

Catching and retrapping of Rufouscheeked Nightjar *Caprimulgus rufigena* at Nylsvlei Nature Reserve, Limpopo province

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For purposes of catching and ringing birds, amongst others, my ringing group and I have visited the Nylsvlei Nature Reserve from August 1999 on 60 occasions (counted as daily ringing sessions). As part of these ringing weekends, we also aim to try our hand at catching nightjars. This activity usually starts at about 22h00 onwards, preceded by a splendid supper.

We start off with travelling some of the internal reserve roads we know nightjars tend to frequent. Occasionally, the perimeter road skirting the outside of the reserve is also driven. One of my experienced trainee ringers expertly handles the vehicle and headlights whilst another operates the spotlight from the front passenger seat. I sit in the back seat and rest my eyes in between catching (or attempting to) nightjars. A one-million candlepower spotlight is operated from the car whilst the catcher (me) goes out on foot with a large handnet. I tried going out on foot (literally - which certainly is silent enough) but eventually this becomes painfully hard-wearing. I have recently opted using rubber-soled diving booties which are silent and at least provides a much greater degree of comfort. As experience is gained, I am slowly increasing my catch rate from a paltry nothing to approximately 60%, or sometimes more. I have also found that the catch rate is dependent upon the volume of fortified grape juice consumed during supper.

We have thus far been successful in catching 10 Rufouscheeked as well as four Fierynecked Nightjars *C. pectoralis*. Dr. Tim Jackson, an Afro-Tropical nightjar

specialist now residing in New Zealand, confirmed some of the more problematic individuals based upon measurements and photos. A summary of the biometric data taken from the Rufouscheeked Nightjars caught thus far is provided in Table 1.

Our groups' dismal catch-effort amounts to two birds each during 2002 and 2003, three birds during 1999 and eight birds thus far for 2005. But what makes these observations so interesting is a retrap of my first ever ringed Rufouscheeked Nightjar (CV17030) 1y 1m 24d later. This relates to a retrap rate of 10% for Rufouscheeked Nightjars or 7% for all nightjars that we have caught in the Nylsvlei Nature Reserve area. Considering our very low catch rate up until now (only about one caught for up to 3 attempts) and the fact that the catcher cannot see whether a nightjar on the ground is actually ringed or not, I found it very interesting and exciting to actually re-trap a nightjar, and on top of that, in exactly the same area where it was originally caught. This retrap might also confirm that Rufouscheeked Nightjars, as breeding intra-African migrants, return each year to a particular and preferred area.

I have put a request to the Ringers List for further information that might substantiate my observations. Numerous ringers provided me with their Rufouscheeked Nightjar statistics, which might I dare say, looked as good, or poor, as my own. Although many birds were caught and ringed, very few birds were retrapped.

The SAFRING database for Rufouscheeked Nightjars supports this observation. Up until the date of request (15 April

2005), the database contained 342 records. From 1952 onwards, 38 ringers have contributed towards this database. This database includes 4 (1.2%) retraps and only 1 (0.3%) recovery. Three individuals were retrapped by Steve Braine and one retrapped by Dirk Heinrich.

From 1952 up until 2000, 151 Rufous-cheeked Nightjars (range 1 – 21, average (6 p.a.) were caught and ringed over a period of 26 years, excluding those years when no catches were made. During this period, only one (0.7%) recovery and retrap each were made. However, from 2001 up until 2004 an amazing 188 Rufouscheeked Nightjars (range 37 – 71, average 47 p.a.) were caught and ringed. Alas, during this period of intense effort only three (1.6%) retraps were made.

Nightjar BH18424 was ringed at Wiese (Namibia) and retrapped after 0y 1m 25d at the same place. Nightjars BD49468, BD49472 and CC19366 were all ringed at a place 3km's east of Hobatere Lodge (Namibia). All three individuals were again retrapped in the same spot, 1y 3m 17d, 0y 4m 7d and 0y 10m 26d later, respectively. Nightjar 4A02220

was ringed at Vaalkop Dam and recovered in the same area 1y 0m 8d later.

In conclusion, analyses of the data shows that catching a ringed nightjar is worthy of opening a bottle of champagne and that nightjars, of this species at least, tend to stay and return to the same area. Based upon the SAFRING database, retraps covering more than one season has apparently never been made, but I assume that birds would return to the same area year after year. Somebody, please prove me right!

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Table 1. Summary of biometric data collected for Rufouscheeked Nightjar.

	n	Female			n	Male		
		Min	Avg	Max		Min	Avg	Max
Culmen	3	8.8	9.8	10.4	6	8.8	12.8	20.1
Head	3	38.8	39.2	39.8	6	38.2	40.2	43.9
Mass	4	44.5	56.5	68.4	6	56.5	64.6	81.1
Tail	3	116.0	116.7	118.0	6	114.0	125.2	142.0
Tarsus	3	15.3	18.3	21.7	5	15.6	19.5	23.3
Wing	4	157.0	167.0	186.0	6	158.0	169.3	193.0