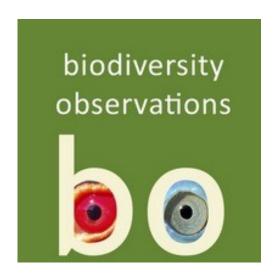
Garden bird ringing at 3 Florence Street, Oatlands, Mkhanda (Grahamstown): the closing chapter

Adrian JFK Craig



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Bird Ringing

Garden bird ringing at 3 Florence Street, Oatlands, Mkhanda (Grahamstown): the closing chapter

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Abstract

This is the third and final report summarizing 42 years of bird ringing in a garden in Mkhanda. In total, 2036 birds of 59 species were ringed, of which 217 individuals (27 species) were recaptured at least once, and 34 birds (17 species) were recovered dead.

Introduction

Bird-ringing provides the most useful information when the ringed individuals are re-encountered at some future date. This is most likely when ringers re-visit the same site repeatedly; recaptures not only provide valuable data on longevity and site fidelity (or movement and dispersal), but also on the timing of the annual cycle (e.g. moult and breeding condition) in different years. Thus most ringers focus on particular localities, and gardens are often conveniently secure areas for monitoring urban/suburban birds (e.g. Tyler 1979, Brown & Brown 2003, Thomson 2019a), and even birds of adjoining natural habitats (e.g. Hanmer 1989; Wilson & Medland 2020).

After 42 years at the same address in Oatlands, Mkhanda, Eastern Cape, South Africa, we found that living at a large property in an old house with constant maintenance requirements, and with regular water crises, was no longer a practical proposition. In two previous articles I have summarised my ringing activity in this garden (Craig 2007, 2013). Now that we have left, a final stock-taking seems appropriate. What have I learned from my sporadic captures at this site?

Study Site and Methods

The Oatlands area is an old suburb of Mkhanda, with well-established trees, including coral trees Erythrina caffra in adjoining gardens, and Australian flame trees Brachychiton acerifolius on the pavements. Our garden had a massive alien conifer (20 m tall, with the top lost to lightning some years before our arrival), a jacaranda Jacaranda mimosifolia (15 m) and a pin oak Quercus palustris (12 m, which fell victim to the polyphagous shot hole borer Euwallacea fornicatus in 2020 and was felled), as well as two rather spindly yellowwoods Podocarpus latifolius. These tall trees meant that a significant amount of bird activity was well above the height of mist-nets. We added a weeping boerboon Schotia brachypetala and a tree fuchsia Halleria lucida, which attracted nectarivores and other species. There were two birdbaths, but no other water features, and seed was provided somewhat irregularly in a hanging feeder on the jacaranda tree. Cats were discouraged with the aid of dogs, which generally ignored birds and learnt quickly not to approach mist-nets; a few doves have fallen victim to Jack Russell terriers over the years. There was a large lawn area and a mix of exotic and indigenous shrubs and flowering plants. This was all maintained by my wife, assisted by a weekly gardener, while I contributed only admiration.

My garden bird list was subject to strict criteria: it included only birds within my boundary, and in flight they had to be below the level of the gutters to be accepted (cf. Craig 2021). Ringing in the garden began in 1988. Most birds were captured in mist-nets, generally a 6 m net near one birdbath, and one (rarely two) 12-m nets in other areas. On a few occasions clap traps were placed below the seed feeder. Netting was opportunistic, on days with good weather when I was home all day (typically weekends, until retirement); there was no attempt to catch every month, or use a measured-effort protocol.

Results

The final tally of birds recorded in this garden was 103 species (see Appendix), but many of these species were not catchable – such as the Cape Crows *Corvus capensis* which perched regularly on the tallest tree. Nesting within the garden proper was rare, and the juvenile birds seen or captured were mostly attributable to the wider surroundings.

Capture rates were unpredictable; on some days no birds, sometimes fewer than five in a day, yet on five occasions more than 30 birds were caught in a day, with a record 40 birds in December 2007. Table 1 suggests that netting was more successful in late winter and spring than in summer (cf. Brown & Brown 2003), although there were both long-term changes in the local avifauna, and seasonal variations.

In total, 2036 birds of 59 species were ringed, of which 217 individuals (27 species) were recaptured at least once, and 34 birds (17 species) were recovered dead (Table 2). My personal interest has always been in small passerines, which have been the primary target; I soon stopped ringing Laughing Doves *Spilopedia senegalenis*, and they were released if captured.

Of the rings recovered from dead birds, there was no further information on the cause of death in eight cases: a Laughing Dove, Olive Thrush, Southern Fiscal, Cape White-eye, Amethyst Sunbird, Com-

Table 1: Number of occasions on which particular numbers of birds were caught per day in different months.

No. birds caught	1-5	6-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	Net days
January	8	2	2			12
February	12	1	3		1	17
March	11	9	4	1		25
April	9	6	1			16
May	24	6	5		1	36
June	8	5	2	2	1	18
July	7	5	4	4	1	21
August	10	7	9	1		27
September	11	9	12	2		34
October	6	4	9	2		21
November	4	5	4			13
December	7	5	3		1	16
No. days	117	64	58	12	5	256

mon Starling, Cape Weaver and Village Weaver. However, 10 birds were hit by cars (two Olive Thrushes, two Southern Boubous, a Speckled Mousebird, Green Woodhoopoe, Fiscal Flycatcher, Cape White-eye, Red-winged Starling and Southern Grey-headed Sparrow). A further eight were killed by cats (three Cape White-eyes, a Laughing Dove, Cape Robin-chat, Bokmakierie, Bar-throated Apalis and Amethyst Sunbird), while six fell victim to other predators: two ringed Cape White-eyes were killed in the net by Southern Fiscals (and an unringed Cape White-eye was killed by a Burchell's Coucal), a Village Weaver was killed by an unidentified raptor, and the rings of three Cape Weaver were recovered from pellets at a nest of Spotted Eagle Owls. One Village Weaver was a window casualty, and a Cape Robin-chat was the unintended victim of a rat trap. So cats and collisions were the main causes of death identified.

 Table 2. Birds ringed at 3 Florence Street, Mkhanda, 1988-2022.

Species	Ringed	Recaptured	Recovered	Maximum interval
Cape White-eye	403	46	5	100 months
Village Weaver	269	20	3	62 months
Cape Weaver	246	21	4	164 months
Speckled Mousebird	176	28	2	38 months
Southern Grey-headed Sparrow	132	6	1	22 months
Olive Thrush	105	25	4	55 months
Dark-capped Bulbul	96	8		63 months
Bronze Mannikin	92	4		13 months
Red-faced Mousebird	66	1		59 months
Common Fiscal	40	12	1	36 months
Greater Double-collared Sunbird	38	2		123 months
Cape Robin-chat	35	15	2	70 months
Amethyst Sunbird	30	1	2	145 months
Common Starling	28	1	1	13 months
Red-winged Starling	26	1	1	72 months
Black-collared Barbet	23	1		28 months
Laughing Dove	20	2	2	60 months
Southern Double-collared Sunbird	16			
Black-headed Oriole	13	1		16 months
Bar-throated Apalis	12	3	1	8 months
Southern Masked Weaver	12	2		17 months
Spectacled Weaver	11	3		7 months
Fork-tailed Drongo	10			
Lesser Honeyguide	10	1		3 months
Streaky-headed Seedeater	9			
Fiscal Flycatcher	9		1	29 months
Cape Wagtail	7	1		3 months
Southern Boubou	7	3	1	67 months
Brimstone Canary	7			<u> </u>
Pin-tailed Whydah	7			·
Yellow-fronted Canary	7			<u> </u>
Bokmakierie	5		1	2 months
Grey-headed Bush Shrike	5			·
Red-eyed Dove	5			
Cardinal Woodpecker	5			<u> </u>

Species	Ringed	Recaptured	Recovered	Maximum interval
Sombre Greenbul	5			
Neddicky	4	1		< 1 month
Brown-hooded Kingfisher	4	1		1 month
African Hoopoe	4	1		4 months
Black-backed Puffback	3	1		29 months
African Firefinch	3			
Green Woodhoopoe	3		1	20 months
Red-fronted Tinkerbird	2			
Barn Swallow	2			
House Sparrow	2			
Little Sparrowhawk	1			
Speckled Pigeon	1			
Burchell's Coucal	1			
Cape Glossy Starling	1			
Greater Honeyguide	1			
White-browed Scrub-robin	1			
Willow Warbler	1			
Cape Batis	1			
Malachite Sunbird	1			
Grey Sunbird	1			
Dusky Indigobird	1	·		
African Paradise Flycatcher	1			
Yellow Weaver	1			
Total: 59 species	2017	212	33	163 months

Interesting recaptures and recoveries

Mousebirds: The impression from sight records was that Speckled Mousebirds were much more regular visitors than Red-faced Mousebirds, with the latter species often not recorded for weeks at a time. This is supported for individual birds by the ringing data, with a single recapture of a Red-faced Mousebird, whereas 16% of the Speckled Mousebirds were recaptured, and two individuals were recaptured more than once.

Cape Robin-chats and Olive Thrushes: This garden appeared to be a transit area for Olive Thrush, in contrast to other sites where we mistnetted both species (Craig & Hulley 1996). Of the thrushes ringed in Florence Street 25 of 105 were recaptured; 15 birds just once within six months of ringing, while five birds were recaptured several times. Three Olive Thrushes, two of them ringed as subadults, moved between different gardens within the town. By contrast, 16 of 35 Cape Robin-chats were recaptured; one was recovered within a block of the ringing site, and two birds made regular visits to our next-door neighbour's house. Ten of these birds were recorded more than six months after ringing, with nine individuals recaptured more than twice.

Southern Fiscals: Whereas student projects on shrike territories on the university campus revealed that at least some male birds remained on the same breeding territory for up to seven years, in this garden there seemed to be a much more regular turnover. Colourringed birds were not present for more than two successive years.

Bush-shrikes: Two Grey-headed Bush-shrikes were photographed by Lynette Rudman (pers. comm.) in her Grahamstown garden, about 3 km in a direct line from Florence Street; one three months, the other 29 months after ringing. A Puffback and a Southern Boubou were later recaptured in the Botanical Gardens, about 3 km from the ringing site. The female Southern Boubou recovered after almost five years was hit by a vehicle in Florence Street; the body still warm when I picked it up.

Cape White-eyes: One individual was recaptured eight times over eight years, and seven other birds were recaptured more than once. Clearly some white-eyes visited the garden repeatedly, though they could not be termed resident within this limited space. The recapture rate (greater than 10%) is very good for a small passerine bird, and 12 individuals were caught more than three years after they had been ringed as adults. One Cape White-eye, ringed and then recaptured six times in the Botanical Gardens in Makhanda, was more than 10 years old when last handled; the oldest birds in Florence Street were recaptured more than eight years after ringing.

Sunbirds: One Amethyst Sunbird was recaptured three times over 20 months, two were recovered, one after four years (about 3 km away) and the other after 12 years 3 months. The latter bird was ringed as an adult male, so it was at least 13 years old; it was killed by a cat in the garden of 4 Florence Street, directly across the road. This bird had never been recaptured; did it simply avoid our garden after its original capture, or had it toured extensively during the "missing years"? A female Greater Double-collared Sunbird ringed in 2010 was first recaptured in 2016, then again in 2018, and twice in 2020 when more than 10 years old. This was the most regular sunbird species in the garden.

Sparrows: The Southern Grey-headed Sparrow was the regular garden bird, with House Sparrows recorded on three occasions in 42 years. House Sparrows are very localised in Makhanda, and seldom appear as garden birds (Craig et al. 2021). About 10% of the Southern Grey-headed Sparrows were captured as juvenile birds, and five recaptures were within a year of ringing.

Weavers: For Cape, Southern Masked and Village Weavers recaptures revealed movement between locations within the town. Of the Village Weavers recaptured, 16 were within 12 months of ringing, with the maximum intervals (two individuals) just over five years. While Southern Masked Weavers had been present on farms just north of Makhanda when I first arrived in 1980, the first birds were caught in this garden in 1999, whereas both Cape and Village Weavers had been present since the 1980s. For the Cape Weaver, 12 birds were

recaptured within 12 months of ringing, while three were recaptured after more than five years. The oldest bird recorded was a male Cape Weaver recaptured almost 14 years after ringing; since he had been ringed as an adult male in breeding plumage, and males do not usually attain full breeding condition in their first year, he was at least 15 years old.

Other seedeaters: At the bird feeder, weavers and Southern Greyheaded Sparrows were observed daily, and other granivores were occasional visitors. Streaky-headed Seedeaters were regular in the garden, but few were captured. Although Bronze Mannikins were first recorded in the Botanical Gardens in 1995, and by 1998 had also been ringed in other gardens in Makhanda, they were first captured in the Florence Street garden in 2010. Only one bird was recaptured after more than one year, and with more than 450 individuals ringed in the town, we have only one other record of greater longevity (22 months). This strongly suggests that the Bronze Mannikin is short-lived compared to the small-bodied (< 15 g) insectivores and nectarivores which were handled.

Discussion

Over a period of 27 months from 1975-1977, the famous Eastern Cape naturalist CJ Skead noted all birds seen and heard from his home at 2 Florence Street, across the road from our house (Skead 1997). He recorded only one species which is not on my garden list — an Emerald Cuckoo, killed by a car in Florence Street in April 1976. There is however a recent record of an Emerald Cuckoo (window casualty in September 2020) from a garden just a block away (Helen James, pers. comm.). Skead (1997) had also recorded Greater Honeyguide from his veranda, whereas my first record was an immature bird captured in October 2021. So I believe that my garden records and ringing sample accurately represent the birds typical of the area over this period.

My garden ringing totals are insignificant compared to truly committed ringers such as Neil Thomson, who reported > 12,000 birds ringed over 10 years in a suburb of Windhoek, Namibia (Thomson 2019a),

and especially Dale Hanmer, who ringed more than 30,000 birds in and around her Malawi garden from 1974-1988, primarily using mistnets (Hanmer 1989). The most-ringed families at this site were weavers, waxbills, warblers, sunbirds and bulbuls. By contrast Thomson noted that most of the birds ringed in his garden, with two other ringers assisting at times, were caught in walk-in traps, so that the catch was dominated by seed-eaters. The five most-ringed species in Windhoek were Red-billed Quelea Quelea quelea, Black-throated Canary Critothagra atrogularis, Southern Red Bishop Euplectes orix, Laughing Dove Spilopelia senegalensis, and Southern Masked Weaver Ploceus velatus; together these made up 65% of the birds ringed, and the 10 most-ringed species (adding five other seed-eating birds) accounted for 90% of the total (Thomson 2019a). Stephanie Tyler ringed more than 1,000 birds in two years in a suburban garden in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, logging over 1,700 net hours. Her five mostringed species, in descending order, were Baglafecht Weaver Ploceus baglafecht, Swainson's Sparrow Passer swainsonii, Greater Blue-eared Starling Lamprotornis chalybaeus (more than 130 of each species ringed), Tacazze Sunbird Nectarinia tacazze, and in fifth place a tie between Brown-rumped Seedeater Crithagra tristriata and Red-billed Firefinch Lagonosticta senegala (Tyler 1979). Seven different ringers spent a total of 52 days mist-netting in a garden in Zomba, Malawi, over a 23-year span. Here on the fringe of natural forest, more than 1,000 birds of 51 species were ringed, and more than 70 individuals were recaptured. The five most-ringed species at this site were Olive Sunbird Cyanomitra olivacea and Little Greenbul Eurillas virens (more than 150 of each species ringed), together with Collared Sunbird Hedydipna collaris, Eastern Double-collared Sunbird Cinnvris mediocris and Red-throated Twinspot Hypargos niveoguttatus (more than 50 ringed) (Wilson & Medland 2020).

In Table 1, the nine most-ringed species from Florence Street (> 60 birds each) comprise four seed-eaters (two weavers, sparrow and mannikin), two frugivores (mousebirds), and three species with a mixed fruit and insect diet (white-eye, thrush and bulbul). Clearly even comparing the same trapping method (mist-nets), geographical situation, garden lay-out and net placement will have a major impact on the selection of species which are captured. However, both weavers

and sunbirds can be major components of the species community in an urban garden in Africa.

Movement between sites was evident for some species, but not others. Thomson (2018, 2019a) emphasized how the numbers of birds ringed in a single garden showed clearly that local movements were typical for most species, but also noted that the sparsity of ringers meant that few recaptures were recorded to show how far individual birds ranged. Seasonal records for particular species may be indicative of movement between habitats, as the records for some forest species in Malawi revealed (Wilson & Medland 2020). With the quality of current digital photographic records, this is a new possibility for "recaptures" away from the original ringing site, as illustrated here by the Grey-headed Bush-shrike.

Bronze Mannikins apparently have a short life expectancy; in Zimbabwe, Woodall (1975) recorded a maximum age of 28 months, with the typical life expectancy of adults little more than a year. However, this may not apply to other waxbill species; in Windhoek, Namibia, both Blue Waxbill *Uraeginthus angolensis* and Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild* were recaptured after more than five years (Thomson 2019b). The oldest Red-throated Twinspot recaptured in Malawi was just over four years, and despite small sample sizes, this was less than the intervals for two Southern Yellow White-eyes *Zosterops anderssoni*, and a much shorter period than for sunbirds of similar weight (Wilson & Medland 2020).

The potential longevity of some weaver species is well-established (cf. Hanmer 1989), and there are an increasing number of records of sunbirds surviving > 10 years (Wilson & Medland 2020, Bonnevie et al. 2023). Garden bird-ringing can play an important role in clarifying which species within a family may be long-lived.

Conclusions

Ringing garden birds can provide useful information on local movements, and on the age of common species under urban conditions. In an era where fuel costs and security concerns may restrict visits to other localities, this opportunity on the doorstep should not be neglected by ringers

Acknowledgements

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Appendix: Checklist of birds recorded at 3 Florence Street, Mkhanda, since 1980

Common name	Scientific name	Status
Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	winter visitor
Hadeda Ibis	Bostrychia hagedash	local resident
Little Sparrowhawk	Accipiter minullus	rare visitor
African Goshawk	Accipiter tachiro	rare visitor
Black Harrier	Circus maurus	vagrant
Banded Harrier-hawk	Polyboroides typus	rare visitor
Speckled Pigeon	Columba guinea	local resident
Red-eyed Dove	Streptopelia semitorquata	local resident
Cape Turtle Dove	Streptopelia capicola	local resident
Laughing Dove	Stiptopelia senegalensis	local resident
African Green Pigeon	Treron calvus	local resident
Klaas's Cuckoo	Chrysococcyx klaas	summer visitor
Diederik Cuckoo	Chrysococcyx caprius	summer visitor
Black Cuckoo	Cuculus clamosus	rare summer visitor
	Cuculus solitarius	
Red-chested Cuckoo	Clamator jacobinus	rare summer visitor
Jacobin Cuckoo	Centropus burchelli	rare summer visitor
Burchell's Coucal	Bubo africanus	mainly summer visitor
Spotted Eagle Owl	Apus caffer	local resident
White-rumped Swift		summer visitor
Knysna Turaco	Turaco corythaix	local resident
Speckled Mousebird	Colius striatus	local resident
Red-faced Mousebird	Urocolius indicus	local resident
Crowned Lapwing	Vanellus coronatus	vagrant
Brown-hooded Kingfisher	Halcyon albiventris	local resident
African Hoopoe	Upupa africana	mainly winter visitor
Green Woodhoopoe	Phoeniculus purpureus	local resident
Trumpeter Hornbill	Bycanistes bucinator	vagrant
Crowned Hornbill	Tockus alboterminatus	winter visitor
Black-collared Barbet	Lybius torquatus	local resident
Red-fronted Tinkerbird	Pogoniulus pusillus	local resident
Greater Honeyguide	Indicator indicator	vagrant
Lesser Honeyguide	Indicator minor	local resident
Brown-backed Honeybird	Prodotiscus regulus	vagrant
Cardinal Woodpecker	Dendropicos fuscescens	rare visitor
Knysna Woodpecker	Campethera notata	rare visitor
Olive Woodpecker	Dendropicos griseocephalus	vagrant
Red-throated Wryneck	Jynx ruficollis	vagrant
Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	summer visitor
Greater Striped Swallow	Cecropis cucullata	summer visitor
Lesser Striped Swallow	Cecropis abyssinica	summer visitor
Rock Martin	Hirundo fuligula	mainly winter visitor
Fork-tailed Drongo	Dicrurus adsimilis	local resident
Black Cuckooshrike	Campephaga flava	vagrant

Black-headed Oriole	Oriolus larvatus	local resident
Cape Crow	Corvus capensis	local resident
Southern Black Tit	Parus niger	rare visitor
Cape Bulbul	Pycnonotus capensis	vagrant
Dark-capped Bulbul	Pycnonotus layardi	local resident
Sombre Greenbul	Andropadus importunes	local resident
Olive Thrush	Turdus olivaceus	local resident
Cape Robin-chat	Cossypha caffra	local resident
White-browed Scrub-robin	Cercotrichas leucophrys	vagrant
Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus	summer visitor
Bar-throated Apalis	Apalis thoracica	local resident
Long-billed Crombec	Sylvietta rufescens	vagrant
Neddicky	Cisticola fulvicapilla	vagrant
Karoo Prinia	Prinia maculosa	vagrant
Fiscal Flycatcher	Sigelus silens	local resident
Southern Black Flycatcher	Melaenornis pammelaina	vagrant
Cape Batis	Batis capensis	vagrant
Chinspot Batis	Batis molitor	vagrant
African Paradise Flycatcher	Terpsiphone viridis	summer visitor
Cape Wagtail	Motacilla capensis	local resident
Common Fiscal	Lanius collaris	local resident
Southern Boubou	Laniarius ferrugineus	local resident
Black-backed Puffback	Dryoscopus cubla	vagrant
Olive Bush-shrike	Chlorophoneus olivaceus	vagrant
Southern Tchagra	Tchagra tchagra	vagrant
Bokmakierie	Telophorus zeylonus	local resident
Grey-headed Bush-shrike	Malaconotus blanchoti	irregular visitor
Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	local resident
Cape Glossy Starling	Lamprotornis nitens	irregular visitor
Red-winged Starling	Onychognathus morio	local resident
Cape Sugarbird	Promerops cafer	vagrant
Malachite Sunbird	Nectarinia famosa	winter visitor
Lesser D-collared Sunbird	Cinnyris chalybeus	local resident
Greater D-collared Sunbird	Cinnyris afer	local resident
Amethyst Sunbird	Chalcomitra amethystina	local resident
Grey Sunbird	Cyanomitra veroxii	vagrant
Collared Sunbird	Hedydipna collaris	vagrant
Cape White-eye	Zosterops virens	local resident
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	vagrant
S Grey-headed Sparrow	Passer griseus	local resident
Yellow-throated Petronia	Petronia superciliaris	
Thick-billed Weaver	Amblyospiza albifrons	vagrant rare visitor
Spectacled Weaver	Ploceus ocularis	local resident
Village Weaver	Ploceus cucullatus	local resident
Cape Weaver	Ploceus capensis	local resident
Capo Mouvoi	ooda aapondo	iodai rodiaciit

Southern Masked Weaver	Ploceus velatus	local resident
Yellow Weaver	Ploceus subaureus	rare visitor
Southern Red Bishop	Euplectes orix	rare visitor
Bronze Mannikin	Lonchura cucullata	local resident
African Firefinch	Lagonosticta rubricata	vagrant
Common Waxbill	Estrilda astrild	vagrant
Swee Waxbill	Coccopygia melanotis	vagrant
Pin-tailed Whydah	Vidua macroura	local resident
Dusky Indigobird	Vidua funerea	vagrant
Yellow-fronted Canary	Serinus mozambicus	local resident
Cape Canary	Serinus canicollis	winter visitor
Forest Canary	Chrithagra scotops	vagrant
Bully Canary	Chrithagra sulphurata	vagrant
Streaky-headed Seedeater	Chrithagra gularis	local resident