

ROBERTS NUMBERS - A PERSONAL VIEW

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One of the fundamental principles of creating a databank on a computer is never to change a numerical coding system unless it is absolutely essential. Another fundamental principle is that, if you do have to change a coding system, it must be designed in such a way that the new codes have no meaning within the old system, and the old codes have no meaning within the new - in other words, old codes must be instantly recognisable as old, and new codes as new.

One example of a successful change was from the old 'identity card' numbers to the 'Book of Life' numbers. There is no possibility of confusing which system the numbers 022 2071 053W and 461122 5073 006 belong to.

An example of a disastrous change in a coding system is, embarrassingly, within SAFRING itself. On 1 October 1974, SAFRING changed from one system of age codes to a new system. Both systems consisted of numbers from 0 to 9. A '5' on the old system meant 'second year', on the new system it means '0-year'. Ringing schedules spanning this date have (or ought to have) the earlier birds aged according to the old system; the later birds according to the new. The potential for error is enormous and, inevitably, it has occurred. The Western Cape Wader Study Group has a recent printout of all Sanderling recoveries - 6 out of 19 have ages at time of ringing which disagree with the Group's records, and for which the errors are attributable to misinterpretation of the pre-1974 age codes. This is not to be construed as a criticism of the present Ringing Organiser, but is a criticism of a very bad decision taken 10 years ago, which has resulted in the age records in SAFRING'S databank, especially for recoveries of birds ringed before 1974, being suspect.

On the basis of this bitter experience, I am more than concerned about the forthcoming revision of Roberts, in which species have been renumbered. From the point of view of the principles enunciated at the beginning of this article, it is a bad system, since the new numbers also consist of three-digit numbers (316 will be Greyheaded Gull, and not Cape Turtle Dove). The propagators of the new system have added a so-called 'check digit' onto the numbers but it is so obviously redundant that no-one will make use of it - Newman (1983) sets the pace in this regard.

Worst of all, however, is that since the early 70's, the SAFRING schedules have used Roberts numbers (and the supplementary numbers published in Safring News) as their sole means of identification of the species onto which rings have been placed. The mere existence of a second numbering system degrades the reliability of all future ringing records at their most important level: that of species identification. The only way to ensure the integrity of the data at this level is to go back to the old system of writing the species names in longhand on the ringing schedules (at the present rate of name changes, even this is no safeguard). Otherwise, there will always be lingering doubts as to which 316 was ringed.

Can't we learn from past mistakes instead of repeating them?

REFERENCE : -

Newman, K. (1983) Newman's Birds of Southern Africa.
Macmillan: Johannesburg.

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