

Merlin Mist Nets



A Merlin 18m, 70 denier, 2-ply nylon mist net erected in a reedbed.

Introduction

During my training and later as a recently qualified C-permit holder, I asked other ringers which mist nets were best and quickly realised that there was no consensus. The answers I received seemed to relate more to personal preference, ringing site, species targeted and in some cases, brand loyalty than anything supported by facts and figures. Over recent years, as I have gradually increased my net stock, I have purchased North Ronaldsay (NR), Ecotone polyester and Ecotone nylon nets in that order, driven partly by price and partly through experience.

My first encounter with Merlin mist nets was whilst ringing at a UK bird observatory where they were used alongside Ecotone nylon and polyester nets. Having now extracted over 600 birds there, I can say that, to me at least, the performance of the nets was indistinguishable and the only way I could tell them apart was by looking at the net loops. Based on the lack of comments from other, more experienced ringers there I am assuming that they didn't notice a significant difference either.

These nets are left in place throughout the year and are exposed to all the British climate can throw at them, plus a healthy dose of sea spray on occasions, and there seemed to be no differences in their durability either. With all this in mind and after reading Peter Dunn's review, (East Yorkshire Ringing Group – Filey), I purchased two 18m and one 12m, 70 denier, 16mm mesh, 2-ply, nylon nets from Merlin Ringing Supplies.

Peter Dunn's review covered all of the basics but I had wanted a bit more detail and more photographs to assist me in reaching an informed decision before purchasing, so I decided to fill in

some of the gaps with this article. I should just make it clear that that I have no personal or financial interest in anyone who retails mist nets!

Purchasing

This was straightforward. After downloading and completing an order form from the Merlin Ringing Supplies website, it was emailed off together with a copy of my ringing permit. I received a reply and payment details the same day. Following payment by bank transfer the nets arrived, as a tracked package, within four working days.

First Impressions

The Merlin Ringing Supplies website makes it clear that their nets are supplied without cotton bags and that all the loops are black so it didn't come as a surprise to me when the nets arrived in plastic bags.



Figure 1. A brand new Merlin Ringing Supplies mist net.

On removing the net from the bag, I was surprised though. There seemed to be a lot of it. When I stuffed it into an empty net bag it took up more room than the equivalent Ecotone net, rather like the difference between a brand new pillow and one which has been used for a couple of years. It may be that that the difference I observed is also age-related and will disappear over time or it could be something to do with the composition of the nylon polymer. Either way the nets looked and felt absolutely fine although there were some inconsistencies in their construction and tethering.



Figure 2. The relative volumes of a new Merlin 18m net (left) and an older Ecotone 18m nylon net

Peter Dunn wrote that the top and bottom of the net could be identified by the finishing, with a small length of surplus net hanging underneath the bottom shelf. Only one of the three nets I purchased had been finished in this way with c. 45mm of netting below the bottom shelf.

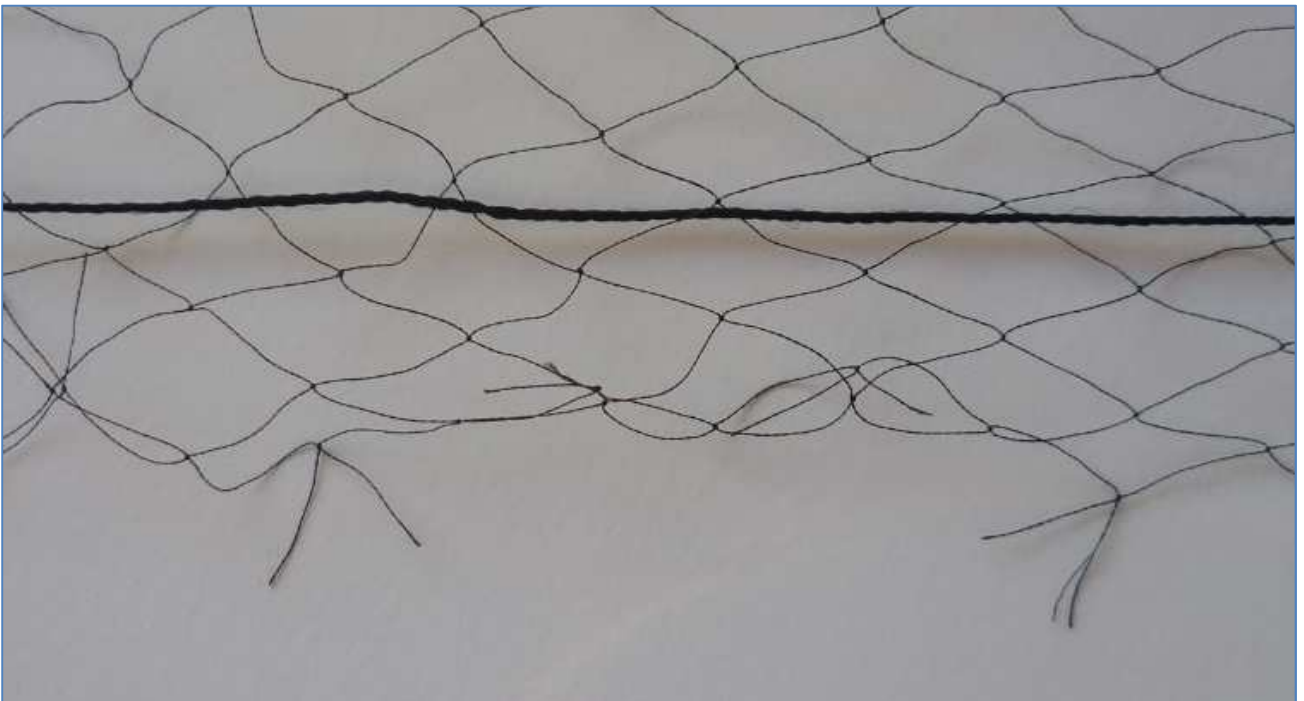


Figure 3. The bottom shelf of one net

The other two nets had a neater finish on both the top and bottom shelves and I had to select the top shelf based on which shelves were tethered.

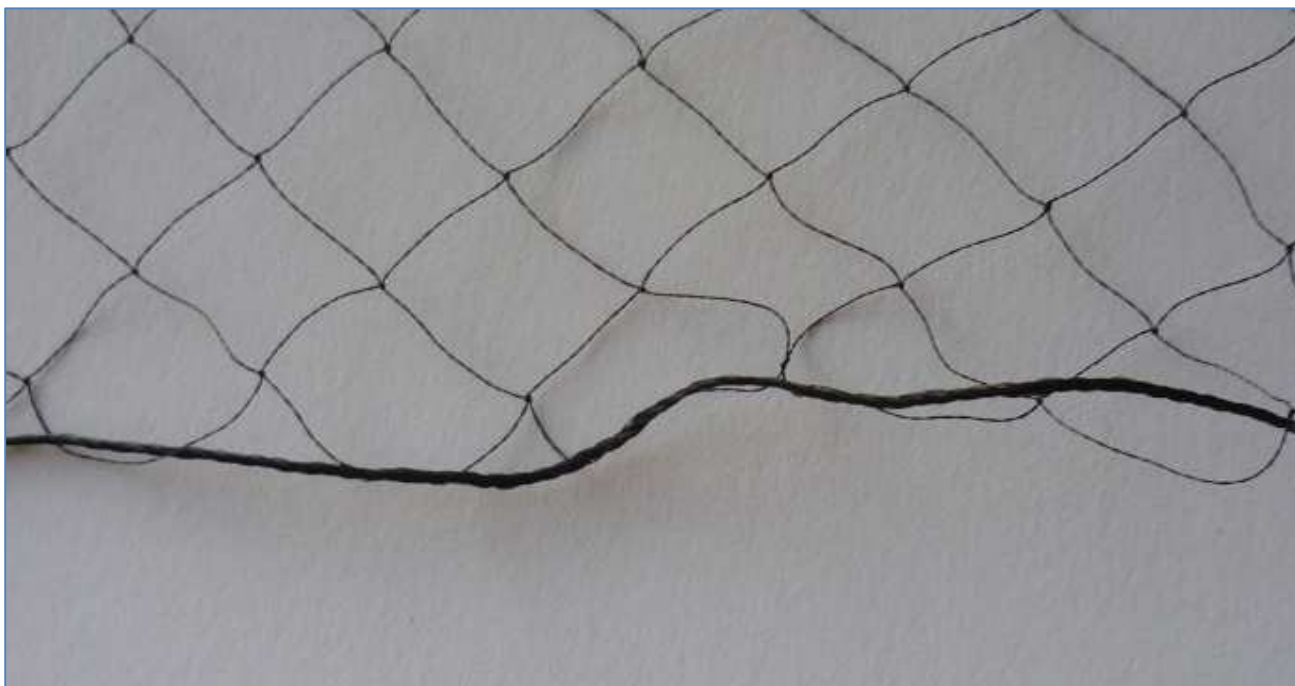


Figure 4. The bottom (or top) shelf of the other two nets.

The nets reviewed by Peter Dunn were all doubled and tethered on the top and middle shelf-strings. The nets I received varied in construction with two being doubled and tethered on three shelves and one on two. The location of the tethered shelf strings also differed from net to net as recorded in the table below. I do not know whether this variability is due to different individuals constructing the nets or the evolution of the design over time.

| | North Ron. Polyester 75 denier | Ecotone Polyester 75 denier | Ecotone Nylon 70 denier | Merlin Nylon 70 Denier 18m | Merlin Nylon 70 Denier 18m | Merlin Nylon 70 Denier 12m |
|-----|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Top | X | | | | X | |
| 1 | | X | X | X | X | X |
| 2 | | | | | | |
| 3 | | | | | | X |
| 4 | | X | X | X | X | |
| 5 | | | | | | X |

Table 1. X marks the position of tethering on North Ronaldsay, Ecotone and Merlin mist nets.

There is no description of the tethering on the Merlin Ringing Supplies website and my decision to purchase was influenced by Peter Dunn’s review. Tethering is an important factor in my selection of nets as my ringing site is exposed to the prevailing wind. Receiving two nets with three shelves secured rather than the expected two was actually a bonus. The tethering is less sophisticated than on NR or Ecotone nets and the shelves are knotted less frequently, at intervals of between 1.0 – 1.5m, but this has proved to be entirely effective so far in winds gusting up to c. 20mph.

The knots on both nets with three tethered shelves have been fused to the tethering line, presumably by the application of heat, to ensure they cannot undo but the loose ends of some have also been affected and are relatively stiff. I was concerned that these might catch on the netting and cause damage so I carefully trimmed them off with a pair of scissors just to be on the safe side. The knots on the net with two tethered shelves had not been heat-sealed.

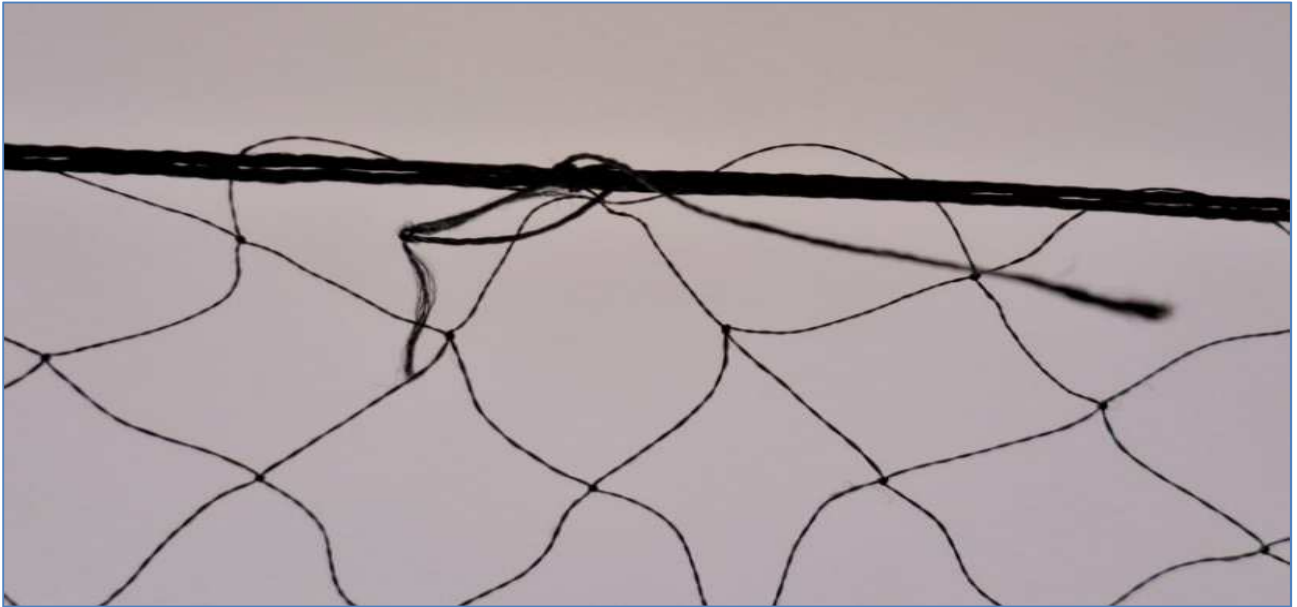


Figure 5. The loose ends of a tether on the top (or bottom) shelf of one of the nets.

Whilst inspecting the netting, I discovered a small number of holes in the 12m net, where the opposite corners of a mesh had not been knotted together during manufacture. In the event these were so few in number and so easily rectified that I repaired them myself rather than returning the net and asking for a replacement. It would certainly be worth checking new nets for any serious faults.

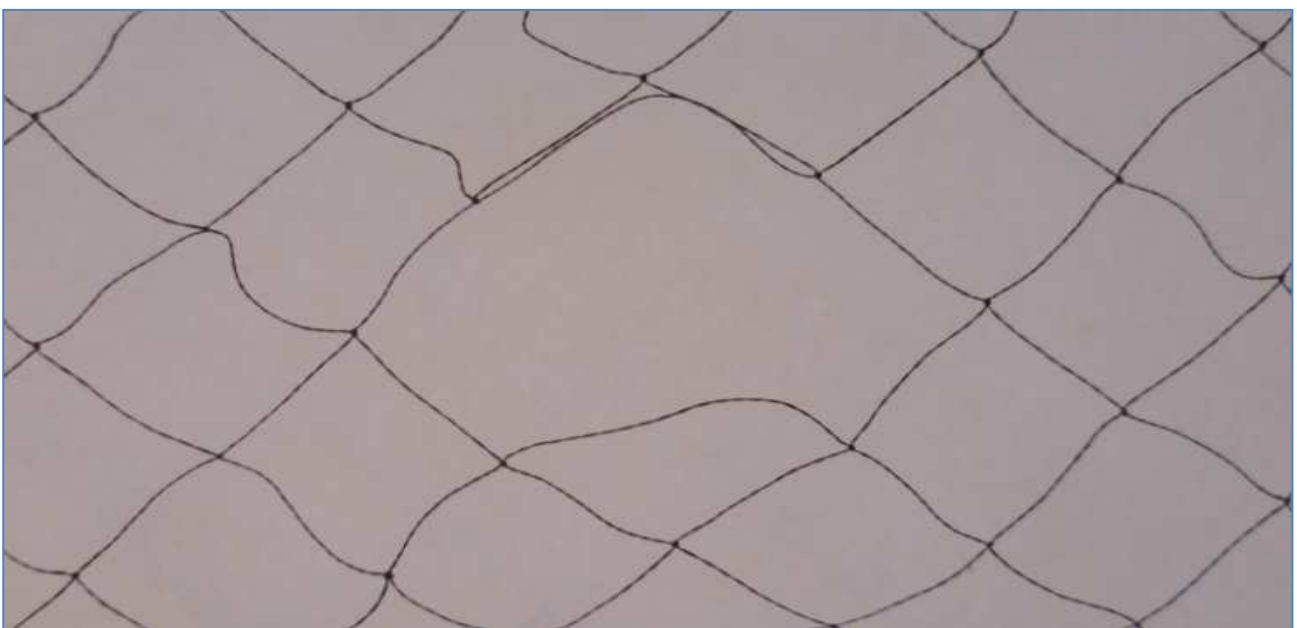


Figure 6. One of a small number of manufacturing errors found in the 12m Merlin net.

Merlin net loops are made out of braided nylon cord, secured with metal clips, and are of similar overall length to Ecotone loops although the cord is thinner, more like a round shoelace in comparison to a bootlace. It is too early to say whether these will be less durable than NR or Ecotone loops but the thinner cord does make it easier to knot the loops together when putting the nets back into their bags.



Figure 7. Merlin (top) and Ecotone mist net loops.



Figure 8. A Merlin mist net loop under tension.

The nets in use for the first time

Having previously tied coloured thread to the top net loops to aid in their identification, I erected each of the new nets in succession. All three were set up for the first time without any problems, snagging or tangling. They hung well and evenly along their length and importantly, the shelf strings were all of equal length. One of the 18m nets was c.40cm shorter than expected but fine in all other respects.



Figure 9. A Merlin, 18m, 70 denier, 2-ply nylon, mist net.

The depth of the pockets was 18cm, exactly the same as my Ecotone nets and more than enough for the passerines and near passerines I am targeting. The photo below shows my empty camera case, weighing 40g, sitting in one of the pockets.



Figure 10. The depth of a shelf pocket on a Merlin, 18m, 70 denier, 2-ply nylon, mist net.

Cost

The total purchase plus delivery costs of a variety of 18m, 16mm mesh, nylon and polyester mist nets in November 2017 are tabulated below. Merlin’s nets are significantly less expensive than their competitors are and before my purchase, I was concerned that “you get what you pay for”. However, drawing an analogy that birders can relate to, it’s a bit like comparing top of the range Swarovski and top of the range Opticron binoculars. The former offers unsurpassed optics but the latter will perform equally well in most conditions for a fraction of the price.

| Manufacturer | Ecotone | Ecotone | Ecotone | North Ron. | Merlin |
|--------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|
| Denier | 75 | 70 | 75 | 75 | 70 |
| Mesh size | 16mm | 16mm | 16mm | 16mm | 16mm |
| Material | Polyester | Nylon | Polyester | Polyester | Nylon |
| Retailer | NHBS | NHBS | BTO | BTO | Merlin |
| Cost | £116.49 | £98.49 | £83.50* | £81.50* | £35.00 |

Table 2. The purchase and delivery cost of an 18m mist net from various UK retailers as of November 2017.

* BTO prices include the ringer’s discount.

Conclusion

These are not the low cost, Chinese-made, monofilament nylon nets, available for a few dollars on the internet and so popular with illegal trappers around the Mediterranean. With the possible exception of the net loops the materials are of equal quality to those used by other manufacturers in Poland and the UK. In terms of visibility, catching ability, ease of extraction and durability I have been unable to detect any significant differences between the Merlin mist nets and their more expensive nylon or polyester equivalents. Nor, as I said in the introduction, have any other ringers I know who have used them.

There are some inconsistencies in their construction and the Merlin web site acknowledges that: *“sometimes the cosmetic finishing is not always up to the standards of NR or Ecotone nets. There may be the odd blemish or error during production.”* In the nets I received, these were few in number, minor and easily rectified. At less than half the price of a net from their nearest competitor Merlin mist nets represent a serious, value for money alternative for those on a budget.

Alan Pomroy, November 2017