EDITORIAL

Two important, recent publications in international ornithological journals focus attention on bird ringing.

In *Ringing & Migration* (the British Trust for Ornithology Ringing Scheme journal) Vol 13: 129-151, December 1992, B Calvo and R W Furness provide a review of the use and the effects of marks and devices on birds. 'Marks and devices' include the whole range from metal and colour rings, through dyes and patagial tags, etc., to sophisticated devices such as data loggers and radio transmitters. This review (which has already been adopted by the BTO to assist them in assessing proposed studies) is aimed at all those researchers who employ the use of rings or other marks or devices on birds to gather data and who confidently assume that no influence on the biological parameters that they are studying results from the use of these rings or marks.

The authors scrutinized a total of 786 papers published in five international ornithological journals between 1975 and 1989. Colour rings had been used in 39,6% of these studies and metal rings in 38,3%. Some 1,3% of the researchers made brief comments, usually to the effect that the rings or marks did not appear to influence the behaviour of the birds studied, and only 0,7% actually tested for bias that might have been caused by the rings, 98% made no comment at all.

Calvo and Furness also conducted a wide search through the scientific literature normally specialising in banding or other marking techniques, and seem to have done a thorough job of locating explicit documentation of the sort of problems that can befall birds subjected to marking procedures (the impressive reference list includes two papers from this journal). They conclude that **all** marking methods can have adverse effects on birds and suggest that more attention should be given by researchers to such effects.

This warning is timely in view of what seems to be a widespread (if not worldwide) trend towards greater ringing effort (see items under Foreign News, beginning on p. 31), with increasing numbers of birds being ringed in many countries. As practising bird ringers/banders, we should all keep uppermost in mind the paramount ethic that the welfare of the birds that we handle overrides all other considerations. Further, we should aim to improve standards by scrupulously reporting any aspect or technique of capture or handling or marking which unexpectedly proves problematic and places birds at risk. Unfortunate experiences should be shared, to ensure that they are not unwittingly repeated, and the pages of this journal are appropriate for such cautionary notes.

At the same time it is important for active ringers to be able to confidently and effectively defend the practice of bird ringing, to be convincing in argument for its continuance, and to be aware of the weakness in the traditional arguments of those who campaign for animal welfare and sincerely believe that bird ringing is both unnecessary and cruel. Suffice it to say that bird ringing has been practised worldwide for over fifty years and that the technique relies on the general public to report recoveries. If it resulted in

widespread maiming and death of birds it would be impossible to hide the fact.

The aim of Calvo and Furness in their review was not to condemn the technique of marking birds in the course of research, but to caution researchers that this method can influence the birds' behaviour. Nevertheless, their findings may be taken out of context by the anti-ringing lobby to argue that marking **always** has adverse effects on birds. We know that this is not so.

I have discussed at some length the first of the two important articles mentioned in the opening sentence. The second, by John Coulson, recent Godman-Salvin medallist of the British Ornithologists' Union and current Editor of *Ibis*, has reviewed bird ringing in an article subtitled **The greatest advance in the study of birds in the 20th century**. He documents the types of information obtained by bird ringing: migration (100 years ago it was not known where many European birds spent the winter); population dynamics; emigration and philopatry; gene flow; individual life histories and conservation. He refers to the vast amount of information derived from ringing which is in existence and still awaits analysis, and mentions the repeatedly-made suggestion that bird ringing should stop because so much data already exist. Such a response, he claims, would be short-sighted and a mistake because we should look for changes in survival rates and migratory routes as environmental changes occur. He further makes the point that there is not a single species for which there is too much information", and recalls that it was the change in bird survival, detected though increased ring recoveries and counts of bodies which drew Man's attention to the problems of organochlorine insecticides, PCB's and other environmental pollutants. He acknowledges that much ringing is paid for by the individual ringer and the accumulated data sets have therefore been obtained remarkably cheaply. Yet, in terms of value:

> "The database produced by bird ringing is beyond price. It is a quantitative measure of the past and the present and a means of predicting the future."

That is what SAFRING ringers are contributing to, and this Editor can do no better than to close with a further direct quote of Coulson's final 10 words: "... well done the amateur ornithologist: keep up the good work."
