

REPORTBACK ON THE 2ND NATIONAL RINGING WORKSHOP

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Ringling Workshops are now firmly established on the birding calendar in South Africa, and will continue to provide an opportunity for interchange between ringers and other interested parties.

The second National Ringing Workshop was held at Sandveld Nature Reserve from 1 to 3 March 1996. This followed eighteen months after a most successful workshop at Bonamanzi, and was also an unqualified success. My only regret was that, with such enjoyable ringling and so many interesting speakers, my daily programme was so tightly scheduled that I never found time to speak to several people for whom I had lots of questions.

Sandveld is a provincial reserve under the control of the Nature and Environmental Conservation Directorate of the Free State. It lies on the banks of the Bloemhof Dam, which at the time of the workshop was 100+% full. The dam is on the Vaal River near the junction of the old Cape and Transvaal Provinces and the Free State. The habitat is primarily grassland with some Kalahari thornveld, some Acacia thornveld and a small patch of Karoo scrub. The areas of open grassveld with majestic Camelthorn trees are evocative of a Piermeef. Due to the high water level in the dam, the sometimes considerable area of exposed shoreline suitable for waders, was inundated.

A choice of accommodation was available: well-equipped chalets, camping sites and a communal kitchen at the conference centre. The conference centre was perhaps the only area which proved less than ideal. Despite cool overcast weather, the hall proved stiflingly hot, and the curtains admitted so much light as to detract seriously from the quality of the slides that were projected. As the presentations were of a high standard, it was a pity that the slides could not do justice to the speakers.

With the exception of the Northern Province, all the new provinces were represented to some extent, with large contingents from the Cape (Tygerberg, and Terry of course) and Wesvaal Club. The format of the workshop was not particularly conducive to the training of new ringers, but rather to an interchange between qualified ringers, experienced and new. This situation was discussed at some length during the proceedings, but it was decided to maintain the existing format and consider introducing training workshops/courses for prospective ringers. Personally, I found the one to one trainer/novice relationship during my ringling training to be most effective, even though it meant travelling long distances.

At the Workshop we got plenty of training in getting up early! All the formal proceedings and presentations took place during the middle of the day, and mornings and late afternoons were set aside for ringling. Due to the variety of habitats, there was something for everyone, and those who did not erect nets moved between ringling stations. There was even a small Balchatri Brigade that scoured the powerlines and telegraph poles for raptors.

Compared with Bonamanzi, not as many specials were ringed, but the numbers were better. Interesting species included Sociable Weaver, Pygmy Falcon, Steelblue Widowfinch and Rufouscheeked Nightjar. Rufouseared Warbler was seen, but managed to evade the mistnets. Garden Warbler was a new bird for the Reserve's bird list. During the calling of the bird list, Rick asked "Did anyone get a Little Bittern?" From near me, I heard a whispered reply "Yes, by a Redbacked Shrike!" At the feedback session, when Dr Aldo Berruti was compiling a composite list on the overhead projector of all species ringed during the weekend, a Jacobin Cuckoo somehow became a Jackass Penguin! A total of 532 birds of 55 species were ringed at 13 ringling sites. Altogether 169 species were ticked for the weekend.

Terry was accompanied by an overseas guest in the person of Eddie Fritze from Denmark. He showed us glimpses of his unorthodox

method of catching and ringing seagulls whilst disguised as a used plastic bag on a municipal rubbish dump. Unsuspecting seagulls are grabbed around the body by a lightening fast Fritze when they alight on him. The only person I have seen with quicker reflexes is Kotie Herholdt – he caught two Doubledbanded Sandgrouse simultaneously, the male in the left hand and the female in the right hand, after stalking them by spotlight one night on our farm in the Lowveld. And to think that I miss half the time, even with the help of a hand net!

Marc Herremans proved to be a most erudite speaker, and was of great help in elucidating moult to those of us who had previously only recorded moult as a tick in the appropriate column. In the field, he demonstrated what Adrian Craig had presented in the lecture hall, plus more. Marc also demonstrated what makes a European Reed Warbler a European Reed Warbler and not anything else, using the slides taken by the Raijmakers, who have picked up a handful of these rare warblers at their regular ringing site.

Mark Anderson gave us an update on his ongoing Sociable Weaver Project. Sociable Weavers capture the imagination of many birders because of the most amazing nest structure they build, which also houses that pint-sized little raptor, the Pygmy Falcon – not to mention cobras! As was pointed out by Steven Piper, the majority of southern African bird species are unstudied, and by conducting an in-depth study of one of these species, a ringer can become an overnight world expert on his species. He suggests we should do this before all our species are snapped up by frustrated European researchers who have run out of unstudied birds.

A thought-provoking issue was discussed by Norbert Klages – are newer technologies necessarily better technologies? A study of penguin flipper bands has shown that newer bands are not superior to older designs, but that all designs are less than perfect. This highlighted

the need for continuing research into constantly improving ringing methods and materials, so as to minimise the effect on the target species (see article on pp. 9-12).

Two species have been singled out for intensive study by SAFRING, and will receive preference when funding is available: the Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* and the Redbilled Quelea *Quelea quelea*, a trash bird hitherto considered good only for ringing and flinging. It is felt that by ringing the problem species intensively, a contribution can be made which will prove the value of ringing to the population at large. This is vital in today's world where environmental issues are increasingly seen to be in conflict with humanitarian issues. The Barn Swallow has been identified as a target species for in-depth study, in both Europe and Africa (see EURING Swallow Project on pp. 44-46).

When the Ringing Workshop was drawing to a close, an informal chat session was held during which ringers were asked to share ringing anecdotes. This was slightly strained as the participants were all sober (full marks here!) and Steven Piper virtually had the floor to himself. He entertained us as only Steven can. Concerning the more mundane matters such as SAFRING and Birdlife SA policy and funding, Terry Oatley and Aldo Berruti gave us an insight into the workings of the respective organisations. As ringers, we are fortunate to have the full support of Dr Berruti, the newly-appointed Director of Birdlife SA and himself an avid ringer. It was emphasised that ringers have a responsibility to project a positive image of ringing to other birders in general and to the public in particular.

Congratulations are due to Rick Nuttall for a superbly organised weekend; even the heavy weather which threatened all weekend held out until after the conclusion of the formal proceedings. We look forward to the next Workshop which will take place somewhere in the Eastern Cape at a date to be decided on later.