

# Report on the International Conference on 100 Years of Bird Ringing, 1899–1999, Helgoland, Germany

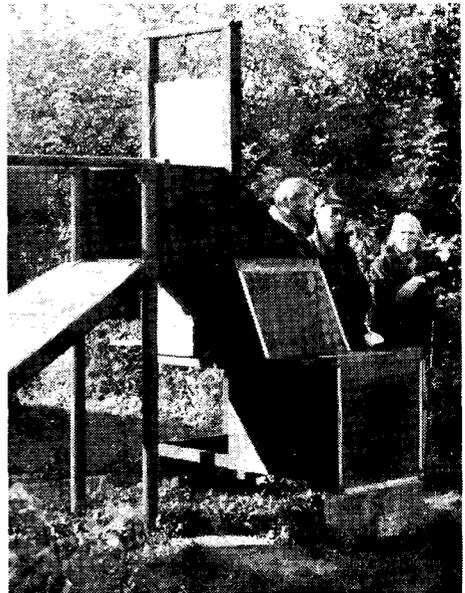
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1999 saw the celebration of 100 years of bird-ringing. Hans Christian Cornelius Mortensen, a teacher from Viborg, Denmark, was the first person in the world to ring birds with uniquely numbered metal rings. He started in 1899, ringing 165 young Starlings with numbered and addressed rings hoping to obtain some recoveries. The experiment was a success and one year later his first results were published on the birds' movements. The method attracted much attention and in the following years many European countries

started to ring birds and establish ringing centres.

Initially, the 100th anniversary was planned to be celebrated in Denmark, where Mortenson started ringing, but this had to be changed. The conference was held on the German island Helgoland where regular ringing was started by Hugo Weigold, the first director of the Vogelwarte Helgoland, in 1909. The island, a red sandstone rock, is about 70 km off the mainland in the North Sea.



**Left (Fig. 1):** Scale model of 'Trapping Garden' with large walk-in aviaries.

**Above (Fig. 2):** Holding box for ringing, at end of trap.

From South Africa, Les Underhill, Steven and Andy Piper and I attended the officially entitled *International Conference on Results and Perspectives of Bird Ringing*, 29 September–3 October 1999. The opening was on Wednesday evening 29 September. There were scientific presentations from Thursday to Saturday. Originally I had asked to do a poster on the quelea movement patterns in southern Africa. On the morning of my flight to London (i.e. 2 weeks before the conference) I received an email at my office informing me of an upgrade from poster to oral (they had an oral slot open). So I had a few minutes to convert my poster to overhead transparencies and find a few slides before leaving for the airport! The posters and talks covered a variety of subjects from the history of ringing through to the latest satellite technology. I met ringing organisers that I had met at the IOC in Durban and also made new acquaintances.

One can walk around the rather small island in some two hours. It is popular, as it is a duty-free shopping experience and thousands of tourists visit every summer. The shops, residents' houses, restaurants and hotels are all around the harbour area. The rest of the island is for the birds. Thousands of birds visit every spring and autumn, not for

the shopping experience but as a stop-over between the Scandinavian countries and southern Europe. A strong wind was blowing the entire time of the conference, but I still went for some walks around the island. The north side is a red cliff face where seabirds breed in summer. Being autumn, there were only a handful of cormorants and gannets resting on the cliffs.

It was interesting to see the Helgoland 'Fanggarten' (Trapping Garden). The migrant passerines resting in the bushes are walked into large enclosures: walk-in aviaries that don't have the front fencing, and the rear narrows into a cleverly designed holding box (Figs 1–2). There are three such traps, allowing thousands of migrants to be ringed every autumn and spring.

On Sunday evening I boarded the last regular ferry of the season. The residents cheered from their small motorised boats, circling us as we left the harbour. I drove to Holland with colleagues to visit the Dutch ringing centre (Arnhem) for two days. In terms of data organisation, this scheme is the most advanced in the world (the world here includes the USA). All their ringing data of the 1990s has been computerised. It was a great experience to see the way they function.

