

# EDITORIAL

## RINGING OF WHITE STORKS

The finding of a ring-maimed White Stork near Vereeniging in the Transvaal early in 1987 resulted, later in the year, in the screening on the national TV network, of a feature programme on the pros and cons of bird ringing, with the emphasis on the ringing of White Storks. Although the programme focused initially on the positive aspects of bird ringing in South Africa, the general impression formed by the viewing public (the programme '50/50' reaches a very large audience) was that ringing is dangerous to White Storks. The claim was further made that there can be no justification for further ringing of these birds since the migration routes of the White Stork are now well-known. It was suggested also that alternative methods of marking storks should be investigated, with wing tags and radio frequency signal transmitters being suggested as possibilities.

Ringers who viewed the programme will have observed that the ring used was too small. The claim that the constriction was caused by accumulation and hardening of faecal material inside the ring takes no account of the fact that the habit of all White Storks of defecating on their legs has a thermoregulatory function and is not known to cause appropriate-sized rings to become manacles. If this was not the case there would have been no recoveries in southern Africa of ringed White Storks ranging up to 20 years in age. The oldest ringed White Stork recovered anywhere had lived for 25 years. Instances of rings causing injury to storks are very rare, as mentioned in the programme. This issue of Safring News features dramatic evidence of the sort of injury which can result from bad ring application; in this case the ring was obviously not properly butted (closed). Photographs of this case have been supplied direct to the Organiser of the scheme concerned so that appropriate action can be taken to obviate further such cases.

These incidents should not, however, be seen as justification for the suspension of further ringing of White Storks, or indeed of any other species, especially of those which, like the White Stork, are suffering population declines and are consequently in need of special attention from conservationists. Obviously the ringing of vulnerable or endangered birds should be undertaken only by very proficient ringers and should not result in avoidable and unnecessary disturbances at critical times, nor should it cause needless injury or risk of injury.

There are conservationists who would claim that ringing cannot be accomplished without disturbance or risk of injury. Experience tells us, however, that such risks can be reduced to a minimum by the maintenance of stringent standards for ringers, and the fact remains that the use of metal rings or bands to mark individual birds is the only practical way to obtain information on mortality and survival, fidelity to breeding or wintering site, and fidelity to mate from season to season. Such information is essential to an understanding of species' life cycles. Without such understanding, it is unlikely that we can formulate and implement appropriate conservation measures to save threatened populations in the long-term.

#### RINGERS' MEETING

Details and impressions of the ringers' meeting held at the Wilderness appear in this issue under the title "Ringing in the Changes". I am grateful to Steve Piper for supplying this résumé of the meeting.

One of the items proposed concerns the holding of a ringer's conference sometime in 1988, preferably in the PWV complex so that locally-resident ringers could host those from further afield and thus reduce the cost of attendance at such a conference. Perhaps the many ringers who would have liked to attend the Wilderness meeting, but were unable to do so, will be able to avail themselves of this second opportunity. There are certainly many matters to debate, and some exciting new developments. For more information, turn to page 89.

#### A CAUTIONARY NOTE ABOUT TICKS

Dave de Swardt, who is conducting a study of Gurney's Sugarbird *Promerops gurneyi* recently found a tick on one of his ringed sugarbirds and sent it to Onderstepoort Veterinary Research Institute for identification. The tick was identified by Dr Jane Walker, as a nymph of *Hyalomma marginatum rufipes*, one of the so-called 'bont' ticks, and the following paragraph from her letter is relevant:

"The immature stages of this tick have been recorded from many species of birds, while the adults usually feed on the larger domestic and wild animals. In recent years the species has become somewhat notorious because it is one of the most important vectors of Congo fever virus. I myself think that it would be advisable to remove ticks from birds with forceps, not with your fingers. The chances of picking up Congo fever from one of these ticks are probably very slight but it is such a dangerous disease that it is well worth taking precautions against it. Also, take care not to squash the ticks when removing them as one could become infected by any blood that they contain. Again, this is unlikely, but it should just be borne in mind."

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