

Reports

The Bloemfontein Swallow Project: 2001–2003

Rick Nuttall

National Museum, PO Box 266, Bloemfontein 9300, SA. ornito@nasmus.co.za

Introduction

The background to the Bloemfontein Swallow Project, including the methods used to capture European Swallows *Hirundo rustica* at the unusual tree roost in a garden in the suburb of Universitas, Bloemfontein, as well as ringing results from the summers of 1998, 1999 and 2000 have been published previously (Nuttall, R.J. 2000. Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* ringing in Bloemfontein, South Africa. *Safring News* 29: 20–24). This article provides further information on the Project and the results of ringing efforts from the 2001, 2002 and 2003 summers.

The different arrival times of European Swallows at the roost sites in Bloemfontein and the changes in location of these sites during each of the last three summers have affected the results of the Project considerably.

Arrival time and roost site used

2000/2001 Season

Very low numbers of swallows were present in the Bloemfontein area during the 2000/2001 summer, probably as a result of the hot, dry conditions experienced in the central interior at the time, compared to the more favourable, moister conditions in the eastern and northern parts of the region.

The first report of birds using the Linga Longa garden roost site was on the night of 25 February 2001, more than 6 weeks later than the previous three summers. During a visit to the site on the evening of 27 February, an estimated 300–400 birds were seen roosting in a single tree; numbers had in-

creased slightly (estimated at 500–700 birds) by 4 March. The swallows used the roost until 17 March, with numbers decreasing dramatically; on the evening of 18 March, two groups of swallows (estimated at 20 and 50 birds respectively) made a number of low passes over the roost area before departing to roost elsewhere.

2001/2002 Season

The good rains and warm temperatures of the 2001/2002 season produced 'normal' numbers of swallows again, as experienced since the project began in February 1998.

A flock of about 400 swallows was followed at dusk on 23 December 2001 until they descended to roost in a tree situated less than 1 km from the Linga Longa roost site. Despite frequent visits to the Linga Longa site at dusk over the next few days, the roost remained unused. A large number of European Swallows was reported using a *Phragmites* reedbed roost bordering the Modder River, on the farm 'Two-Bob-a-Day' about 20 km east of Bloemfontein in mid-January 2002. This site represents the more usual environment, habitat and substrate used by roosting European Swallows. From a Bloemfontein Swallow Project perspective, this large roost fortunately dispersed about two weeks later, with the first birds reported using the Linga Longa roost site at the end of January 2002. As is usually the case, the first birds using the roost, numbering a few thousand, gathered in the same single tree in the Linga Longa garden as has been the case in previous years. Use of a single tree only allowed more concentrated mistnetting activities than

was the case later in the season, when larger numbers of birds were present.

As numbers of European Swallows using the roost increased, so the roosting birds utilized the other trees in the garden, and later on, those growing on the sidewalk on both sides of the adjacent street. Although the larger numbers of birds present under these circumstances often resulted in high catches of swallows, the chances of recapturing ringed birds decreased.

Numbers of birds at the roost started to decrease from late March, with an estimated 1000–2000 using a single tree as a roost on the evening of 6 April. On 7 April a group of about 300 birds flew in to the roost area after sunset and circled a few times before flying off to roost elsewhere. On 8 April, a smaller group of about 100 birds did the same. The last swallows were seen on the evening of 9 April 2002, when two birds came in to the roost area at 18h15, flew low between the trees before disappearing to roost elsewhere. The sequence of events described here is typical of the end of the 'swallow season'.

2002/2003 Season

This was the first season since 1994/1995 that European Swallows did not use the Linga Longa garden roost at all during the summer. Although careful observations were made at the roost during late December 2002 and throughout January and February 2003, no swallows roosted in the trees in the garden. There were reports in January that the 'Two-Bob-a-Day' reedbed roost along the Modder River was again in use, but this was not investigated. Nevertheless, on 27 January 2003 a group of a few thousand birds was discovered roosting in *Phragmites* reeds in a small, dry dam on the University of the Free State (UFS) campus, about 1.5 km from the Linga Longa roost site. These swallows were easily targeted and ringing could fortunately continue even though the birds were not using the 'regular' garden roost. An estimated 3000–4000 birds at most used the small reedbed roost, with numbers of swallows decreasing noticeably towards the end of March. An estimated 80–100 birds used

the roost on the night of the last ringing session of the season, 4 April.

Ringing results

2000/2001 Season

A total of 493 swallows were ringed during five ringing sessions at the Linga Longa roost between 5 and 18 March 2001. Adults (53.5%) and juvenile birds (46.5%) were caught in almost equal numbers. The ringers who contributed to the 2000/2001 season were Frik Conradie (5 sessions, 206 swallows), Rick Nuttall (5 sessions, 151 swallows), Dawie de Swardt (3 sessions, 110 swallows), Johan Kok (1 session, 16 swallows) and Johan van Niekerk (1 session, 10 swallows).

Two foreign-ringed swallows, from the United Kingdom and Finland, and 11 SAFRING-ringed birds were controlled. Data available for nine of the SAFRING-ringed birds revealed all were ringed at the Linga Longa site; a single bird ringed in 1999, six in 2000 and two 'same season' controls, from 2001.

2001/2002 Season

Ringing was carried out at the Linga Longa roost on 16 occasions between 5 February and 5 April 2002. The first ringing session of the season was initiated partly by the presence of veteran ringer Gerrie Grobler, who visited Bloemfontein for a week in February; one of his prime objectives was to assist with the swallow ringing. The ringers who contributed to the 2001/2002 season were Rick Nuttall (16 sessions, 1009 swallows), Dawie de Swardt (11 sessions, 838 swallows), Johan Kok (11 sessions, 611 swallows), Gerrie Grobler (4 sessions, 564 swallows) and trainee Graeme Skinner (1 session, 11 swallows). Visiting Norwegian swallow ringer Ingvar Grastveit joined in for a single session.

A total of 13 foreign-ringed swallows from six different countries (United Kingdom: 4; Norway: 4; Channel Islands: 2; Finland: 1; Poland: 1; Spain: 1) were controlled during the 2001/2002 season. Of particular

interest were single birds from Spain and Poland, representing the first swallows from these regions controlled during the Bloemfontein Swallow Project. One of the four Norwegian-ringed swallows controlled was ringed in Norway by Stein Byrkjeland, one of the sponsors of the Project who visited the roost to assist with ringing in February 2000!

A total of 39 swallows ringed at the Linga Longa roost either earlier this season, or during previous seasons, were controlled during the 2001/2002 summer. Some of these were ringed in early 1999.

2002/2003 Season

Ringing took place during 17 sessions from 29 January–4 April 2003 at the small reedbed roost on the UFS campus, with only 12 birds ringed on the last evening. Ringers who contributed were Rick Nuttall (17 sessions, 982 swallows), Dawie de Swardt (10 sessions, 744 swallows), trainee Graeme Skinner (3 sessions, 161 swallows), Johan van Niekerk (3 sessions, 55 swallows) and Johan Kok (1 session, 50 swallows). The Project was also fortunate to welcome visiting Hungarian swallow researchers Dr Tibor Szep and Zoltán Szabó and Chairman of the SAFRING Steering Committee, Prof. Steven Piper (University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg), who joined the ringing activities for a single night. Well-known Netherlands swallow ringer and enthusiast, Bennie van den Brink, spent four days in Bloemfontein and participated in the

ringing during three evenings. We are very grateful to these esteemed ornithologists for visiting Bloemfontein and sharing their knowledge with us!

A total of five foreign-ringed swallows from four different countries (United Kingdom: 2; Finland: 1; Germany: 1; France: 1) were controlled; the birds from Germany and France were the first from these countries for the Project. A total of 86 SAFRING-ringed birds were controlled; at the time of writing, data available for 63 of these revealed all were ringed at the Linga Longa site: three birds ringed in 1999, two in 2000, 20 in 2002 and 38 'same season' controls, from 2003, with single birds controlled 34, 36 and 40 days after initial ringing.

The recapture of comparatively large numbers of swallows in the Universitas, Bloemfontein area in subsequent seasons, following original ringing at the Linga Longa roost, and in particular recaptures at the nearby UFS reedbed site in 2003, indicate a high degree of non-breeding site fidelity of these long-distance migrants.

Ringing results compared: 1998–2003

The results for the last six seasons (1998–2003) are shown in Table 1. For locally-ringed (SA) birds (i.e. at the Linga Longa and UFS reedbed roosts), no distinction is made between controls of same-season ringed birds and those ringed during previous seasons. Details of foreign-ringed birds controlled in

Table 1. European/Barn Swallows ringed at the Linga Longa and University of the Free State roosts (1998–2003).

Year	Sessions	Total ringed	1 year	Adult	Controls	
					Foreign	SA-ringed
1998	3	411	–	–	–	–
1999	15	3935	1983	1952	11	50
2000	18	5434	3763	1671	17	91
2001	5	493	229	264	2	9
2002	16	3033	2008	1025	13	39
2003	17	1992	574	1418	5	86
Total	74	15 298	8557	6330	48	275

Table 2. Foreign-ringed European Swallows controlled in Bloemfontein: 1998–2003.

Country	Season					Total
	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	
United Kingdom	8	9	1	4	2	24
Norway	2	4		4		10
Finland		3	1	1	1	6
Channel Islands				2		2
Denmark		1				1
Italy	1					1
France					1	1
Poland				1		1
Spain				1		1
Germany					1	1
Total	11	17	2	13	5	48

Bloemfontein are presented in Table 2.

The results as shown in the tables are remarkable considering that the ringing effort has been restricted to a few trees in a single suburban garden and a small reedbed site only!

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For further information on the Bloemfontein Swallow Project visit www.nasmus/ornithol/swallow1.html.