

Banding of Flame Robins at Mount Buller

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One of the most important objects of the VORG Flame Robin Survey is to retrap birds banded elsewhere. Thus, when a group of banders converged for the second year in succession on Mount Buller, 145 kilometres north-west of Melbourne, for the holiday weekend 29-31 January 1972, we hoped that some of the thousands of birds banded in the wintering areas (Purchase, 1972) might be retrapped.

During a similar excursion to the same locality in 1971, we banded 133 Flame Robins *Petroica phoenicea* but no recoveries of birds banded elsewhere resulted. In 1972, there were far fewer birds in evidence than in 1971 and we observed only three with bands.

One of these, banded there in 1971, we caught easily in a spring trap. We did not notice a second one until after trapping and netting operations had finished, but we felt it important that the third one be caught as it was a female brooding young.

Traps set nearby were ignored by both the male and the banded female while the use of nets in the vicinity was impractical.

The nest was located under the eaves of a building at a parking area about 800 metres down the mountain from the alpine village (altitude 1581 metres). At dusk before the almost full moon rose too high, two members of the party bearing a 10 metre mist net at full stretch on poles, clambered up the bank towards the nest site. Another carrying a stool and accompanied by the most agile bander, preceded the net to a spot below the nest in the hope of catching the brooding bird by hand. As the net was brought in close, the bander leapt on to the stool and reached for the bird. It was too quick and escaped this attempt but in so doing it flew into the net and was immediately captured.

Even though many birds are known to return quite quickly if disturbed from their nests at night, we considered it important to cause a minimum of interference. We hurriedly read the band number (012-26096) by torch light, made

a brief examination of the size of the nestlings and replaced the bird promptly on the nest. Despite these precautions, the female did not remain on the nest but next day we observed both adults feeding the young in routine fashion.

On checking the records, we found that this female had been a fledgling in streaked juvenile plumage when banded on 30 January 1971 some 800 metres from its nesting site. Although previously presumed, this is the first positive evidence of a Flame Robin breeding in the first season following its hatching.

In both years, as a follow-up to the January banding, on another holiday weekend which occurs early in March in Victoria we attempted to locate banded birds. Most of the flocks had dispersed from the banding areas and we found only small parties lower down the mountain. We sighted one banded bird still in streaked juvenile plumage about two kilometres from where banding operations had taken place but all our efforts to catch it failed.

Because of the slow rate of catching, on all four excursions we found time to fill in moult cards for nearly all birds caught. Our disappointment at the low retrap rate was alleviated by the information accumulated, which should help in differentiating between the various plumage phases of this dimorphic species.

Reference

Purchase, D. (1972). Seventeenth Annual Report of the Australian Bird-banding Scheme, in the press.

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