

LONGEVITY OF DUNE LARKS IN THE NAMIB DESERT

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The Dune Lark *Mirafra erythrochlamys* is the only passeriform species that has evolved the capacity to permanently reside in the sand-sea of the Namib Desert, a hyperarid region where rainfall is scant and primary production is very low (Lancaster 1989).

These birds have never been observed to drink, rather depending on their meager food supply of insects and seeds to provide their water needs (Cox 1983). Because they successfully live and reproduce in such a hostile environment, the biology of Dune Larks holds a great deal of interest. Yet, only limited information about these birds exists, one study on their breeding biology, and two other short investigations on their foraging ecology (Boyer 1988, Cox 1983, Safriel 1990). Nothing is known about how long these birds live, information which is a

fundamental component of their overall fitness.

During a two year study of the physiological ecology of Dune Larks (1989-1991), I recaptured 3 birds that had previously been banded by Mrs Helen Boyer (Boyer 1983). Analysis of these data show that Dune Larks can live nearly 6 years in the Namib (Table 1). This is a conservative estimate since these birds were banded as adults and recaptured while they were still alive. If the productivity of each lark is 0,5 young/yr (Boyer 1983), then during 5 reproductive years a bird would produce 2,5 young. We do not know how many birds live to this age. A large number of nestlings are preyed upon by Blackbacked Jackals *Canis mesomelas*. During the breeding season of 1990, one of 13 pairs that I studied fledged young.

TABLE 1

RECAPTURE DATA FOR DUNE LARKS BANDED IN THE NAMIB DESERT

| BAND NO. | F02302 | F02322 | F02310 |
|-----------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| DATE BANDED: 1985 | 14 Feb | 3 Nov | 11 May |
| DATE RECOVERED: 1991 | 15 Jan | 16 Jan | 16 Jan |
| LOCATION ^a | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| TIME ELAPSED (years) | 5,92 | 5,17 | 5,67 |

^a 1. Banded and recaptured in East Dunes area of Namib-Naukluft Park 23°47'S, 15°40'E.

2. Banded and recaptured at !Khomabes in Namib-Naukluft Park 23°32'S, 14°40'E.

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