



Source: Rory McCarthy, 'Israeli military court sends captured Hamas leaders for trial', *Guardian Unlimited*, 01/09/06.

Tags: [animals](#), [countryside](#), [sound](#)

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Such a tiny bird. And so very difficult to extract. The mist net had been erected in a remnant corridor of vegetation in this very old and damaged corner of the world. The morning temperature was only a few degrees above zero and there was concern that the tiny thing wouldn't survive the ordeal. A fisherman's hands, hands that had extracted sardines and *alici* from nets that had trawled Mediterranean waters, eventually set the bird free.

The bird, a tiny weebill, weighed only eight grams. Its wingspan and head were carefully measured too. The examiner blew gently on the soft belly feathers, exposing the pink flesh underneath. By doing so he could see if the bird displayed a brood patch, thereby determining its sex. After this, a tiny metal band with an engraved number was fastened around its left leg. The last task in the small bird's incarceration was to record the time of release. The examiner relaxed his grip and the bird sprang to its feet in the palm of his hand. The recorder wrote down the time, the photographers zoomed in on the little bird and clicked, yet it remained still. The examiner stretched out his arm towards the inviting security of the woodland, yet still the bird did not fly. Then with a short jump it alighted on the thick finger of the examiner, now held aloft, as if to remind the tiny bird of its connection with the sky and well earned freedom. The photographers captured more images of the small bird and the large hand. The little eye moved slightly and then it flew off in a flash, not in the direction of the woodland, but disappearing into the crop.

This was a wheat crop stunted in its growth by a lack of rain and fecund soil. It was tired soil, stripped of all the nutrients it once held. If the wheat were to survive the ominous black frosts of September and receive a good soaking of spring rain, it would still give the farmer a return. This particular variety of wheat was being grown exclusively for the Middle Eastern market, where its texture and milling properties were in high demand for the manufacture of flat breads.

The recorder got up from the examination table to stretch

her legs. It had been a good morning, with a number of new species being logged in the books. The jewel in the crown however, was the netting of a white browed babbler that had previously been banded. This small band of metal on its left leg represented so much to her and to everyone involved. It was very likely that this band had been placed on the bird eleven years ago, when the last survey had been completed. If so, it meant that this bird had survived within an incredibly threatened environment. The nets had been set up not far from an ugly gravel pit filled with empty chemical drums, the jarring colours of the plastic erupting from the subtle hues of the eucalyptus trees which surrounded the concealed dump.

The recorder left her pencil and paper with a volunteer and took her other recording equipment into the bush away from the nets and the drums. She came to a small clearing near some termite mounds. A shallow pit, surrounded by tiny fragments of charcoal told her that there must have been charcoal burners operating in this forest a long time ago. Prickly acacia bushes were in full bloom, the yellow blossom punctuating the shadows of the under storey shrubs. A small metal box in a plastic case hung by a strap over her shoulder. She placed the earphones over her ears and then plugged in the microphone. When she was comfortable in her stance, she pressed a button then held the microphone aloft. She looked at the furry windsock over the microphone and thought again of the weebill perched on the fat finger. She closed her eyes and listened to the multi-layered birdsong of the space around her. It came in waves, swelling suddenly and then evaporating unexpectedly. It was these moments of unsilence that resonated and captivated her the most and she knew that when she returned to the city, she would need to store them somewhere safe in the recesses of her memory.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Gregory Pryor.*