

EDITORIAL

Over the past year there has been extended comment in popular ornithological literature in South Africa (particularly in Bokmakierie) on the proposed changes of bird names and numbers for the new 'Roberts' edition currently in preparation. By now many may feel that enough has been written on the subject and may question the need for yet more comment in this edition of Safring News. The need is real because within the context of SAFRING'S day-to-day operation the advisability of changing species numbers is no longer a matter of personal preference, but a fundamental issue of direct concern to the long-term curation of the databank.

The new edition of Roberts Birds of South Africa was originally scheduled for publication early in 1984 but it is understood that it may take longer to complete the revision than was originally anticipated. Earlier this year the S.A.O.S. issued a printed list of southern African bird names giving both the proposed new numbers and the old Roberts numbers. This led some ringers to enquire whether they should adopt the new numbers for their 1982/1983 ringing returns. They were quickly persuaded that such good intentions would be counter-productive. It must be understood that SAFRING cannot adopt the new numeration system for reasons which Professor Les Underhill makes clear in his article on page 65.

SAFRING'S databank is not the only one employing the old Roberts numbers. There are several others and collectively they represent a considerable investment in time and money. For those which are computerised and complete (e.g. Atlas surveys), conversion to the proposed new numbers can be achieved with the application of a simple computer program, but for ongoing schemes the matter is not that simple.

There is currently a much-used catch phrase going the rounds. 'To err is human; to really muck things up you need a computer!' The popularity of this comment regrettably testifies to its truth although the implied slur on the computer is not justified. To get the information into the computer it has to be 'captured' and this involves copying what is already written on forms or schedules onto punched cards or directly into a computer file via a terminal keyboard. It is at this stage one can expect a degree of transcription error. In the field of commerce, most errors can be automatically eliminated by program design (e.g. as on the bank tellers' machines which go 'boing' if the wrong key is depressed), but unfortunately few such validation procedures can be employed in checking biological data.

If, in addition to straight capture of the data, decisions have to be made about the validity of the codes, then the scene is set for really 'mucking things up'.

Computer programming is both challenging and exciting. As with designing electrical circuits, there are many ways of achieving the same result. Some ways are more elegant than others. Perhaps because of this variety of options computer experts seem seldom to agree on routes to solutions. There may be some who disagree with Les Underhill's personal view. If so, I hope they will take the trouble to suggest constructive and feasible alternatives. In the meantime, all ringers can continue using the old Roberts numbers on their schedules until new schedules are issued which will provide space for the name of the bird to be written in, as was the case years ago!

TERRY OATLEY

