

Twenty Years Ago

Some extracts from *Safring News*, Vol. 3, 1974:

“My first recollection of the bird ringing set-up in S.A. is of the operation being conducted from a corner of the Fitzpatrick library by a rather elderly female secretary on a shoe-string budget. She seemed confused by coordinates and indeed some of her coordinates were confusing, which reminds me of the Yellowbilled Duck recovered in Finland. The SAOS Ringing Scheme was further fraught by its partial conversion to a holerith system, a sort of poor man’s computer card. The cards have coded holes and the system was full of them too. In fact a lot of early data were lost as a result of this conversion, which has never since been used.

By the time I arrived, many of the worst problems had been solved by Eduard van Zinderen Bakker Jnr. and a lot of data had been extracted from the backs of Geoff McLachlan’s cigarette boxes! Some set procedure had been established by Mrs Rowan. For the next three years, keeping the scheme afloat was a continual struggle, which I later shared with Mike Jarvis, with part-time work and insufficient funds. I well remember the sweat that was involved in preparing the five-year (14th) report to try to bring the records up to date. Those were the days of doing things manually, or once a year, and every time we added up the totals ringed we got a different answer. Even at that stage, I realised that there was no such thing as a ringing Pope – and everybody was fallible. In fact the only infallible aid to ringing is the computer which, as we all know, is only as good as the input data.”

C C H Elliott
Safring News 3(3):1.

“It may be of some consolation to ringers to know that NUBRA’s ‘computer consultant’ is a ringer. Although I doubt if he remembers it, I was introduced to the gentle art of bird ringing by Mr Peter Mendelsohn. This was the Pretoria sewage works. A few years later, on a Statistics Association Conference, I visited those same reeds – from the other side – where a water purification plant had displaced the reeds, and, I presume, the swallows.

The highlights of my ringing career have been, I suppose, catching a Belgian Knot at Langebaan before I got my full ringing permit, and catching seven foreign swallows – one Polish, four British and two Russian – on three successive ringing trips. Five of these came on one night! Currently, I participate in the activities of the Western Cape Wader Study Group and in the mass ringing of Hartlaub’s Gull chicks on Robben Island.

So much for my ringing *bona fides* – what of the computer. Of great advantage to NUBRA, is the fact that the University’s Computer Centre is only at the other end of the same corridor. The Centre houses its central unit, the UNIVAC 1106 Computer, which is classified as ‘medium to large’. The Central Processor Unit (C.P.U.) includes a set of 128 integrated-circuit control registers with a cycle time of 166 nano-seconds per 36-bit word. (A nano-second is 1/1000 millionth of a second.) Main storage (memory on the computer consists of 131 072 words (36 bits) with two auxiliary systems on drum (2 097 152 words) and discs (25 million words). All of this should and deserves to sound impressive. The University’s computer is a powerful piece of machinery.”

L G Underhill
Safring News 3(2):15-16.