

LETTERS AND COMMENTS

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Dear Sir

Recently there has been much discussion about the cost of operating the ringing scheme in southern Africa. We hear the "return on cost" being bandied about. I believe that much more emphasis should be given to the intangible benefits which accrue from such a scheme.

The wildlife and our whole environment needs every friend it can get. Unfortunately many activities which purport to create an interest in wildlife are essentially ones in which the participants are told to "KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF". The great success of the various awareness courses in which children and adults collect specimens and get their hands into the earth shows just how important the senses of touch and smell are to creating interest. Bird ringing is an activity in which all our senses come into play and a sympathetic feeling develops for wildlife. I suspect that one of the biggest problems we have in the modern world is the emphasis placed on being entertained, whether this be in spectator sports or theatre. I suppose game reserves may also fall into this category, but do we really want this in wildlife conservation. Surely we desperately need as many activists as we can find. Bird ringing is precisely the sort of activity which will appeal to the activist.

My own particular interest lies in education. Outside the classroom (where I teach Geography and Geology) I spend a lot of time trying to get children, in particular, to be aware of what is available in their immediate vicinity. Birds are ideal as a subject in this respect. Many, if not most children, are itching for an opportunity to do things. This is particularly true at junior school where this must all start. They need to be active participants - it is no good merely showing them something, THEY MUST HANDLE THINGS. It is here that ringing offers everything which a teacher could ask for. One adult can easily interest 5 to 10 children, particularly if a reasonable number of birds can be trapped. The children soon learn that the short time required to trap a bird is followed by a much longer time for measuring and writing up. This is where the teachers' patience is often tried to the limit. I have found that a new group needs anything from 5 to 8 times as long to weigh and measure a bird as an experienced ringer. However, if one is to be successful in creating an interest then one has to be patient. THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR HANDLING THE BIRD. The joy evident on the child's face when the technique is mastered is a great reward.

Where does this lead us? I feel that there should be place in the ringing scheme for both the interested amateur and the

professional. While the professional would concentrate on using **ringing** as a tool in a specific project, the interested amateur could have a more relaxed approach and should be able to enjoy ringing. He should be encouraged to use ringing to interest others in birds and other forms of wildlife. We desperately need more wildlife enthusiasts.

I am not suggesting that if an amateur is interested in carrying out a project using ringing as a tool, he should not be encouraged to do so. This is ideal, but it should not preclude amateurs ringing for fun. We are all so materialistic that we don't count the enjoyment derived from an afternoons ringing in the cost benefit ratio. The arguments which are put forward by many people that we should just watch birds for fun holds little water in the modern world. We need more than bird watchers if we are to make an impact on the general attitude of the masses. We need activists.

I suspect that if we were to actually calculate the cost of allowing interested people to ring birds for relaxation it would amount to a small proportion of the overall cost in hard cash. However, the benefits which could accrue to birds and wildlife are such that this would be well worth while. We do not have nearly enough people interested in wildlife to do anything which would discourage a single active participant. Certainly the impression given to those outside the mainstream of ornithological research is that the professionals are not interested in anything but their own pet project. Perhaps we are all more or less guilty of seeing everything as they affect our own sphere of influence and are not able to see the whole canvas of life. If we continue to ignore wildlife and the environment as has been the case in the past there will soon be nothing wild for both the amateur and professional to study.

I would suggest that we should do everything in our power to encourage more and more active ringers to take part. Let every outing be an educational project and then let us hope some of the amateurs will become so interested that they want to undertake specific projects. The amateurs will use far fewer rings than the professional, merely because they do not have the time while the professional has. However, the benefits which can accrue to wildlife in general are way out of proportion to the actual cost in rings and recording.
