

# Colour Banding Satin Bower-birds

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The author describes her experience when she started to colour band Satin Bower-birds (*Ptilonorhynchus violaceus*) in her garden at Leura, in the Blue Mountains. The size of the visiting population proved much larger than expected, and in three and a half months 160 birds were banded. The method of trapping and the system of colour banding are described. The project is continuing.

Until we began banding "Satin" on June 12, 1965, my husband and I were under a great misapprehension about the extent of the winter population in this district. (The upper Blue Mountains.) We thought that at most there would be perhaps 50 visiting our garden, but after 3 months in operation we now realise that numbers run into many hundreds.

## Organising

When planning our campaign we followed the chart of colours suggested by Ian Rowley (*Aust. Bird Bander*, Vol. 2, No. 3). However, having the mottled green plumage of the immature male and female birds in mind, we decided to use light green instead of dark green, and we considered that 6 colours would be ample for our study. How wrong we were. The colour bands must be obtained from England, and we ordered plastic strap bands, 100 in each colour, black, white, yellow, orange, light blue and light green. We reluctantly discarded red because the Satin Bower-birds dislike this colour.

Light green proved to be unsatisfactory almost immediately, as it is indistinguishable from light blue at a distance of 20 ft. without binoculars. We found the yellow also a little pale, so we obtained Scotchlite in these colours which we placed over the bands. This is a fiddly job, but it has proved a success as the colours are much stronger.

We are very fortunate to be working with the Satin Bower-bird. It is a large bird, it has comparatively long legs, and it stands erect. It feeds and plays about the ground, so reading the bands is not a great problem. Our feeding trays are from 20 to 40 ft. away from our observation window. We always use binoculars when recording sightings. The birds are shy so we must keep out of sight.

## Capturing and Banding

We first used a large drop door wire trap as described in *The Australian Bird Bander*, Vol. 3,

No. 1, with a catching box. We use sugar, bread, cheese and fruit as bait. They enter the trap quite readily. However, we have now almost discontinued using this large trap, as we found often 4 or even more birds were captured together, and so some birds waited too long to be banded and became agitated. If we put a bird into the catching box while waiting, it tried too frantically to free itself against the glass front. Also we could not prevent Pied Currawongs from attacking birds through the wire. Often mixed species enter the cage together, Red Wattle-birds entered with the Bower-birds and occasionally a Pied Currawong at the same time.

So we now use a much smaller funnel type trap. The birds enter through the ground level funnels, one or two at a time. We cover the entire trap with hessian as soon as the birds enter, and they remain quietly in the dark. We take the birds out through a top door, which is closed while we are trapping, but it is always open when the trap is not in use so that they go in and out without fear. This is slower catching but is kinder to the birds.

Each bird carries the C.S.I.R.O. metal band and two colour bands. We started our sequence by placing two coloured bands on the left leg with the metal band below. So No. 1 bird carries yellow, yellow, metal on its left leg; No. 2 bird carries yellow, white, metal on its left leg, etc. Using 6 colours thus, 36 birds were banded in this sequence; then we commenced putting two colour bands on the right leg and the metal band on the left leg. We are now working on our fifth sequence and we place the metal band between the colours on the left leg, so No. 160 bird carries black, metal green on its left leg.

The actual banding operation takes some little time with each bird. We find the metal band difficult to open evenly, and therefore time must be taken to close it precisely on the leg. The colour bands are easily applied, being coiled straps which spring back into place. We seal

these with acetone, and while it dries we enter particulars of the bird's plumage in our field book. We measure the length of the tarsus and then we weigh the bird. For this we use a small wooden holding cage. It has two drop doors which are held shut with elastic loops over a screw on top of the box. We place the bird into the box through one door, then suspend it on a hanging balance for weighing. We allow the bird to fly free by opening both doors. The whole procedure takes about 10 minutes.

#### Results

From June 12 until the end of September, 1965, we banded 160 Satin Bower-birds, including 2 mature blue males, and 3 males showing patches of blue feathers. 36 birds have been retrapped, many several times, and 80% of those banded

have been resighted at our food trays, most returning regularly until all went walk-about for the summer. The dispersal occurred early this year, between September 24 and September 30. So far all bands have been in perfect order when birds have been retrapped. Before dispersal we had many reports of banded birds at food trays or at berry trees from people as far as 6 miles down the mountains to ten miles west, as well as from locations adjoining gullies or parks about the district.

One bird has been recovered dead approximately 1 mile away, and one bird was captured in a fowl yard about 4 miles away. This bird was released unharmed.

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## EXTRACTS FROM LETTERS

### Short-tailed Shearwater Banding Progress

We are particularly glad to be able to publish the following letter, as apart from a few sporadic recoveries, nothing has been published for some years about the banding results of the detailed research programme which Dr. D. L. Serventy has conducted on the Short-tailed Shearwater (*Puffinus tenuirostris*) in the Bass Strait for the past 18 years. It is a reply from Dr. Serventy to an enquiry about a Shearwater recovered in Botany Bay last November (see "Recovery Round-up", p. 17):

"I am very pleased to respond to your letter of January 4 and to give you some information on the interesting recovery of *Puffinus tenuirostris* at Botany Bay. The circumstances are as follows:

"The bird, No. 16122, was ringed with a Tasmanian Fauna Board band by me at Little Green Island in the Furneaux Group on March 17, 1952, as a fledgling. It was found dead on November 19, 1965, at Botany Bay, New South Wales. He reported that the bird was quite fresh and in very good condition and did not appear to be injured in any way. Apparently it was exhausted in the heavy south-east gale winds that were experienced the previous night. The winds reached a maximum of 70 miles per hour. This bird was 13 years and 8 months at the time of death.

"However, we have a fair number of recoveries of older birds. I started ringing Mutton-birds on Fisher Island in Nov., 1947, and of 70 breeding birds ringed at that time 11 were found breeding there last month, i.e. 15.7% after 18 years.

"The Botany Bay bird is unusual in that the majority of the beach mortalities on the East Australian coast in the spring and early summer are birds in their first year. Thus of a grand total of 99 ringed birds found dead in the Tasman Sea area between 1951-52 and 1964-65, 43 of them were first year birds.

"An extensive marking programme on this species has, in recent years, been considerably accelerated by the co-operation of the Victorian banders. Since we started using monel bands in 1950 a grand total of 53,687 birds have been marked up to the 1965 season. Of these 40,690 were marked as fledglings and 12,997 as adults. Out of the total of 40,690 fledglings the Victorians have marked 23,237 birds. Most of the banding takes place in Victorian and Tasmanian rookeries but the entire breeding range of the species from New South Wales to South Australia has been tackled.

"I am very interested to hear of the recovery of the *Puffinus pacificus* (see Recovery Round-up, p. 17) which was marked as a fledgling in March, 1958. This bird was approaching 8 years of age when found but if this species behaved similarly to *Puffinus tenuirostris* it is probable that it had started breeding earlier. The age at first breeding of female *Puffinus tenuirostris* varies between 5-7 years and the mean commencing age is 5.3 years. Males started breeding, on the average, a year later (or older)."