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CLEVER LITTLE HUNTERS: CATCHING CAPPED WHEATEAR AND MOUNTAIN WHEATEAR IN THE NAMIBIAN SEMI-DESERT

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AFRING NEWS

CLEVER LITTLE HUNTERS: CATCHING CAPPED WHEATEAR AND MOUNTAIN WHEATEAR IN THE NAMIBIAN SEMI-DESERT

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In the Namibian gravel plains in an area about 60 km SW of Usakos and little more than 100 km inland from Swakopmund, the family of Muscicapidae is well represented by Herero Chat *Namibornis herero*, Tractrac Chat *Emarginata (Cercomela) tractrac*, Karoo Chat *Emarginata (Cercomela) schlegelii*, Familiar Chat *Cercomela familiaris*, Southern Ant-eating Chat *Myrmecocichla (Oenanthe) formicivora*, Capped Wheatear *Oenanthe pileata* and Mountain Wheatear *Myrmecocichla (Oenanthe) monticola*.

Figure 1 – Chat habitat in the Nambian semi-desert gravel plains.

Figure 2 – Capped Wheatear, subspecies *Oenanthe pileata neseri* from Namibia.

The habitat suits them well: flat open spaces, with scarce low bushes, a few acacias along the dry river beds and scattered low grass which - with gratefully received rains – once a year possibly is replaced by knee-high swaying fresh green. In the dry season food is scarce and then it is almost impossible for the desert birds to resist the twiggling juicy mealworms we set out in a trap.

I fell in love with these beautiful birds who sing in the silence and darkness of a desert morning and give us company around the lonely house we rent for the summer months on our yearly ringing expeditions. Although described as often tame, they made us laugh and think with their unexpected behaviour.

Capped Wheatear

For ringing purposes we set out flap traps with mealworms in the cool mornings in a circle of about 200 m around the house and check them every hour or less, until the sun is heating up the ground and air too much for bird catching.

On one of these control walks I found an adult Capped Wheatear in a trap, and the mealworm was gone. Often the bird is taken by surprise when pulling at the bait. Especially the little birds, unlike shrikes or starlings, are at times too weak to easily pull the mealworm out of the holding hair clip. They release the trap but don't eat the worm. Then the trap is closed, and the worm is untouched.

Figure 3 – Fully adult Capped Wheatear, subspecies *Oenanthe pileata neseri* from Namibia.

Not in this case.

I took the bird back to the ringing station in the house, ringed it (ring FH20490), took the measurements and let it go. In the next round I found a Capped Wheatear in a trap – and it had a ring, new and shiny! It was the same bird in another trap. Again the mealworm was gone. My thinking was:

It might happen sometimes when the bird is unaware and hungry, that it gets caught by mistake another time, not recognising the connection between bait and trap. In the next round I found a Capped Wheatear in still another trap – it was again the same bird. The mealworm was gone!!

Was three times in one short morning a sign of chance or maybe of purpose? Eating its way through different traps, not going back to the place of its former capture? Did the bird realise that being caught would result in its soon release and thus consider that another worm was worth the stress of being handled?

I collected the traps as it was getting hot, and so I finished what had turned out to be an experiment on foraging behaviour.

Mountain Wheatear

Some weeks later I observed another chat in possible „thinking process" and decision making. In that area two rivers, now dry, have carved their beds, leaving a little triangle-shaped plateau of about 300 m length. On the third side rises a rocky hill. The only open water is found at an artificial waterhole down below in one of the river beds. Following the valleys the birds rise up the slope and land on one of the three smallish trees on the plateau. A perfect spot for the birds to scan the area and a perfect spot for us to set out traps!

A male Mountain Wheatear landed on top of one of the trees, saw the worm, grabbed it and got caught. Usually I control the traps and collect the trapped birds every 30 to 40 minutes in one move, as the birds on their perch fly off when approached and it takes quite some time, often up to 20 minutes or more, for them to return to their favourite spot in the territory. From here they have the best overview as it is mostly the highest point over the flat gravel plain.

Figure 4 – Mountain Wheatear male

After being ringed (ring FH44561) the bird flew to the second tree and spotted the worm in the trap underneath. It dropped immediately to the ground and I was pondering if I should not remove all traps to avoid unnecessary stress to the bird when being caught again. Having the Capped Wheatear in mind, I was wondering if the Mountain Wheatear would be caught a second time. I checked my watch to give him 5 minutes. There stood the bird, watching the worm and here was me, watching the bird.

What followed was eight minutes of suspense. Would the chat be able to resist? Would it fly off? Would it turn away its head to have the bait out of sight, as Pale Chanting Goshawks *Melierax canorus* sometimes do when a second (or third) trapping attempt failed? Clearly the chat was focused on the twisting mealworm. Walking around the trap it got some overview, moving forth and back, half excitedly moving closer, then even stepping into the trap – and out again, standing still watching, flicking wings and tail, extending its wings – it displayed the whole scale of its behavioural skills.

All this time I imagined little clouds of its thought process coming out of this little brain. This particular trap is a large round handmade flap trap, a present of one of my estimated ringing teachers. It has 45 cm diameter, 10 cm more than the usual design.

Finally, the chat stood still for a while, and with a decisive hop it entered the trap, waited some time close to the prey, got in position like an athlete before the start signal, snatched the worm and jumped out far backwards, the big fast trap closing behind him.

Applause!

There it stood, the worm alive in its beak, the breast raised, the head lifted, like a proud champion!

We could not stop laughing about this clever little miracle. Since then I am convinced that they know what they do.