

processing, as well as in the analyses used to derive results from the accumulated data.

The wisdom of exposing undergraduate and postgraduate students to this type of project or learning opportunity is obvious. What is open to question is the degree to which they can be relied upon to do any follow-up work. They tend to have large workloads, and other conflicting priorities. From the point of view of the University, funding and the commitment of study leaders are as important as the interest of the students. Any co-authorship or acknowledgement offered in such a project will have to be earned and will require a lot of dedicated effort on the part of students.

Steven Piper has rightly raised the issue of tangible benefit to local ornithological development accruing from such visits. I believe that this can be achieved by identifying the sought-after skills, information or techniques which could be acquired and developed by local ornithologists and scientists. This would need to be done in consultation with any visiting researchers during the planning stages of the research. Where follow-up work is needed, the means and rewards for this need to be negotiated ahead of time by persons qualified to do so.

My thanks to all who helped with this venture. Their involvement and enthusiasm are really appreciated.

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## QUELEA RINGING PROJECT

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Having decided that the recently-announced Redbilled Quelea ringing subsidy was well worth supporting, I set about trying to find known concentrations of birds, so as to prevent wasted effort and costs.

I contacted representatives of various bodies in the small grain production and processing industry, and was eventually referred to the Resource Conservation Unit (RCU) of the Department of Agriculture. Unknowingly, I had travelled a full circle, as they were also the sponsors of the ring subsidy for quelea ringing and were very pleased to hear from a ringer intent on taking part.

The RCU is responsible for the monitoring of quelea activity and the coordination and control of eradication programmes. After explaining my needs, I was duly supplied with a print-out of quelea occurrence reports and a healthy dose of encouragement. After two days without touching this mine of information, I received a call from the RCU enquiring whether

any ringers were operating in the Upington area. After making investigations and passing back the negative answer, I mooted the possibility of using outside ringers on an 'expenses paid' basis. At that stage I wasn't expecting a call back as I didn't think that funds would be available.

Great was my surprise when I received a call the day before the Ringing Workshop asking when I could take a team of ringers to Upington, all expenses paid. The target was a breeding colony located in the red dunes about 50 km north of Upington. With all the planning and commitment in place for the Workshop, I undertook to make the trip the following weekend with a team of eight people.

This was easier said than done at such short notice! After many phone calls I finalised a team and made final arrangements in Upington. Needless to say, Dries Nel and Gerrie Grobler were not passing up this opportunity. The plan was to leave Potchefstroom on the Friday afternoon and travel through to arrive late that evening. We would then leave for the breeding colony at 4 am the following morning and trap until it became too hot. After that nothing was certain, other than that

we wanted to leave for home by 2 pm on the Sunday. With a 700 km trip ahead of us, and the likelihood of a very hard weekend behind us, we were not taking any chances with late travelling. Everyone was warned to make provision for a very harsh sun in very dry conditions. We even carted frozen water coolers all the way from Potchefstroom – just as well, as it turned out. Guest-house lunchpacks were arranged and everything was planned to allow us the maximum possible time for quelea ringing. For once things went according to plan and we didn't need Plan B, which is just as well, because there wasn't a Plan B.

The site consisted of two shallow valleys between red sand dunes and the colony was spread out among clusters of Swarthaak bushes *Acacia mellifera* little more than two metres high. Each bush had anything from 50 to a 100 nests, depending on its size.

We arrived before sunrise and placed our nets singly or in units of two, to facilitate extraction and control. As we planned to extract, ring, write and fling at the nets, we felt that we would remain in control of the expected rush of captures. All went well until about 10 am, when we suddenly found ourselves with dead and dying birds. It appeared that the predominantly juvenile birds were more susceptible to the heat than our experience allowed for. We emptied the nets as fast as possible, dis-

mantled them and settled down for a well-earned break and a lot of soul searching.

In the afternoon session, we tried opening one net at a time and concentrating the whole team at that net. This worked extremely well and we found ourselves clearing a net in under five minutes. Around 8 pm we packed up and were on our way back to Upington to enjoy a welcome cleanup and supper.

Sunday morning saw us repeating our, by now, well-rehearsed routine and by 10 am we had processed 3 004 Redbilled Quelea for the weekend. With the long homeward drive firmly in mind, we packed up and returned to Upington, where we enjoyed a shower and left for Potchefstroom.

The final breakdown was 49 adult males, 139 adult females and 2 816 juveniles (all younger than six months). Many valuable lessons were learnt, and not all of them new. I have prepared a separate list of guidelines for ringing in quelea breeding colonies.

Finally, thanks to the ringers and trainees, Northern Cape Nature Conservation and the Resource Conservation Unit. With all their help and enthusiasm the trip was a huge success. Any groups of ringers wishing to make themselves available for a similar outing should please contact Terry Oatley or myself.