

EDITORIAL

Looking back over the events of 1996 (the calendar year) from my particular seat as ringing coordinator, I am left with two overriding impressions. The pleasant one is that bird-ringing is very much alive and well in southern Africa. We enjoyed a well-organised and well-supported national ringing workshop at the Sandveld Nature Reserve in the Free State; many new ringers have been trained, have obtained 'A' permits and have come 'on-line' with significant contributions to the overall ringing effort, and a new ringer's manual has been compiled and brought to first draft stage by a dedicated group of ringer's who voluntarily undertook the task at the Sandveld workshop. To cap it all, the frequent focus on bird ring recoveries by Geoff Lockwood in the SASOL-sponsored slot in the very popular "50/50" Sunday night TV programme is, without doubt, resulting in an increase in ring recovery reports from the general public.

The unpleasant impression is that, from an organizational point of view, SAFRING (the South African Bird Ringing Unit) is languishing. This is because of serious funding shortfalls, notwithstanding the much-increased financial support from Birdlife South Africa and a significant donation from SASOL (this last due largely to a fundraising initiative by the Wesvaal ringers). A very creditable initiative by another ringer (Herman Bernitz of Middelburg, Mpumalanga) almost succeeded in securing SAFRING a further corporate donation, and may yet do so, though not in the current, critical financial year.

The funding shortfalls are not new; the government grant has been pegged for the last five years. Were it not for the generosity of the University of Cape Town, which made good some of the early deficits and is carrying the recent and current ones, SAFRING

would already have ceased to function as a Unit. The University, however, along with many other educational institutions, is also facing government cut-backs in its subsidies and cannot be expected to carry SAFRING's deficits for much longer.

A ringing scheme is effectively an open-ended, long-term monitoring exercise. In terms of results, it cannot claim to have a short-term goal or objective, with which a corporate sponsor might like to be associated. The longer it runs, the more valuable the data that accrues from it, but such an ongoing exercise is best funded by government, especially when public money is allocated to government projects which use ringing as a research tool. Until the grant from treasury is increased to a realistic level, with provision for upward adjustment to match inflation, the Unit must hope to survive through financial input from diverse sources, including personal donations.

SAFRING supplies services to other countries in southern Africa and it is noteworthy that Namibia (through the Ministry of Environment and Tourism) provides SAFRING with an annual donation, (increased each year by a small percentage). It would make a substantial difference if Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi followed Namibia's example. It makes financial sense to share the cost of a centralised unit rather than each country underwriting the much higher cost of having its own scheme.

One of the consequences of being short-funded is that SAFRING has not been able to employ the extra hands it needs to cope with the burgeoning requirements of an increasing number of active ringers. It has also meant that we have not been able to afford the planned authority cards for ringers, or, most importantly, to have written the software pro-

gram suites that will enable the capture of full primary ringing data submitted by ringers and the integration of these records with the processing and curation of recovery data. It is hoped to offset the first problem by seeking capable voluntary helpers, and a start has already been made along these lines. The second problem needs a few months of programming expertise (user-software for ringers is the least part of it) and cannot be started unless or until there is money available for it.

Alas, it never rains but what it pours, as the age-old adage says. One of the major financial events of 1996 was the fall in the value of the South African Rand against other major currencies. Because all our rings, pliers, wing rules and nets are imported, we will not benefit from what some financiers persist in telling us is a good thing. Unfortunately, many of the smaller-sized rings can no longer be manufactured on automated-runs (which effectively halve the purchase price of the rings from the manufacturer). This means that the costs of replacement stocks of these rings are going to rise very sharply.

This will inevitably affect the ringers, especially those who ring large numbers of birds. There are ways in which escalating ring costs

can be shared, especially where intermediate-sized rings with lower turn-over are involved, but ultimately as well as proximately, we are all going to have to pay more. The latest copy (December 1996) of the Dutch ringer's news magazine *Op het Vinkentouw* announces an increase in ring prices, and I was interested to note that Dutch ringers will be paying at least as much or more than we do for many of their ring sizes. However, bird rings are like petrol, in that it does not help to be told that ours is cheap in comparison to the price paid for it in many other countries. You still have to pay more to keep the wheels turning.

Some ringers may be faced with hard decisions; one way of cutting ring costs is to specialize in a particular species or group of species, although this will mean releasing non-target species from your nets, unringed. This is not, however, commensurate with the objectives of ringing-site networks. The alternative is to redouble our efforts to find sponsorship and donations which will enable individuals (through their clubs) to keep the ringing scene alive and healthy, and assist the Bird Ringing Unit itself to move out of the current financial doldrums. In the South Africa of today, this will not be easy, but it is assuredly worth the effort.