Birding on the Chobe

By PROF. J. M. WINTERBOTTOM

THE Chobe Game Reserve of Botswana, soon to become a National Park, has a frontage on the Chobe River from Kasane to Ngoma. It is still in an embryonic state and the public at present has access only along the river. Since, at any rate in the dry season, most of the game is concentrated there, this is not a severe restriction for the ordinary tourist. To the ornithologist, as will be indicated below, the restriction is somewhat more serious. Fortunately, the Percy FitzPatrick Institute expedition, 6th—27th September, had a free hand and, thanks to the generosity of Mr. Ian Henderson, who lent us a Land Rover, was equipped to explore the country back from the river too.

However, any bird-lover who visits the Reserve has a feast in store in the riverine species. Both Carmine and White-fronted bee-eaters breed there, the former in large numbers. The Ihaha Lagoon holds an astonishing wealth of waterbirds — both pelicans, the pink-backed in numbers up to 50; white faced duck in hundreds; red-bill, yellowbill, pochard, knob-billed, spur-wing and Egyptian and pygmy geese; wood ibis, openbills, marabou and sacred ibis, often in large numbers; spoonbills, great white and little egrets; squacco, black and rufous-bellied herons; skimmers, grey-headed gulls and whiskered terns and both jacanas; makes your mouth water, doesn't it?

In the thick bush along the river, that splendid songster Heuglin's robin is common and the usual birds of such vegetation — black-eyed, yellow-bellied and terrestrial bulbuls, black-headed orioles, black-collared barbets, etc. — occur freely. Less expected was the trumpeter hornbill. Near Kasane, the Narina trogon occurs, though we were not lucky enough to meet with it.

A little back from the river is a dense belt of Acacia-Commiphora scrub and woodland. Here scarlet-chested and white-bellied sunbirds were abundant and Marico and black sunbirds also occur. The "go away" bird was common and so was the orange-breasted bush shrike. Giant eagle owls were nesting in the big thorn-trees and so were the most characteristic birds of the Chobe, the fish eagles, more numerous and tame than I have ever seen them.

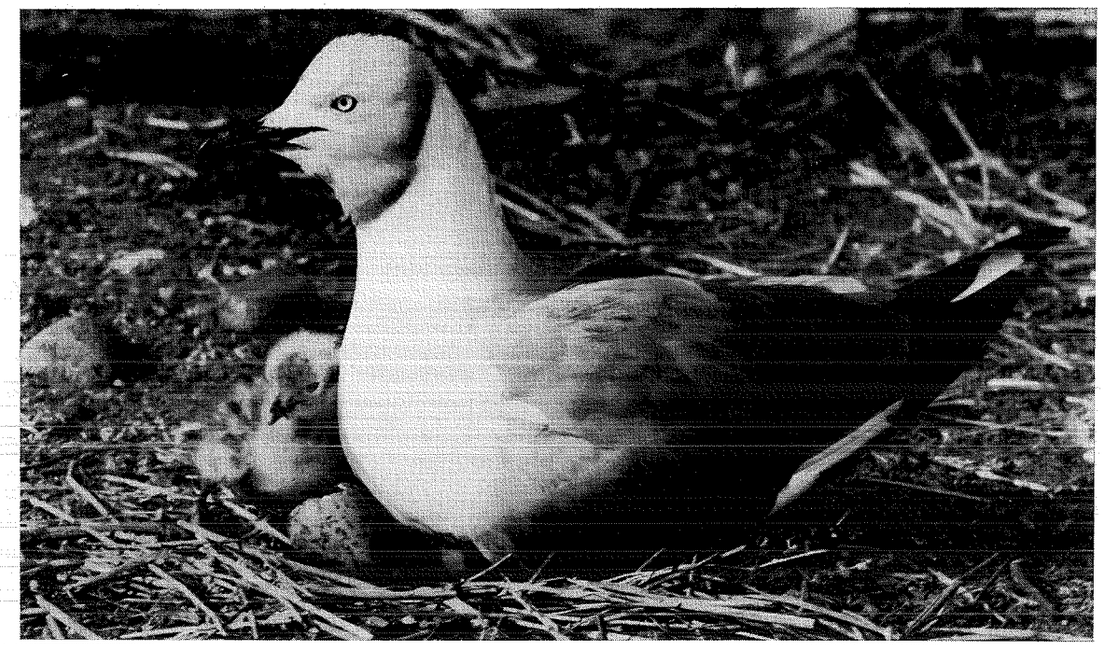
Out on the flood plain, or along its edges, are three species of coucal, including the big coppery-tailed, which is the commonest of the three; red-billed francolins and white-rumped babblers.

All these species, and many more, can be seen by the ordinary visitor. Further back from the river, and accessible only on tracks closed to the public, is a belt of *Baikiaea* woodland, much cut about by timber concessionaries but still containing some good trees and a representative selection of the birds typical of this habitat. One of the commonest is the Swallow-tailed Bee-eater; more usual birds included the Yellow-throated Sparrow, White-flanked Flycatcher, Puff-backed Shrike, Red-billed Hoopoe, Brubru Shrike, etc. We made two exciting discoveries here. One was Souza's Shrike, which was only the second record for southern Africa (we got the first on the Okavango, in South West Africa, in 1965); and the other the Angola, or Mottled, Rock Thrush, a first record for Botswana. Incidentally, this bird, though called a rock thrush because it belongs to the genus *Monticola*, has no interest in rocks at all. Another interesting find here was Arnot's Chat, which is usually a bird of mopane woodland.

Some 30 miles south of our base at Serondela (put at our disposal by Peter Johnson, who played a big part in the expedition, while his wife and his mother did the catering and fed us like fighting cocks) is a small pool in flat mopane country where we were astonished to find two red-billed teal and three stilts.

From Serondela, we made a 2-day trip to the Liambezi Lake, just over the Caprivi border, and added a number of extra species to our list. A great feature of Liambezi was the astonishing number of Pygmy geese, which were everywhere, in pairs and in flocks of up to 40. It was also the only place where we saw our familiar South African waterfowl, the coot.

We saw plenty of eagles besides the Fish eagle already mentioned—Tawny, Wahlberg's and the Black-breasted and Brown Snake-eagles, the Martial eagle, the Bateleur and, on the last day, the Long-crested. We found several Kori bustards, though most of the area was too thickly wooded to suit them. Blue waxbills were everywhere but the Violet-eared only in the *Baikiaea*. Our total species tally was 242. Peter Johnson was disappointed that we didn't reach the 250 — perhaps we might have done if we'd had another week. Personally, I have no grouses — I even got what James Fisher calls a "lifer" in the shape of the Natal nightjar. The full report will give all the other fascinating details I have had to omit here. If it appears in *The Ostrich*, I fear that some of you will throw it, unopened, into the waste-paper basket — but it will be your loss! I haven't told you here about the pratincoles, or the Rufous-necked Falcon; or the nightjars; or the francolins, or . . . but I must stop before you throw this into the waste-paper basket too.



Grey-headed Gull at its nest. Photographed in the Korsman Bird Sanctuary, Westdene, Benoni, by K. B. Newman.

RINGING ADDRESS: A CRITICISM

By P. LE S. MILSTEIN

MRS. M. K. ROWAN'S interesting article on "Bird-ringing in Southern Africa" lumps all those who like myself consider that improvements in our Ringing Scheme should include a better ringing address. As only some of her remarks concerning this group apply to myself, I would like to express my own views. Criticism by ringers has been justified, and it is gratifying to learn that progress is being made. It is implied that ringers are partly responsible for the amazing administrative lack of a system of ring-issue registers as an elementary essential. The article also gives an impression of the arguments favouring an address change being naïve and subjective, while those against appear conclusive and objective. Since I am at present studying in Britain, it must be stressed that these are my personal views, and not necessarily the views of my organization. Only on August 24th did I see a copy of the June *Bokmakierie*.

Remarks by Mrs. Rowan concerning the human fallibility factor and fear of returning rings probably apply to all ringing schemes to a greater or lesser degree. I heartily endorse any measures which, while not encouraging the destruction of ringed birds for their rings, would increase the efficiency of our ringing as a research technique. That is my prime consideration. A satisfactory ringing address could be an improvement while we would lose nothing. Mrs. Rowan's main argument against a change of address is that at present a supposed "norm" exists in South Africa, a reasonably consistent ratio between birds ringed and recovered. I dispute this.

Her assessment of education as a key factor appears contradictory, since any education, any articles, any personal contacts serve to increase ringing returns. However slightly they may increase recoveries, it is unlikely that this will occur at a predictable level. It is more likely to fluctuate considerably, as with my former colleague Dirk Lourens' quelea-ringing or my goose-ringing, when we used all publicity media available to us. If the 5% recovery rate of Egyptian Geese includes my recoveries, this is an example of a deviation from the supposed "norm". These recoveries were largely obtained by active solicitation of shooting and trapping farmers. They had no intention in most cases of sending them in, and two young men in the Orange Free State actually had a "trophy rack" for their waterfowl rings. Similarly in the early days of quelea-ringing, enormous efforts were made to obtain rings from the controlled swarms. As movements became clearer, this search petered out. Statistics may not make allowance for such factors. One authority on the application of statistics to bird-ringing considers the calculation of this error unnecessary, for admirably practical reasons.

I cannot recollect being challenged to a

quelea experiment, though they could easily be obtained for this grisly "test" by the sackful. The experimental numbers suggested seem too low to me if the usual trickle of returns is to be expected. How would this "salting" simulate anything approaching natural conditions in our sparsely-populated country? The "new-addressers" who beat a retreat probably did so wisely, rather than accept the responsibility of scattering thousands of poisoned birds around. To me, the time and effort involved would not justify the doubtful conclusions. Fear of reporting rings on the most notorious bird in the country, avian pest number one, is not a fair assessment. Yet fear is not the most important factor in an address-change; it is probably usual for all poached birds with rings.

Like other ringers I appreciate the kind co-operation of officials of the National Zoological Gardens (not Pretoria Zoo!) over the years. The issue mentioned of junior officials is only an administrative matter which could easily be rectified. My views on the unsuitability of zoos as a clearing address apply to all zoos, and the National Zoological Gardens is not singled out for criticism. I feel strongly from past experience that the association with a zoo of a recovered wild bird, dead or alive, too readily suggests an escapee to some-one who has no idea of bird-ringing, who knows like most people the elementary function of a zoo, and who does not know whether zoos normally mark their birds or not. The recovery of a dead of shot "zoo" bird does not always imply scientific research to the finder, but perhaps more often an escapee of mild interest. Promises of sending the ring in "next time" do not satisfy me.

It is surely not a coincidence that no other ringing scheme in the world has a "zoo" address, or has had one. A ring with "museum", or a box number on it, must surely stimulate more thought as to the origin of the bird, and that it may be important to some-one. Educated or intelligent people will send any ring in, "zoo" or whatever. They are not the problem as shown by the Congolese missionary who sent our Cliff Swallow rings to London without discovering the secret address inside. We in Southern Africa are dependent for the bulk of our recoveries on a sparse polyglot population of low average education. The improvement of our ringing address will of course not solve all the teething problems of our scheme. However, it should certainly make a contribution. If even a small proportion of the rings flung away can be additionally retrieved by this means, the minor change is justified.

Whether this will waste the previous years of ringing for comparative purposes is doubtful, to be polite. Should a "norm" exist, the recent change from a secret address on our smallest rings to one which can now be read by the uninitiated is, in my opinion, likely to bring about greater differences in the recovery rate than any reasonable change in address. Carried to its logical conclusion, the "stick-in-the mud" attitude presumably also includes no change to a better metal for our rings in the future, lest this effect the "norm". We still use the metal first used by Mortensen on June 5, 1899, after his initial attempts with tin-plate in 1890 had been unsatisfactory. Ring-wear and ring-loss are greatly under-rated and under-publicized problems of population and longevity studies; our scheme should not be bound to aluminium.

While I agree that it is far easier to sit back and not change the ringing address, particularly with a ring monopoly, I do not agree that it is better. The address is one of several small improvements which should still be made in our scheme: we can only gain by it. Since population studies are the ultimate in ringing, incorporating practically all aspects, another improvement of considerable benefit to these studies would be a directive that all ringed broods be unequivocally indicated, together with any chicks in the brood not ringed, for brood success studies. Improvements should not be left in abeyance while we quibble indefinitely and subjectively over vague possibilities. The charge by Des Jackson in the June *Bokmakierie* alleging weak leadership by the S.A.O.S. is certainly not without foundation.

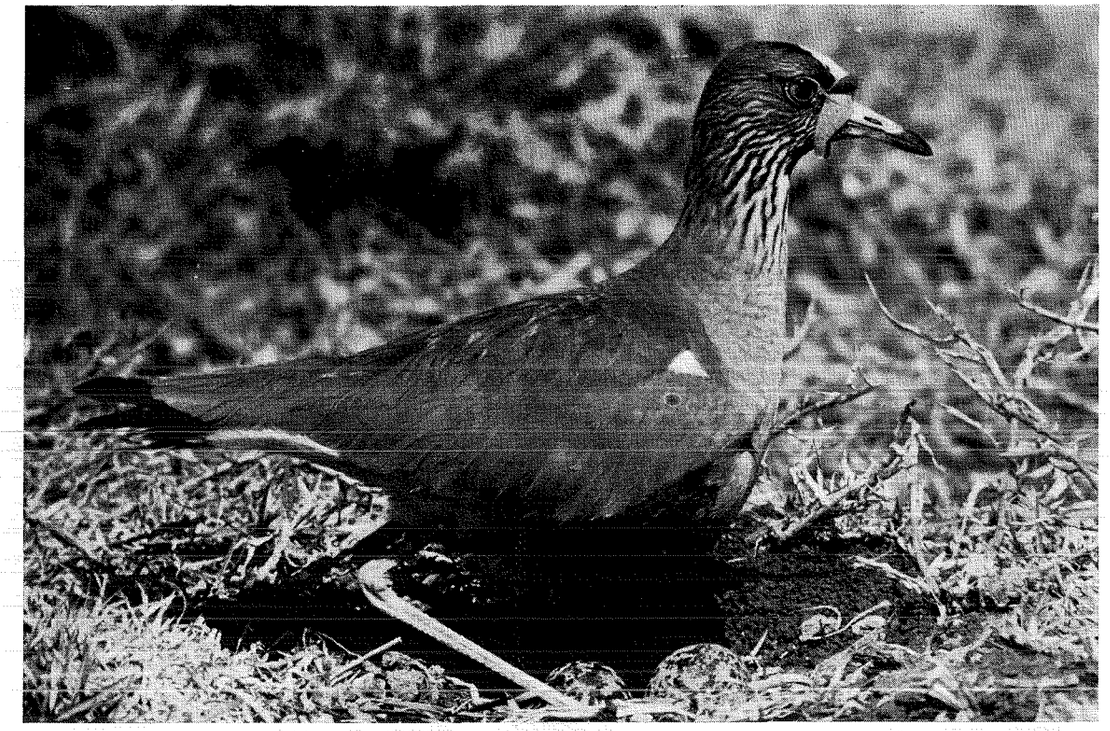
What we require is the progress and improvement mentioned by Mrs. Rowan at all levels of ringing instead of standing still. We need adequate rings before we can turn our attention to an adequate administrative system, adequate courses for novices, adequate guidance for research programs, adequate writing-up of research. Education should be stepped up enormously by whatever means we have, at whatever opportunities we have. The future is more important than the past. The British Ringing Scheme is generally considered the world's best. Prophets of doom may be interested in the fact that their smallest rings now have no connection with the British Museum of Natural History, but are inscribed "BTO Tring England". Would the gradual change of *our* rings to a better address be such a foolhardy move?

Ringing Address: Reply

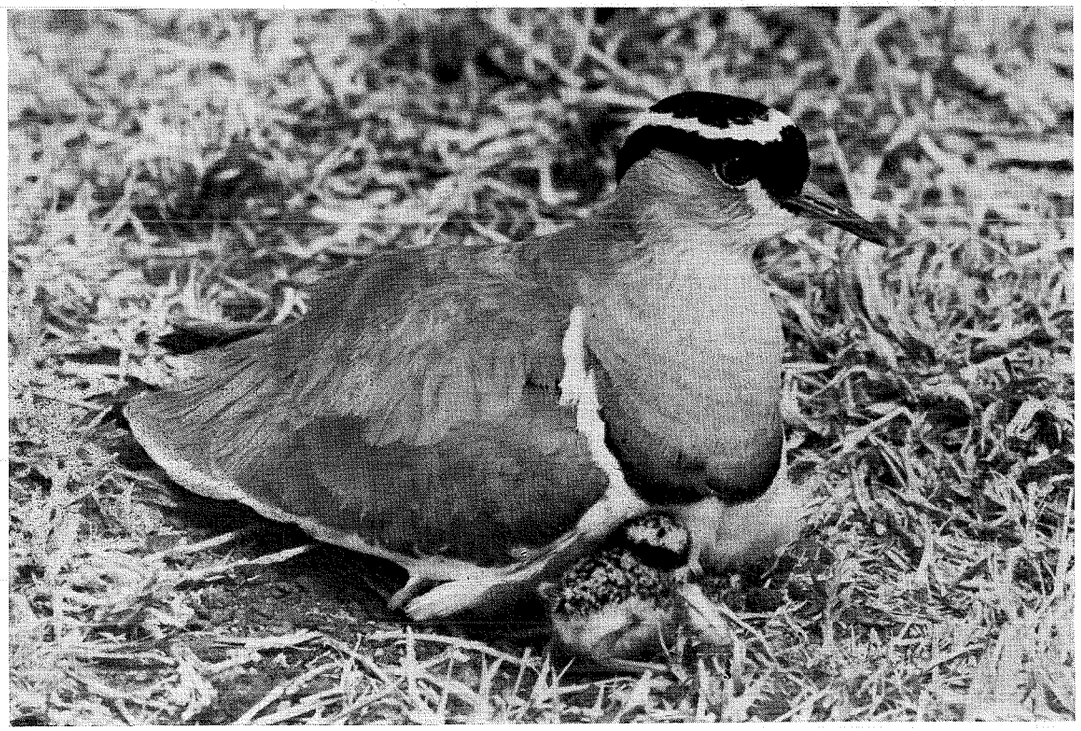
By M. K. ROWAN

Thank you for giving me an opportunity to comment on Mr. Milstein's article on the ringing address. A full answer would take pages, but I will limit my remarks to three of the more important points.

1. *Firstly, I hope that readers will not accept at face value Mr. Milstein's interpretations of the arguments advanced in my original article, but will return to the June* Bokmakierie *to check what*



Wattled Plover at its nest. Photographed at Rondebult, Germiston, by W. Tarboton. Taken from a 35mm transparency.



Crowned Plover with chick. Photographed by P. Steyn, Essexvale, Rhodesia.

I actually said. I ask this because Mr. Milstein has several times misrepresented me, doubtless inadvertantly, but with unfortunate distortions of my meaning. To cite only one example: Mr. Milstein says that I "implied that ringers are party responsible for the amazing administrative lack of a system of ring-issue registers as an elementary essential." This passage contains no less than three mis-statements, as follows. (a) Nowhere in my article did I suggest, by implication or otherwise, that ringers bear any part of the blame for administrative shortcomings. (b) However, I did state outright that ringers must share responsibility for the problem of "lost returns", because they have not always submitted their prime entries as meticulously as required. It is pertinent that Mr. Milstein himself appears to be one of the offenders of this category. (c) The assertion that no ring-issue is kept is false. It is precisely because such a record has been maintained (although not always perfectly) that we know that certain individuals have been lax in submitting completed ringing forms.

2. *Secondly, there are Mr. Milstein's arguments on the statistics of ringing, which seem to me unsound. To deal with a minor fallacy first: Mr. Milstein supposes that the 5% recovery rate for Egyptian Geese owes much to his own efforts. "These recoveries", he writes, "were obtained by active solicitation . . ." I am afraid he is mistaken. As I made plain early in my article, my figures for recoveries were taken from Dr. McLachlan's paper on the "first ten years of ringing in South Africa". Actually, McLachlan's review covered thirteen years, but as the period ended in June, 1961, it effectively antedates Mr. Milstein's own active participation in wildfowl ringing and research.*

A further and more misleading fallacy lies in Mr. Milstein's supposition that the term "norm" (his word) represents the same thing as "a reasonably consistent ratio between birds ringed and recovered" (my phrase). In fact, "norm" has no very precise meaning but, insofar as it can be defined, it denotes an unchanging standard or pattern. And it is neither necessary nor likely that our recovery rates conform to any such thing. On the contrary, seasonal variations and irregular annual fluctuations about the long-term mean seem much more probable; and, given sufficient data, I would expect the study of such fluctuations to be biologically enlightening.

Another serious fallacy appears in Mr. Milstein's third paragraph, where he writes that "statistics may not make allowance for" abnormal alterations in the recovery rate. But this is precisely the sort of thing that statistical analysis is designed to detect! It will show at once if there has been any significant deviation in the proportion of returns, and the investigator can immediately seek the cause. If he finds that the alteration was artificially produced (as in Mr. Milstein's examples), then the ringing data may be of no further biological value. On the other hand, if the deviation results from natural factors, it may be highly revealing.

It seems to me that arguments like those quoted above can only arise from a fundamental misconception, an idea that statistical analysis is an end in itself. It is not. It is merely a means for extracting from our ringing data all possible information on population problems — a question of vital interest to our own exploding species. But, if recovery rates are artificially fiddled, this potential may be destroyed — a poser to which none of our "new-addressers" have yet produced any satisfactory answer.

3. *Finally, I would like to draw attention to the emotional approach that Mr. Milstein has adopted, because I think it obscures the basic issues that ringing administrators are bound to keep in mind. For instance, instead of discussing the proposed quelea experiment with scientific detachment, he writes of "this grisly test"! He talks of "scattering thousands of poisoned birds around", blandly overlooking the fact that, according to depositions by his erts-while colleagues and himself, the poison used to destroy these birds is rendered innocuous by a few hours exposure to sunlight and the open air. With concern about the indiscriminate use of pesticides mounting throughout the world, I feel we are entitled to ask very seriously: What is the truth here? Are we now to understand that the dead birds remain toxic after all? That the anti-quelea campaign is contaminating the South African environment on a dangerous scale? Or is Mr. Milstein merely trying to "make a point" in order to discount the possible virtues of my proposal?*

He has other equally emotional passages, equally misleading in their veiled imputations of dishonourable motives (e.g. " . . . it is far easier to sit back and not change the ringing address, particularly with a ring monopoly . . . "). But let me conclude with reference to a passage at the beginning of Mr. Milstein's article, where he accuses me of creating an impression that arguments in favour of a change of address are "naïve and subjective". This was not the impression I intended (I tried to treat the issue on its merits), but I am afraid that Mr. Milstein has amply confirmed it by his own writing, for his article contains no objective arguments, and advances no hard scientific evidence in support of his contentions.

Although bird-ringing in South Africa owes much of its modest success to the many non-scientists who give dedicated hours to field work, it remains a scientific pursuit, financed from scientific sources and with scientific objects. Thus only scientific criteria can be applied in its administration; and the proponents of a new address must match these standards when they press their case. This requirement is as elementary and as essential as the keeping of a ring-issue register.