

EDITORIAL

SAFRING NEWS 21

A new look to the layout is introduced with this volume. The double column looks more 'professional' to many people, but the advantage is not merely aesthetic. It is easier to read, and especially to scan, because of the shorter line length.

It is intended that Volume 21, should mark the return to two issues per year. More input from the southern African bird-ringing fraternity will be required, however, if this is to be achieved within the few months left of 1992. I thank the contributors to this issue, and I hope that those readers who have been meaning to write something for the journal but have never quite got around to it will now be moved to put pen to paper or to produce a text with the aid of a PC. I look forward to receiving your contributions.

CURRENT TRENDS IN MARK-RECAPTURE

Bird ringing is without doubt the most commonly practised form of the mark-recapture technique. Those of you who think that you are simply ringing birds and are not into all this fancy scientific gobble-de-gook can persist in this belief in southern Africa because sustained and increasing ringing effort is needed in order to build up our meagre data bank. In the final analysis though, the results of your ringing efforts comprise mark-recapture data.

In April of this year I went to Europe to attend the Euring 92 Symposium at Montpellier in France (see Les Underhill's report on page 19) and to visit ringing scheme offices in Switzerland, England and Denmark. The experience provided both stimulation and encouragement, and

it was re-assuring to find out at first hand that my colleagues in Europe share similar and familiar problems in ringing scheme administration.

The meeting at Montpellier, convened by the Euring Committee and entitled **The use of marked individuals in the study of bird population dynamics: models, methods, and software** attracted over 60 professional statisticians and biologists, some of whom were also bird ringers! In the course of three and a half days, 16 of 30 papers and 4 of 7 posters directly addressed the estimation of survival rates. Only one paper was primarily concerned with bird migration!

As somebody with a particular interest in survival rates I had mixed feelings over the emphasis on statistical methodology that characterised many of the presentations. A decade or two ago biologists' data frequently violated the assumptions of the models used to estimate survival. Now the wheel seems to have turned nearly full circle, with modelers' assumptions coming perilously close to violating the data, or so it would seem when missing birds subsequently found to be still alive are nevertheless assumed to be dead for the purpose of survival estimation.

Considerable interest was aroused by our passing mention of the comparatively long life spans of our African passerines. Steven Piper and I are interested in comparing survival rates of European and African passerines. A straightforward enough procedure, one might think, but statisticians with whom we discussed the idea informally were intrigued with the difficulties the task presented, and some genuinely believed that it couldn't be done! As a biologist I am confident that my data are unassailable and I feel challenged to show that the experts are

wrong, but in the back of my mind there is that niggly little verse:

They all agreed that it couldn't
be done
But, with a smile, he went
right to it
..... and he couldn't do it!

The symposium included an afternoon specifically devoted to software packages and provided the opportunity to see, amongst other things, dedicated ringers' software such as the British Trust for Ornithology's B-Ring program and the Dutch ringers' program in action. As PC ownership becomes more widespread amongst amateur ringers in this country there will obviously be a need for such packages, suitably modified (with regard to species lists for example) for our southern African operations arena. The day may not be too far off when all ringers will be required to submit their ringing returns on floppies. This will at

least dispense with the drudgery of completing ringing schedule forms.

In summarising the Montpellier symposium, Arie van Noordwijk of the Netherlands Institute of Ecology stated that the days of bird ringing being used mainly as a tool to investigate bird migration are over. The two major questions to be answered by bird ringing in the next decade concern dispersal (movement from birth site to breeding site) and variation in survival rates between habitats, regions and cohorts. He advocated that ringing centres should encourage ringers to collect more recapture data. SAFRING has been encouraging its ringers to do this for the last ten years, so we can justifiably claim to be in the forefront of the 'new' trend!

Terry Oatley



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