

A hands-on approach to the identification of common weavers of the East Coast of South Africa: a ringer's perspective

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Many of us in the Durban-based ringing community became ringers as a result of the patience and guidance of Steve Piper. Steve ran a long-term ringing project at Umhlanga Sewage Works for close to 10 years. Many of us joined as spectators, to then become scribes and, ultimately, to sit in the hot seat and process the netted birds. Once we had developed the necessary skills and been duly subjected to 'public' bird-processing and its accompanying hazards, Steve would recommend us to Dave Johnson of the Natal Parks Board for a permit.

The procedure was as follows: Steve would clear the nets, bag the birds, hand the ringer the bird-bag and then let the ringer extract the bird, identify it and process it. The scribe's role was to 'drive' the operation, calling for data and recording this data diligently. It is relatively easy to identify most birds. However, weavers, especially in non-breeding dress, pose a few problems. With time, I devised a simple yet effective process to identify weavers, irrespective of plumage or sex. Many ringers may too have already developed this skill. For ease of typing,

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A contribution, possibly by way of cautionary homily, from the above mentor :

According to the *Knight-Ridder News Service*, the inscription on the metal bands used by the U.S. Department of the Interior to tag migratory birds has been changed. The bands used to bear the address of the Washington Biological Survey, abbreviated: WASH. BIOL. SURV.

Until the agency received the following letter from an Arkansas camper:

Dear Sirs:

While camping last week, I shot one of your birds. I think it was a crow. I followed the cooking instructions on the leg tag and I want to tell you it was horrible.

The bands are now marked:

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I will use the acronym HOWL (Hands On Weaver Location) to fully explain this technique.

Begin by inserting your hand confidently into the bag, particularly when you are talking to the scribe or any other person – you will then get the best HOWL response. Steve and Gordon Scholtz introduced me to this technique with the Thick-billed Weaver. We were all casually conversing until suddenly, I made contact with the Wriggling pair of Side-cutters in the bag. Apparently my pupils dilated and sweat beads appeared on my forehead. Fortunately, I remembered that there were children present and I HOWLed "appropriately." Steve and Gordon still smile whenever we talk about Thickbilled Weavers – I also smile, only it is more like a grimace.

Thickbilled Weavers are the hardest biters of our common East Coast weavers. Brown-throated, Yellow and Spottedbacked Weavers closely follow these. The Spectacled Weaver is, by far, the most genteel of this colourful assemblage of birds, although it too can inflict a respectable nip. When you are next faced with a problematic weaver, remember to replace the bird in the bag, take a deep breath and plunge your hand into the bag and HOWL.

