

EDITORIAL

BIOMETRIC DATA

The last issue of *Safring News* (Vol. 16 [2]) featured a review of "Bander's Aid", a guide to the ageing and sexing of some 113 Australian bush birds. In the words of the reviewer, Mike Fraser, the Guide "... is a fine example of what can be achieved by ringers who, given the opportunity to do what only ringers can in these enlightened days, are prepared to scrutinise every bird in the hand, accurately record what they see, and synthesise the accumulated information." (my italics).

I know that in southern Africa most of our ringers are scrupulous scrutineers and fanatical field-sheet or notebook recorders but, alas, when it comes to actually doing something with their binders or bookfull's of biometric data they are, with a few notable exceptions, woefully inhibited. To quote Mike Fraser again: "... how many of you out there have heaps of yellowing field-notebooks, stacked full of biometrics and descriptions, just waiting to see the light of day? I know I do."

I know he does too! I also know, however, that there are other over-riding priorities on his time, though I cherish the hope that when his thesis is finished SAFRING will receive several ageing and sexing guides (and a veritable flood of moult cards) from him. But what about all the other readers whom this cap will fit?

The October 1987 issue of the B.T.O. Bird Ringing Scheme's journal *Ringling & Migration* Vol. 8 (2), contains a paper by G. A. and R. S. Vowles entitled "Ageing and sexing of the Waxbill in southern Portugal". The waxbill is none other than our familiar Rooibekkie or Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild*, of which there is evidently a feral population of some 10 000 birds residing in the coastal areas of southern and southwestern Portugal. During a three-year period from 1984-1986, the authors trapped and recaptured 179 juvenile and 83 adult waxbills and carefully noted the sequence of moult and plumage changes. Using these data, they are able to document comprehensive details of post-juvenile and adult moult and provide ageing and - and in some cases sexing - criteria for the following age classes: Juvenile; 1st winter; 1st summer; 2nd winter/2nd summer and 3rd winter onwards. They report that the waxbill "... can be precisely aged up to the third autumn moult; a phenomenon which is possibly unique amongst small passerines occurring in Europe."

During the same period (1984-1986) southern African ringers caught and ringed 938 Common Waxbills; prior to 1984 a total of 4 547 were ringed. All in all, therefore, according to SAFRING's records, a grand total of 5 485 Common Waxbills have been caught, handled and ringed. Yet we have to look to work undertaken in Europe for basic ageing and sexing criteria on this agile, and not always easy-to-catch, little bird. As a local financial house is wont to say, "It makes you think, doesn't it?".

Perhaps that is the problem. Thinking about a task is one thing. Doing something about it is quite another. But there is another very important consideration: the welfare of the bird. The additional handling and manipulation concomitant with the taking of biometric details and the stress this places on the individual bird cannot be justified if the data so obtained is never going to be used or (in the case of moult details), transcribed for the use of others. I hope, therefore, that there are not any ringers who are slavishly measuring every bird they catch only because their trainer told them that they must!

The first part of a list of weights of birds collected for museum specimens is featured in this issue of *Safring News*. Readers will note several instances of marked discrepancy between these weights and those accorded to the relevant species in previous publications. Such cases not only indicate the need for further investigation, but also draw attention to the fact that we still lack comprehensive published data on seasonal weight fluctuation of most species. Bird weights vary, not only seasonally, but also geographically, so it doesn't help much to have long lists of weights of widespread species, but through-the-year figures for individual species from single localities are informative.

Extraction and tabulation of data from field notebooks is a useful exercise at any time, as it often shows up gaps. Filling these gaps can provide additional objectives for your ringing programme.

Ringers who believe that they have suitable data but are unsure how to set it out or use it for publication, are welcome to contact me for advice.

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