

REPORTBACK ON THE REDBILLED QUELEA PROJECT

Dieter Oschadleus & Cynthia Best

Since May 1995, over 22 000 Redbilled Quelea *Quelea quelea* have been ringed in southern Africa. The notable increase in ringing effort for this species reflects the enthusiastic response of ringers and ringing teams, to an initiative launched by the Directorate of Agricultural Resource Conservation (DARC) of the National Department of Agriculture.

As part of its Quelea Control Programme, the Department provides sponsorship for rings used on this species, in order to study their movements (see article by William Scott in *Safring News* Vol. 25 pp. 42-43). A provisional summary of the status of quelea-designated ringing effort follows.

The ringers of Wesvaal branch of BirdLife South Africa have achieved remarkable results from their quelea ringing expeditions. Between them, the six most active ringers of this group have ringed approximately 20 000 quelea in the last three years (based on schedules received to date). This group of ringers has already been supplied with close to 21 500 free rings and are waiting expectantly for more.

Non-Wesvaal ringers have ringed about 2 500 quelea, including incidental catches (*i.e.* when not targeting quelea). They have received issues totalling close to 5 700 free rings, so they have a relatively high proportion of unused quelea-designated stocks. These rings could perhaps be put to good use by the active quelea ringers.

Presently, SAFRING has low stocks of free-issue quelea rings and has asked participating ringers to tally up their unused rings on hand.

The Department of Agriculture has undertaken to sponsor further quelea ringing and the rate of ring usage will be easier to track in future. Until now, the free-issue quelea rings have been distributed in advance, directly to the ringers who applied *prior* to their quelea ringing expeditions. However, this system has proven problematic due to the timelag between ringing effort and the submission of schedules showing actual numbers of quelea ringed. This, in turn, causes a delay before SAFRING is in a position to motivate for further DARC-sponsored rings.

The quelea ring-issue system thus needs to be restructured, in order to make the administration and distribution of quelea rings more efficient. From now on, ringers will be requested to pay for the initial outlay themselves. As soon as the schedules are returned (clearly establishing how many quelea have actually been ringed), the ringer will be issued with an equivalent number of free replacement rings. These will be issued up to the nearest 100 rings used, and the balance remaining will be carried forward until the next schedule submission (eg. for 1 029 quelea ringed, 1 000 rings replacement rings will be issued and 29 will be credited as still outstanding). One advantage of the new system is that the ringer will no longer have to keep quelea rings separate from those for other species of the same ring size.

On future quelea ringing expeditions, ringers are encouraged to determine the age and sex of the birds whenever possible. Obviously there will be times when the catch is too great. The value of ageing and sexing will be to establish the movements of different age and sex classes (see article by Les Underhill in *Africa – Birds & Birding* Vol 25(5) 1997 page 18). There are bound to be differences, especially in young and adult birds, and it is important to start discovering these differences.