

FOREIGN NEWS

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THE BOJE EBOK SWALLOW ROOST

Earlier this year, a very unusual recovery was reported to SAFRING. A 'ZOO PRETORIA' ring had been retrieved from a small village lost in the lowland forests of western Nigeria, near the Cameroun border. However, it had an unlikely combination of address and prefix, either misread or distorted by physical wear over time. Considerable sleuthing on the part of Terry Oatley finally revealed that this was a ring from a European Swallow *Hirundo rustica* ringed in March 1969 at the Skinner-spruit roost near Pretoria! The bird had probably been on passage through Nigeria back to its European summer breeding grounds and the ring had been hoarded in the remote Nigerian village ever since.

This find came light in the course of the Nigerian Conservation Foundation (NCF) rainforest conservation programme initiated in 1987 to conduct surveys on all the major forests of the country. This survey, in turn, led to the discovery of the large Boje Ebok swallow roost in Cross River State in western Nigeria. The report on the results of the Nigerian Swallow Project that ensued, was compiled by G Nikolaus, J S Ash, P Hall & J Barker and permission has kindly been granted for a pre-press abstract of the report to be published in *Safring News*.

In January 1995, a team under the leadership of J S Ash, supported by NCF, WWF and British Airways, visited the village of Boje Ebok with the aim of assessing the extent of swallow-trapping for food by the inhabitants.

The villagers cultivate crops and hunt for their protein needs. Near the village, two steep slopes covered in elephant grass provide an ideal roost for swallows but also an easy

source of prey for the hunters. Here the swallow-catchers of the village, mostly male adolescents, trap over a 14-day period around full moon, when it is easier to disturb the swallows. Squeaky whistles imitating their calls lure the birds to the small clearings which each catcher has made amidst the roost. They then ensnare the swallows as they skim low over the grass when flushed or before they settle down again. The snares are large dandelion-shaped brushes, fashioned from 60-80 cm grass sticks smeared with lime and radiating from end of a 4-5 m palmstick. The average night bag is 100 birds per person per night, with a record 4 425 swallows being caught by 30 people on 10 March 1995.

The purpose of the expedition was to obtain accurate data concerning the scale of swallow-catching, the size of the roost, and the possible turnover and origin of these swallows.

The ringing effort took place over two periods from the end of January to mid February 1995. The swallows were caught with mistnets without the use of tape recorders. A total of 2 906 swallows were ringed with Helgoland rings and three foreign-ringed birds were controlled.

A local villager was then employed from February to April 1995, to conduct a nightly count on the number of catchers, the number of birds caught and to record the ring numbers. His records showed that 103 972 swallows were trapped by the villagers during that period, of which 55 birds bore foreign rings from 15 different countries. A further 290 swallows were Helgoland-ringed retraps from amongst the almost 3 000 ringed at the roost in January-February. The team also received 37 rings formerly in the possession of the villagers, thus providing a grand total of 122 rings from 18 ringing centres recovered from the Boje roost.

It was very difficult to estimate the numbers of swallows using the roost. Large numbers moved in with the last light, shooting low over the forest straight into the roost, while others arrived very high up half an hour earlier and slowly descended into the grass. The estimates ranged from between 200 000 to one million swallows. According to the local people, the numbers increased steadily, peaking in March-April, despite the toll taken by the villagers. This indicates that considerable numbers of additional birds, probably 'spring' migrants on passage from further south, also use the roost.

The second trapping period showed that one in 50 mistnet-trapped swallows bore a ring, whereas only one in 120 locally-ringed birds was caught by the villagers using their different technique and snare sites. The data on local retraps show that large numbers of locally wintering birds stay until April. However, one swallow, caught in January 1988, had been ringed earlier that month in Botswana, clearly demonstrating that new birds do arrive from January onwards. So by April, even though half the wintering population would have moved on, the peak population would still number around 700 000 birds.

Because comparatively little swallow ringing has been done in much of Europe over the past decade, the 122 recoveries reflect those countries presently maintaining specific swallow-ringing programmes, namely The Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Slovenia, and previously France. Few swallows are ringed in Scandinavia, Poland and Germany. However, some interesting insights into the origins of these swallows does emerge. Nearly all

swallows caught from December to January had been ringed as nestlings in western central Europe. Those caught from February to April had originally been trapped at roosts in Europe in countries with active swallow-ringing programmes, indicating that they were possibly on passage from further north. Three previous recoveries of Swedish-ringed swallows in Nigeria supports this theory. It is surprising, however, that no British rings have, as yet, been recovered.

The most valuable recoveries are the two swallows ringed in southern Africa, the one mentioned in the opening paragraph and the other caught only three weeks after ringing in Botswana in January 1988. This shows that northwards 'spring' migration starts, for some birds, as early as the end of January. It also highlights the importance of the Nigerian roost. It appears to be placed in the very centre of the West African swallow flyway, thus serving as a roost not only for wintering birds, but also for the passage migrants from further south in Africa.

The inhabitants of Boje had always strictly regulated their trapping methods and timing to in order to preserve their protein source. In response to educational efforts regarding the roost, they agreed to stop trapping swallows if alternative protein sources could be supplied. A BBC film documented the traditional swallow-hunting methods and will be used to raise funds for the conservation of the Boje roost.

EURING has decided to initiate a general swallow project to investigate migration, wintering and effects of swallow-trapping on the western European swallow population.