

EDITORIAL

As this is the last edition of *Safring News* that I shall edit, it would seem appropriate to look back over some of the highs and lows of the ringing scene since my first editorial, 17 years ago.

1981 was certainly a low. At that time, I was anxious to rekindle enthusiasm for South African bird ringing, which had reached its nadir for a variety of reasons, paramount amongst which had been a perceived attitude by sponsors and officials that bird ringing which was not 'project-oriented' was not worth doing. In part, this was a manifestation of the opposite swing of the pendulum from the 'ring-and-pling' excesses of the scheme's earlier heydays in the late 1960s. A more middle-of-the-road approach was needed, and I wrote: "I want to see more people involved in bird ringing, including those who would like to pursue nothing more sophisticated than a back garden ringing programme."

In many circles (both here and abroad) such a statement was akin to heresy, but the late Robert Spencer, then head of the BTO ringing scheme, wrote to me commending my standpoint. That was encouraging. My statement also elicited a delightful account of a study of Yellow-rumped Thornbills under the title "Backyard banding in Western Australia", by Dick and Molly Brown, which appeared as a feature article in *Safring News* 13 (1) of 1984. This edition, which also placed on record the first Indian-ringed Ruff controlled in southern Africa (by Tony Tree in the Eastern Cape), was actually commended (for the first and only time) by Professor W R Siegfried, a Director of the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, of which SAFRING was then a part. A definite high!

In the meantime, the numbers of ringers and of birds ringed were showing slow but steady in-

crease, notwithstanding difficulties experienced in 1983 by the (three) Orange Free State ringers who found themselves classified as hunters. In order to operate legally, they were obliged to take out hunting licences at R25 a year (a lot of money in those days). The Director of the OFS Nature Conservation Department was also the Chairman of the SAFRING Steering Committee, and the matter was eventually satisfactorily resolved in a rather stormy session in committee.

Vol. 14 (1) of *Safring News* (1985) was largely devoted to White-eyes. The idea of having a single issue focusing on a single species did not receive overwhelming acclaim. Perhaps Dick and Molly Brown's feature on banding 13 870 *Zosterops lateralis* in Australia with a subsequent recovery rate of 1 in 925 did not provide the inspiration that local ringers wanted, though the Browns' way of improving the return rate to 3.6% by transporting (releasing up to 5 km away from the backyard banding point) all ringed 'silver-eyes', was an innovative solution to the ringing of transients that could well have been adopted here.

Southern African ringers, by and large, have seemed reluctant to get involved in cooperative projects. When they have been persuaded, as in the collection of blood parasites a few years ago, the achievements have been spectacular (examinations of the over 20 000 smears collected are now going on apace and results can be anticipated soon). Currently, the increasing involvement of ringers in the Quelea Project is a positive response that augurs well for the scheme's reputation.

A glance at the regional and individual ringing efforts achieved in the 1996-1997 ringing year (this issue, p. 67) is a tribute to the commitment and enthusiasm of today's ringing fraternity. The figures provide only the results, however; the full

picture of widespread endeavour to improve knowledge and techniques, and of the camaraderie and interchange of ideas at the national workshops of recent years, is in sharp contrast to the reserved and cautious atmosphere that prevailed among ringers less than two decades ago. By all accounts, people nowadays enjoy their ringing,

and I personally believe that this is the best guarantee of the continued success of the scheme.

For me the continuing highlight of my years at the Unit has been the personal contact with you the ringers. I wish you all success in the years to come, and lots of 'Gee-whizz' recoveries!

Terry Oatley
