

GUEST EDITORIAL

A PRO-ACTIVE SAFRING

After several lean years, SAFRING has got on top of the financial constraints that led to the Ringing Officer operating without an assistant for half a year, to one issue of *Safring News* per year between 1989 and 1991, and to various other debilitating financial stringencies.

We place on record our thanks to the Department of Environment Affairs, with whom SAFRING now has a long-term funding contract, to the Southern African Nature Foundation which provided a once-off grant in 1992 to enable the SAFRING operating account to return to the black, to the University of Cape Town which, besides providing facilities and services, has patiently rolled the SAFRING debt while new funding arrangements were made, to the Namibian Ministry of Wildlife, Conservation and Tourism which has continued to provide funding for SAFRING after independence, and to the Southern African Ornithological Society, which has twice doubled its annual contribution in the past few years.

Added to this is the fact that ringing totals have continued to maintain a general upward trend, from 17 000 birds ringed at the low point in 1978–1979, to over 51 000 in the most recent ringing year, 1991–1992. Although high ringing totals are not an end in themselves, the steady increase over the past decade indicates the dedication and determination of the ringing fraternity, especially in the face of steep increases in the price of rings and ringing equipment. We greatly appreciate the efforts of all SAFRING ringers.

SAFRING is, along with SABAP (Southern African Bird Atlas Project), a component of the Avian Demographic Unit in the Department of Statistical Sciences at

the University of Cape Town, an administrative arrangement designed by the university to increase the amount of analysis performed on the SAFRING data set, and thereby increase the research output of the unit. South Africa must be the only country in the world in which the ringing unit is entrusted to statisticians. Yet this makes good academic sense, because statisticians have to devise the methodology to analyse the data. It is to this end that EURING, the umbrella body for the ringing centres in Europe, has organised three highly successful conferences bringing together statisticians and ornithologists with a common interest in data generated by bird-ringing (see *Safring News* 15: 52–55, 18: 56–58, 21: 19–21).

All this means that SAFRING is currently in a position to be pro-active.

During 1993, SAFRING will be considering the kinds of ringing project that it will especially endeavour to encourage, possibly even by partial refunds on rings. But there will be no return to the heavy-handed approach of the mid 1970s – there is no species in southern Africa for which there are "enough" birds ringed, and we will continue to promote the ringing of all species without limitations. However, there is a vast amount of scope for projects in which the combined efforts of ringers will provide answers to problems that cannot be solved in any other way.

For example, a key uncertainty in population dynamics, one of the cornerstones of conservation biology, is the degree of dispersion within populations. How far do birds move in their lifetimes and, in particular, how far do they move between fledging and breeding? This problem could be tackled by a group of ringers systematically ringing at a series of stations a few kilometres apart. We also

need to get to grips with the ringing of nestlings, developing guidelines for doing this safely (for both ringer and bird).

As another example, consider the possible effect of global warming on migrants. Berthold (1991, *Acta XX Cong. Int. Orn.* 780-786), in a highly speculative paper, has suggested that, in central Europe, resident species will be favoured at the expense of long-distance migrants, because warmer winters would reduce mortality of residents at the critical stage in the annual cycle, and warmer springs would enable residents to occupy all the best breeding territories before the long-distance migrants return to the breeding grounds. Southern Africa is at the extremity of the migration routes of many Palearctic migrants. We have the key opportunity to assess the effects of climate change on the migration patterns of these species. It is therefore likely that the ringing of migrants is going to be a most important ringing project in coming years. Projects that assess the relative abundance of resident species and Palearctic and intra-African migrants need to be designed. We will need to ring many thousands of migrants to generate enough recoveries to assess whether patterns of migration route and breeding origins are changing. The European Swallow is the most-ringed species in southern Africa. 172 000 ringed have generated 685 recoveries. This is one of the few species for which we already have a sufficiently large body of data to act as a baseline against which to measure future change.

So, Ted Robson, and all other swallow ringers, you have our official support ...

Thus a pro-active SAFRING will steadily seek to guide ringers into worthwhile projects, with a big think-tank scheduled for 1993. In the meantime, what short-term goals can we set for ringers for the new year? Firstly, we would ask you to multiply your efforts, both by increasing your own ringing totals for all species, and by training new ringers. If ring prices are a problem, consider making a well-motivated application to your local bird club for a subsidy – we will support you. Secondly, think about ringing projects that will answer specific problems, even if this means ringing fewer birds, not more! Maybe you could get involved in a collaborative project, in which several ringers pool their efforts, or run a "measured effort site" (*Safring News* 18: 47-48). Thirdly, look over your data to find the gaps, such as no moult or mass records for a particular month or season, and set about filling them. The last bits of data are always the hardest to get. Fourthly, put pen to paper, or fingers to keyboard, and write up for *Safring News* what you have learnt through bird-ringing. Terry Oatley, as sympathetic Editor, will help you to turn your draft into a polished paper.

Les Underhill



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