

# GUEST EDITORIAL

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## My first recovery!

For the last five years I conducted ringing activities according to the principles of a 'measured-effort scheme' (Underhill & Oatley 1989) on a farm in southeastern Botswana. Recently, almost six years and over 4 000 birds later, I got my first recovery: an Emerald-spotted Dove hit a window in the capital Gaborone, some 25 km away, three years after ringing. I certainly agree with the probably astounded reader that this event is by no means spectacular, and certainly not important enough to warrant me being offered a guest editorial for it!

When compared with my ringing activities in a previous life in Belgium, this single recovery is indeed no great success. Just prior to departure on autumn migration, up to a few percent of all Blackcaps and European Reed Warblers I caught in Belgium had already been handled by colleagues. Some birds seemed to have the habit of jumping in somebody else's net almost every other night. But then, these approximately 300 Belgian colleague-ringers caught more birds of each of those two species alone than the yearly SAFRING totals for the whole of southern Africa, and that in a country smaller than the southwestern Cape Province! With a ringing total of some 750 000 birds per year, the density of ringed birds in Belgium may be about the highest in the world for an area that size. A few percent of these may in fact still be awfully few! Given that rings are supplied free in Belgium, there are no major constraints on the numbers of birds ringed other than enthusiasm, time and, of course, the weather. It is my firm belief that the price of rings is a major obstacle to the further growth of the number of birds ringed in southern Africa and thus inevitably to the accumulation of sufficient recovery data, which has yet to be achieved for the even most common species

(Underhill 1992). Unfortunately, the financial situation of SAFRING cannot allow for any subsidy of ring costs.

With the arrival of satellite tracking and the current rapid miniaturisation of its devices, ringing has moved into a new era. All aspects of individual mobility and migratory flight performance and migratory strategies can now be better addressed by global tracking, which also allows for identification of important stop-over and refuelling sites, crucial for survival. In the past, ringing predominantly revealed the global killing fields of migrants. Ringing remains particularly relevant as a rather cheap tool for studies at population level, particularly for the assessment of demographic aspects: survival and recruitment, longevity, dispersal, phylogeny, etc. However, for the calculation of survival rates, local retraps by the ringer are considered too biased towards the more successful resident birds, while an important cohort of probably less successful dispersers remains unaccounted for. Consequently, recovery data of dead birds found by the general public (including ringers) rather than recaptures, are mostly used for the assessment of survival.

The Botswana experience is therefore relevant in several ways. The ringing site was situated just outside the capital, in the most densely populated part of the country, yet resulted in a recovery rate of only 0,02% (so far – but there is a small chance that it could still rise). Just imagine what the chances of recoveries would be for a similar exercise in the Kalahari or the Okavango! From this point of view, the operation could very well be considered a 'wasted effort ringing scheme'!

Other than the pure recreational enjoyment that was certainly also part of the experience

(that is if we leave out the memories of net-happy Kudus, Pied Barbets and similarly obnoxious creatures), several interesting phenomena were also substantiated in the course of the Botswana scheme. These included phenology and variability of breeding success and population dynamics in relation to rainfall and drought; moult patterns and strategies; criteria for ageing based on moult and for sexing based on biometrics. With local recaptures of 25-40% in any session there was scope for further analyses such as the demonstration that the site-fidelity of the long-distance migrant Redbacked Shrikes in consecutive years was actually higher than that of the local 'resident' species (Herremans *et al.* 1995).

Oatley (1991) cautioned against routine 'processing' of birds without any insight of, or purpose for, the data being accumulated. Data collection is indeed most valid if it addresses sound objectives. The massive co-operation with the blood parasite project (Earlé & Bennett 1991; Earlé 1993) was a good example of the commitment of ringers to an interesting and original project of data collection. Many relevant aspects of most species' biology still remain to be documented and it is encouraging that *Safring News* is increasingly the vehicle of interesting findings by attentive ringers e.g. concerning moult, ageing, sexing, biometry, identification, capturing techniques, etc. For some of these facets only ringers have the capacity and privilege to address them on sufficiently large samples. Ringing workshops and activities in group certainly generate further discussion and inspiration. More people seem to make a specialised effort for one or another group of

species and I believe that focus on the life histories of southern African endemics should be one of the priorities (if we don't do it, who will/can?).

In conclusion, I would strongly argue that in a region like southern Africa, by far the most valuable moment of bird ringing is 'the bird in the hand', and the fascinating opportunities this offers to collect a wide variety of data, many of which are still badly needed for most species in the region. Although the minimal technical requirement may be to simply put a ring on a bird and then wait for a recovery afterwards, this should only be seen as a bonus, for which the chance is too remote to justify the effort. Ringing can therefore to some extent be compared to sex: if you can't think of giving it a better proximal purpose than the mere ultimate possibility of reproduction, it is actually a bit of a waste!

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