

RINGING IN THE CHANGES

S. E. Piper

INTRODUCTION

The old school motto was *Carpe diem**, seize the opportunity. We did. After the Birds of the Evergreen Forest Symposium there was a rare chance to bring together ringers from all over southern Africa. Some 16 of us gathered on Friday, 11 September 1987, in the Wilderness to discuss the state of ringers, ringing and its administration. Our discussion was broken down into eight major topics under the gentle, but firm chairmanship of the SAFRING Untersturmbannführer, T B Oatley. Mr Oatley began by outlining to us two recent trends. Firstly, British and European nature conservation authorities have in the 1980s begun to use ringing and recovery data for day-to-day policy decision-making; an example given was the ban on bird hunting in France during the harsh winter of 1985/86 when the recovery rate suddenly altered. Secondly, with the dissolution of the provincial system the Department of Environmental Affairs has now taken over the funding of SAFRING on a permanent basis thus ensuring the long-term survival of the scheme.

TRAINING AND AUTHORISATION

There are still some differences in approach between the various nature conservation authorities in the procedures they adopt towards the licensing of ringing and ringers; the more heavily populated regions having more formalised controls. However, nobody present felt that the testing and certification processes were excessive or were stifling ringing; the representatives of the nature conservancies expressed an especially keen desire to see ringing encouraged. While some need was felt for standardization it was not seen as an overriding issue.

More important was the fact that the authorities recognised each other's permits and, as a result, it is easy for qualified ringers to move from one region to another without excessive bureaucratic hassle. It was suggested that for those out-of-towners who wish to ring birds, but who can only get elementary training, that they be allowed to ring without the higher levels of control and supervision that prevail in the urban areas. While this may lead to a temporary lowering of ringing standards (especially in respect of species identification), it will be more than compensated for by an important ringing effort in little studied regions.

* I used to think it meant 'fish for supper'

RECREATIONAL RINGING

The meeting felt that recreational ringing should be encouraged as it: (i) served as an important group activity within bird clubs; (ii) provided an excellent training ground for young (and not-so-young) aspiring ringers; (iii) built up the population of marked birds and (iv) provided an opportunity for co-operative projects spread over the whole sub-continent. Notwithstanding this, strong sentiment was expressed against those who partake in 'ring and fling' with an eye to competition as this sometimes implies a lack of concern for the birds and their habitats. It was suggested that potentially the best venues for new group ringing sites are sewage works, reed beds and some nature reserves. Furthermore, an effort should be made to encourage the setting up of ringing stations and back-yard ringing by individuals or small groups. Lastly, the whole object of recreational ringing was enjoyment and so we should not insist upon the full and detailed processing of each bird down to the recording of its ectoparasites' endoparasites!

MIGRANTS

"What more is there to know about the swallow?" I am sometimes asked. "Which swallow?", I retort. Of the 15 plus swallows and martins that visit our region only the Palaearctic species has a migration pattern that is fairly well established. (Do I detect some protest about two or three other species?) Of real interest are the intra-African migrants because we know so little of them. In addition to the exciting chances of a long-distance recovery is the equally interesting possibility of a local recapture as this can yield data on longevity, site fidelity and local movements. There is much to be discovered by long-term, consistent ringing at a number of permanent stations and this is where the amateur teams come into their own.

COLOUR RINGING

Without doubt individually colour-marked birds provide unrivalled, in-depth information on breeding, feeding and behaviour of local populations. However, it is also now recognised that there is a need, on a world-wide basis, for stricter control of the indiscriminate use of colour marks. This is due to: (a) confusion arising from multiple author studies; (b) the possibility that some colour marks may influence behaviour and mate selection and (c) the way some marking techniques impact upon survival. Ringers were reminded by both Mr Oatley and the nature conservancies that: (i) no colour ringing study should commence without it being registered with the local conservation authority and with SAFRING; (ii) all colour combinations used should be reported to SAFRING so that

feedback can be provided to people who resight birds and (iii) if more than one person is to study a species then there must be someone to co-ordinate the colour combinations, or other marks used. Good quality plastic rings and other marks are in short supply and potential ringers should contact SAFRING to ascertain the availability of materials before commencing a new study.

RINGERS' MANUAL, AGEING AND SEXING GUIDE.

The current Ringers' Manual, rather like the Curate's Egg, is now getting a little stale in parts and needs updating. In addition, a serious need was registered for a comprehensive guide to the ageing and sexing of birds. In order to spread the load of the compilation of such a work a number of specific suggestions were made, the most important of these being:-

1. Mr T B Oatley of SAFRING would be the editor-in-chief and co-ordinator of the material.
2. The southwestern Cape ringers will experiment with a mini-workshop at which they will attempt to devise the ground-rules for the submission of material for the manual and guide.
3. The manual and guide will be produced in an A5, looseleaf format so that it can grow dynamically with time and be updated easily.
4. Ringers will be encouraged to submit details of those species with which they are most familiar.
5. Where a locally occurring species is described in a standard work, such as Svensson, then the author and publisher will be approached for permission to extract the material.
6. The manual should have standard sections on the principles of ageing, sexing and moult analysis.

COMPUTERISATION

With a world-wide explosion in the ownership of home micro-computers, it is evident that soon many ringers will either have their own computers, or will at least have access to a computer. It is no more effort to key the ringing data into a computer than it is to fill in a SAFRING schedule 1. So it is not surprising, what with the manifold advantages of computerised data, that ringers are now turning to computerising their data. At the annual Ringing and Migration Conference held by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) this year a major display of micro-computer software for ringers was presented. The BTO have developed their own suite of computer programs for the

capture, validation and simple analysis of bird ringing data. In order to provide and plan for the advent of computerisation in southern Africa a small sub-committee was established to draw up standards for the interchange of bird ringing data. This working group will comprise Professor L G Underhill and Messrs. D M Schultz and S E Piper.

RINGERS' CONFERENCE

It is now some time since a ringers' conference was held and it was felt that with the many recent advances in ringing studies it would be appropriate to organise a conference in 1988. Mr T B Oatley undertook, in conjunction with Transvaal delegates, to try to persuade the ringing groups of the Witwatersrand and Northern Transvaal Bird Clubs to join forces and together host such a conference. It was further suggested that the conference would possibly coincide with the S.A.O.S. A.G.M. weekend, thus sharing speakers, events, venue and outings. At this proposed conference support for an in-depth seminar on the data processing and statistical analyses of ringing data will be canvassed. This was at the suggestion of Professor L G Underhill of U.C.T. and received the meeting's enthusiastic support.

DIRECTORY OF RINGERS AND RINGING

SAFRING was requested to compile a list of those ringers active in southern Africa (there are thought to be about 125 of them) and the projects on which they are working. It is hoped that this compilation will be published once a year in Safring News and will show, for each ringer, where they ring, what species they are working on, and the type(s) of project that they undertake.

On behalf of those present, and all other ringers, Mr T B Oatley and his assistant were congratulated on the consistently high quality of their output and of Safring News, their speed of response to ringers' questions and problems and for their unflinching good humour.

I thank D M Broderick and D M Schultz for reading earlier drafts of this report.

S E Piper, Surveying and Mapping Department, University of Natal, King George V Avenue, DURBAN, 4001.