

# Afring News

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Afring News accepts papers containing ringing information about birds. This includes interesting ringing trips, interesting captures, faunistic observations relating to ringing, analyses of ringing data, and reports of projects and conferences that had a ringing component.

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## **GURNEY'S SUGARBIRD PROJECT AND SAFRING RINGING DATA**

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## GURNEY'S SUGARBIRD PROJECT AND SAFRING RINGING DATA

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Reading Adrian Craig's article on bird ringing in Safring News (Craig 2011), prompted me to share my experiences as a SAFRING bird ringer and how I grew during the years since I started my sugarbird project in the late 1980s. I never thought I would be able to reach the stage where I am today!

In the early 1980s (I was still a young school boy!) I observed for the first time Gurney's Sugarbirds *Promerop gurneyi* in our Lydenburg suburban garden in early winter (de Swardt 1982). It took a few years to realize that the sugarbirds visiting the suburban gardens during winter must originate from somewhere in the surrounding mountainous areas. Not knowing anything about bird ringing, I realized a few years later when corresponding with John Bunning (of the Wits Bird Club) that bird ringing would be my "tool" to study the sugarbird's seasonal occurrence in the Lydenburg area. The ringing organizer of that time (Terry Oatley) supported me 100% in my project and dreams and as I would be the first to start a project on Gurney's Sugarbirds, I was more determined to tackle this project. During 1985 – 86 I received my ringing training under the supervision of the late Tony Harris (then at Transvaal Museum – now Northern Flagship Institute) and after two years of ringing with Tony I finally apply for my "B" ringing permit to capture sugarbirds only (and release the other birds unringed) at the then Transvaal Nature Conservation Division. Tony also required me to write a project proposal for the sugarbird project to be submitted with my permit application (and I had to rewrite it a few times!) at the end of 1986 before starting my career at Roodeplaat Dam Nature Reserve near Pretoria, Gauteng.

While stationed at Roodeplaat and with the help of friends I visited Lydenburg at least one weekend a month concentrating on capturing sugarbirds in winter in the town and in summer at a few selected sites along the Long Tom Pass - we also had to search for new sites. Of all the sites in the mountainous areas, it was the Paardeplaats site along the Long Tom Pass which I am still visiting on a regular basis since December 1986! One day in April 1989 I phoned the late Tony Harris asking if the time was ripe to upgrade to my "A" permit (a few months before I had plans to become a Free Stater!). In those days the permit testing was very strict (ask any veteran ringer like John Bunning or Kobie Raijmakers) and obtained my "A" permit after my third attempt under the strict testing by Dr. Peter Milstein. The testing involved identifying 50 bird study skin specimens which can't call, have no eye or bill colours, the specimen colours tend to fade and there are no habitat clues - and only one wrong answer was allowed. After my second attempt Peter told me that what is important was not about knowing the birds (the tags are concealed), but about the techniques of taking measurements (not mass) to identify the birds. I also had to write a written exam about ringing and techniques for Tony!

In August 1988 I started my career at the National Museum, Bloemfontein and it was not long before my project was registered as an official project of the Museum. My first seasonal movement record was then obtained in my first year of study: a bird ringed at the Paardeplaats site on 28 February 1987 was recaptured in a suburban garden on 31 May 1988 (after 15 months). Another recapture answered my question of site fidelity in this species as a bird ringed at the Sterkspruit site on 9 January 1988, was recaptured in the suburban garden on 23 July 1989 and then recaptured again at its original ringing site in the mountain on 18 September 1989 (de Swardt 1989). In 1990 I presented my first paper at an Ornithological Congress and reported on my first data on the seasonal movements of Gurney's Sugarbirds in the Lydenburg area (de Swardt 1991). In the Free State I also later started a study on the seasonal occurrence of Malachite Sunbirds *Nectarinia famosa* in the Bloemfontein area. Apart from ringing sites in Bloemfontein, I also visited sites in the



eastern and central-east Free State (as far as Sterkfonteindam Nature Reserve and Qwaqwa National Park - now part of Golden Gate Highlands National Park) to capture Malachite Sunbirds and, of course, Gurney's Sugarbirds (de Swardt 1995).

Just as I was thinking that my sugarbird project was over, the 1993 Langebaan Congress on "Migration, dispersal and Nomadism" was scheduled and further fieldwork visits to Lydenburg were planned to collect data for a poster presentation. After completing my National High Diploma in Forestry Conservation at Saasveld in 1994, I decided it was time to do my Master degree at the University of the Free State and my Gurney's Sugarbird project was used for my degree (de Swardt 1998). At the National Museum I was in the fortunate position to undertake fieldwork visits (last one in February 2011) to my Lydenburg study area, thanks to several sponsors who covered my traveling costs (and the Museum who allowed me to go) and was also able to present a poster at the PAOC 12 at Goudini in 2008. This year will also be my 25th year that I have visited the Lydenburg area for my project and I have ringed 822 sugarbirds since 1986 (both in Mpumalanga, the Free State and Marakele National Park) and have obtained more than 150 resightings, recaptures and recoveries over the years. So, to all these ringers I want to pass a message which I received from Terry Oatley years ago – ringing is like an investment, the longer (years) you visit your study sites, the better are the chances of obtaining recaptures after several years!

### Acknowledgements

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