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 brought to Photoshop, the last two digits of the metal ring to read the entire number (44743). The only section not visible when 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 this is not really important to identify the bird, it is to know whom to notify. By looking for and 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 breeding female (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 Langbeana Lagoon.

The second instance was a more spectacular find: a ringed Osprey. On 17 December 2008, on 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.’

About three days later, Thomsett and Bahaa-el-din were staying with raptor-philie 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. At 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 ring numbers 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.

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.

The colour-ringed and resighted Rock Kestrel, photographed sitting in the barn entrance near Langbeana, 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 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.’