2005). Adult male BH15335 was ringed on 25 January 2004 at Okapuka by Dirk Heinrich and recovered on 26 April 2007 at Onesi Village, northern Namibia, in a mahangu (pearl millet) field. The distance moved was at least 580 km, making this the greatest

distance moved for a ringed bird of this species in Africa (Fig. 1, long blue line). It is to be expected that more long distance movements for the Chestnut Weaver will be recorded as more weavers are ringed.

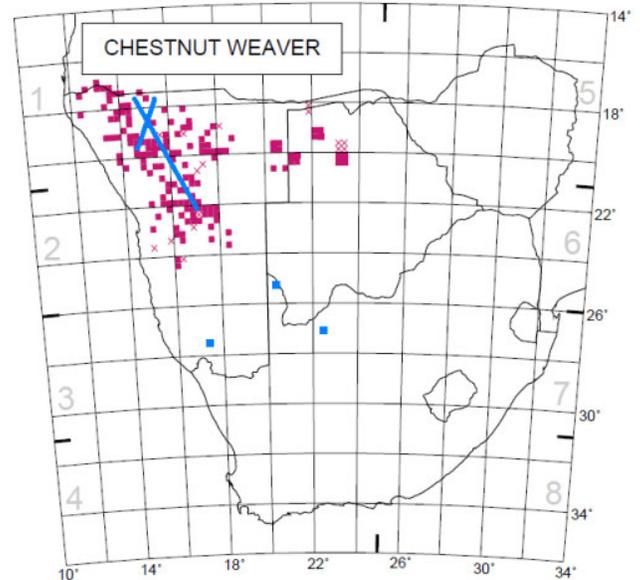


Fig 1. Distribution of Chestnut Weavers in Namibia and Botswana based on SABAP1; blue squares indicate additional out of range records and blue lines are long distance ringing recoveries (see text)

Several sightings outside of the usual range of the species indicate additional long distance movements. A sighting far south of its range in Namibia was made in April 1999 (Swanepoel 2005). A male in full breeding plumage and a female were observed for two days at the confluence of the Löwen and Fish Rivers, on farm Elizabeth 383 (Fig. 1, 27°11'S 17°40'E). The author noted that the birds were probably vagrants which moved south along the Fish River from the Kalkrand area. It was a wet year and the Fish River was still in flood. The distance from the nearest SABAP1 record in the Naukluft Mountains (2416AC) was 360 km SSE, or 350 km due south from the Kalkrand area.

Madel Whittington reported the first record of this species in South Africa at Nossob, in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, on 9 January

2011 (Whittington 2011). It was an adult male in full breeding plumage that was photographed and it remained in the camp area with Southern Masked-Weavers *Ploceus velatus* for three days. The closest known site for Chestnut Weavers to Nossob (Fig. 1, 25°25'S 20°35'E) is 285 km away in Namibia.

Two days later bird ringer Ben Smit saw an adult male in full breeding plumage on 14 January 2011 in the lodge garden at Tswalu Kalahari Reserve, Northern Cape (reported to Sabirdnet, 14 January 2011) (Fig. 1, 27°18'S 22°26'E). Again it was seen with a Southern Masked-Weaver and the Chestnut Weaver male started building a nest. A team of bird atlasers drove to Tswalu for that weekend and Tony Archer submitted a photo of this nest to PHOWN (Photos of Weaver Nests, http://weavers.adu.org.za/phown_vm.php?v_m=502) on 16 January. The bird was last seen at Tswalu lodge on 24 January (S Cunningham, pers. comms). The closest known site for Chestnut Weavers to Tswalu is 560 km. These minimum distances involved in these new South African records are less than the recovery distance recorded in Namibia of 580 km. It is possible that the same individual flew from Nossob to Tswalu, in which case it moved at least 275 km in 1 or 2 days.

Conclusion

The Chestnut Weaver is subject to seasonally erratic fluctuations in numbers and poorly understood dispersal and nomadism during the non-breeding season, but the species remains present throughout the year in northern and central Namibia (Herremans 1997). After breeding some numbers appear to move to the Kunene River as indicated by the long distance recoveries, and the large numbers roosting at the river (Thomson 2009), but with some overwintering in central Namibia (Thomson pers. comm.). The South African bird(s) appear to have moved in the opposite direction, probably in response to the large amount of rain that fell in the interior of southern Africa in January onwards.

Acknowledgements

Neil Thomson provided helpful comments on this paper.

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Footnote

The SAFRING recoveries may also be viewed on the SAFRING web:

BC96737:

http://afring.adu.org.za/m3/retrap_process.php?ringno=BC96737&inscription=safring

BH15335:

http://afring.adu.org.za/m3/retrap_process.php?ringno=BH15335&inscription=safring

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(According to Trevor Hardaker's Southern African Rare Bird News Reports at least two male Chestnut Weavers were seen south of Union's End in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park in the first week of March 2012. This species has thus appeared in small numbers well south of its recorded range in two consecutive years - Ed).

Of Net Eating Trees, Livestock, Domestic Animals and Other Creatures - the Joys of Ringing

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As a trainee ringer I heard many horror stories about unwanted creatures caught in or destroying mistnets. I read about a boomslang that had to be extricated from a net after it had become entangled while going after a struggling bird and also about a crocodile that grabbed an entangled Giant Kingfisher and dragged it and the net into a river. I saw the “monuments” erected at Farm Wiese to commemorate “Dirk’s Gemsbok Project” and “Holger and Dirk’s Sheep Project”. I later heard Graham Grieve talking about the giraffe that had walked through one of his nets and I saw the damage caused by bats which had become entangled in nets. But this sort of thing only happens to other people – right? Wrong!!

Charles Schulz, the creator of the comic strip “Peanuts”, often included a “kite eating tree” in the strip which always managed to “devour” Charlie Brown’s kite. After qualifying as a ringer some of the first encounters my new

and near pristine mistnets had were with “net eating trees”. It did not take me very long to find out that it is far easier to remove nets from long straight thorns than it is from short curved thorns but a net eating tree does not even have to have thorns in order to do substantial damage – twigs, bark, seedpods, fruits and even leaves are quite capable of tearing nets when one tries to free them. No matter how carefully one positions one’s nets the wind always seems to come from the wrong direction and the nets invariably get snagged and usually too high to be able to reach them to disentangle them. No matter how gently one tugs at the net it almost always rips.

So – with a little net eating tree damage to my, by then, not quite such pristine nets, we set off on a ringing expedition to the Kunene. It was here that I got my first taste of livestock damage. A net set to try to catch one of the Kunene specials, Cinderella Waxbill, attracted at least one goat which left more than one large hole in the net. But that was not the end of my experiences at Ehomba. I could only watch in horror from a distance as one of those long horned cattle strolled along parallel to one of my nets with the tip of one horn just snagging the net. And that was not all – I also had to watch helplessly from the same position as two large black pigs walked straight through the same net.

My next serious encounter with livestock was at Farm Teufelsbach. Here we set up a net adjacent to a water trough – needless to say there were no animals in sight when we did this. However – some time later, unseen by us, a flock of goats sneaked in and a number of them walked straight through the bottom shelf of the net. This would seem bad enough but the net could have been salvaged and cut down to form a three shelf net for use in culverts and other height restricted areas. Some goats, however, seeing their companions being snagged in the bottom shelf, decided to jump and left a number of large holes in the second shelf as well. I am still wondering whether I will be able to find a use for a two shelf net. Our suggestion that we should take