

LOCAL NEWS

THE PERILS OF SWALLOW RINGING

Paul Martin

30 Himeville Drive, Bluewater Bay 6210

In November 1996, I received a phone call from Tony Tree. In a sheepish voice, he explained that his wife Maggie and he were in hospital in Port Elizabeth. His story is something of a ringing classic and goes as follows.

As a good bird ringing citizen, Tony had been itching to get into the swallow roost at the dam near his house in Bathurst to do his bit for the International Swallow Project. Rain and wind had been frustrating his efforts all week, but on Friday 15 November he sallied forth.

Tony was walking across the dam wall with Maggie (carrying the mistnet poles!) behind him. As they approached the spillway, which was overflowing due to the recent rains, Maggie enquired whether it might not be slippery. "Guffaw, guffaw – I've crossed here hundreds of times" replied Tony as he stepped onto the spillway and immediately disappeared over the edge, landing on the rocks three metres below. Maggie, who had seen Tony hit his head on the parapet as he went over and was wondering if his life assurance was in order, retreated a few metres back along the dam wall but then, taking her cue from the lemmings, jumped down to his rescue, shattering her leg as she landed amongst the rocks.

Imagine the picture – Tony crouched with his chin resting on a rock to prevent him from drowning if he fainted, with about seven broken ribs, going blue, gasping for breath and muttering "Oh sh—!". Maggie, crawling back to the vehicle, trying to keep Rambo,

their dog, from biting a local who had come to help after hearing the commotion.

Maggie managed to get the vehicle going in second gear and raced to the Pig and Whistle in Bathurst. The contents of the pub emptied to see which drunk had arrived as Maggie pulled up, horn blaring, amid a screech of brakes (you try stopping with only one foot!). Half of Bathurst, the local Commando, police, etc., came to view Tony, but no one dared touch him in case he had broken his back! So there he lay in the water for two hours until the ambulance arrived.

At Port Alfred they took X-rays, but failed to give Tony oxygen, before despatching them to Port Elizabeth. On arrival, Tony was immediately taken to Intensive Care. Before Maggie went into surgery, they took her to say goodbye to Tony, who they feared may be brain dead due to the long period he had been without adequate oxygen. They need not have worried – ringers generally are a tough breed and there isn't usually much upstairs that needs oxygen!

Visiting the pair of them in hospital was, for me, a moment to cherish. The usual brash, exuberant Tree was meek and mild, having to suck into his oxygen mask after every few words, and making funny grating noises whenever I made him laugh.

As visitors to the ringing workshop will have noticed, Tony is none the worse for his ordeal and, although Maggie still has various metal plates in her leg, she is well on her way to a full recovery. A good job really, for although I like to poke fun at them, the pair of them are quite an asset to the Eastern Cape.