

EDITORIAL

GETTING VALUE FOR MONEY

Mindful of recent remarks on SABirdnet, some comment on the price of bird rings (and thereby the costs to ringers) is opportune. I devoted some space to this in my last Editorial (*Safring News* 25: 49-50), explaining the reasons for the sharp increase in ring prices and suggesting some ways in which these might be alleviated. We are all concerned about escalating ring prices, but the factors responsible are beyond our control, so if we want to continue ringing birds we need to accept that it is going to cost substantially more than before.

All of those in southern Africa, for whom bird ringing is an enjoyable recreational pursuit, must (or should) already realise that the falling purchasing power of local currencies is bringing about cost increases in all forms of recreation. Everybody has to dig deeper into their pocket to continue their spare-time pursuits, irrespective of what those may be. The difference between bird ringing and most other recreational activities, is that ringers are making a form of investment. Admittedly the 'return' is only one percent, on average, and you cannot buy anything with it, but it will make a contribution to the store of knowledge needed to effectively conserve our avian heritage.

As the Ringing Coordinator, I am concerned that the increasing prices of rings may lead to undesirable practices as some ringers seek ways to offset high costs. Before addressing this concern, it is appropriate to determine the current 'cost per bird' incurred by the majority of amateur ringers who use mistnets to individually catch and ring hundreds or thousands of birds each year. The easy way to arrive at

an answer is to take the average price of the smaller-sized rings (from 1.8 to 6.0 mm). At present prices this amounts to R52,83 per hundred rings, or 53 cents per bird.

This figure is misleading, however, because not all ring sizes are used in equal quantity. Many ringers must be aware that the 2.3 mm ring is the most commonly used size. In order to determine the proportionate use of different ring sizes I extracted the totals of each size used in the 1995-1996 ringing year. It transpires that 55 518 birds were fitted with rings in the size range 1.8 – 6.0 mm, and 40.1% of these were given 2.3 mm aluminium or aluminium alloy rings (this percentage does not include the 'AC' prefix incoloy bands which made up only 1.13% of the total). So altogether, 41.24% of birds took 2.3 mm rings; the next highest percentage was the 3.0 mm size (18.4%), and 2.8 mm (13.41%). All the rest were in single figure percentages, led by the 3.5 mm ring at 6.23%. Using these proportions, the cost per bird (at current prices) works out at 38 cents.

Obviously this is only an average figure, and will vary from ringer to ringer, depending on the species most commonly ringed. This is the crucial factor. Any species taking a 2.3 mm aluminium alloy ring is going to cost only 18 cents per bird at the bulk discount price for this line (or nothing at all for Redbilled Quelea because the rings are already paid for); birds that require any other size will cost more.

The most important ethic for bird ringers is that the welfare of the bird is paramount. Each bird caught should be fitted with an appropriately sized ring. It is not acceptable to fit a cheaper

size that is larger or smaller than the correct size. Neither cost nor quantity should take precedence over quality where the ringing of birds is involved.

Nevertheless, mist nets are not selective devices. What does one do when a flock of 'expensive' birds flies into a net? A few years ago the head of a northern hemisphere ringing scheme told me that he feared that some ringers were throwing certain birds out of their nets unringed. He was concerned on two counts; one was the rising cost of rings, the second was that catch statistics of certain species would be made valueless by such practice. We need to be reminded sometimes that a consistent ringing effort can yield more than recoveries and retraps; comparison of year-to-year species totals may provide early warning of a change of abundance in a particular species.

When the cost per bird becomes a factor, it surely behoves us to record on our schedules the most complete information we can for each bird ringed. This is what I had in mind in the title *Getting value for money*. Two things are noticeable about many of the schedules submitted to SAFRING. The one is that too many birds, seemingly, are given age code '4' (meaning adult, age unknown); the other is that the sex column is left blank, even for those species for which it is not particularly difficult to differentiate male from female when the bird is in hand.

In the case of the age status of a ringed bird, a 'known-age' bird is always more informative in the event of a retrap or recovery. Raptor ringers consistently provide good information on both the age and sex of the birds they ring; in part this is because these characteristics are

more easily determined in many birds of prey, but the fact that they handle far fewer birds than do mistnetters perhaps persuades them to get as much information as they can from every bird that comes to hand. When it comes to passerines, however, far more scheduled birds are coded as age '4' than as '3', '5' or '6'. In reality, we should expect subadult birds to outnumber adults in most of our catches.

Sexing 'monomorphic' species is more problematic, but codes '3' and '4' are there to enable a ringer to have a stab at the task. For many species, measurements are not always helpful, but there are plumage characteristics that provide clues to both age and sex in many birds. These are being ignored by many southern African ringers, perhaps because of they are unaware of them. But if this is the case then trainers have not instructed trainees comprehensively. In *Safring News* 23: 49-52 (1994), Les Underhill listed by species all the ageing and sexing guides published in the journal from 1972 to 1993. Admittedly these cover only a small percentage of our commonly-ringed species. Even so, the information they contain seems not to be widely used. In the 1996-1997 ringing year, for example, of the 34 ringers who have submitted schedules including Common Waxbills, only 12 have provided information on the sex of the birds ringed, and a further seven of the remaining 22 have looked closely at their birds and inserted codes other than '4' in the age column.

There is obviously room for improvement. But concern notwithstanding, I am tremendously heartened by the example of all those who are working at improving their skills at every outing. Such commitment from the majority of our ringers bodes well for the future of the scheme.