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SAFRING Ezemvelo 60th Anniversary Ringers' Conference

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The 60th Anniversary Ringers' Conference was held at the Ezemvelo Nature Reserve north east of Bronkhorstspuit from the 6th to the 8th December 2008. The reserve preserves a particularly attractive area of Bankenveld with a wide range of habitats including typical Highveld Grassland, reed beds, standing water, riverine forest and broad leaf bushveld on the rocky ridges. It proved to be an excellent venue that not only allowed the ringers all the variety they could wish for but also provided Doug Harebottle and Res Altwegg the opportunity to atlas two pentads in the area.

A total of 36 delegates (including some non ringing partners) attended. While it was disappointing not to have more of the Pretoria expertise represented, we were fortunate in having a relatively large overseas contingent (Stein Nilsen from Norway, Res Altwegg from Switzerland and Magda Remisiewicz from Poland) all of whom made significant contributions. For the less experienced ringers it was really good to be able to be exposed to the years of experience and expertise that vest in the likes of the Rajmaker's, Joseph Heymans, Mike Ford and Hennie de Klerk.

Although proceedings officially only kicked off on the Friday a large proportion of the delegates arrived on Thursday afternoon in order to get an early start the next morning and indeed 03h30 Friday saw Kobie's convoy heading off to the reed beds. The early mornings and late afternoons were given over to ringing while in the middle of the day a range of papers were presented.

With Dieter in the chair, Les got proceedings underway with a potted history of SAFRING. Our organization has certainly lurched from crisis to crisis and it is a tribute to Les, Dieter and their predecessors that despite it all we have survived and been successful.



Fig. 1. View from reception overlooking the dam (photo: Doug Harebottle)

George Bredenkamp from the University of Pretoria discussed the vegetation of the Bankenveld and gave us a good insight as to just how varied and special this unique biome is.

Andre Botha shared with us his experience in tagging vultures and birds of prey. The BoPWG has been getting very exciting results using highly visible patagial tags. Because they are so visible the odds of resightings are very good and bird movements become that much easier to track.

Stein Nielsen's description of arctic ringing in Norway gave a new insight into ringing in extreme conditions and the challenges that these pose.

Together with Red Bishops *Euplectes orix*, weavers are probably the most frequently ringed terrestrial birds in South Africa and Dieter's paper on the ageing and sexing of weavers was appreciated by even the most experienced ringers present.

The Darvill Bird Sanctuary near Pietermaritzburg is one of the country's oldest and has been the site of ongoing ringing campaigns. Mark Brown's paper on this important site was particularly enlightening as it not only emphasized the important role that ringing has played in ornithological science but as it is a habitat that is constantly being modified. Ringing data has been used to track the effects of these changes on birds.

In addition to organizing the conference, Zephné Bernitz found time to prepare a fascinating presentation on her recent contract in Cambodia which entailed ringing and sampling of birds as part of an Avian Influenza (AI) project. This was particularly apposite as only 12 days later (17th December) the press reported another case of AI from Cambodia. Her talk also brought home the devastation that has been wreaked on the avian population by the destitution left behind by the Khmer Rouge regime. It was quite chilling to see images of Jacana carcasses laid out in market stalls.

Joel Avni described the methods that he had developed for trapping ducks at Barberspan. He placed emphasis on bird welfare and the methods and hardware developed to ensure minimal injury and mortality. He showed that successful capture of ducks is very dependent on the birds becoming habituated to the traps.

SABAP2 is now in full swing and Les Underhill gave us a very lucid description of the project. It is an ambitious one but the software that Michael Brooks developed is most impressive and will go a long way to making the project a success. The use of pentads (5 minute x 5 minute units) rather than the ¼ degree sheet (15 minutes x 15 minutes) used in SABAP1 will result in a very much sharper definition of bird distribution.

Res Altwegg illustrated the use of ringing data in scientific research using data he had generated in Switzerland. While the statistical techniques he used are unlikely to be used by the average "citizen scientist" it was fascinating to see the information that can be obtained from ringing data.

The high northern latitudes of Poland are important wader breeding grounds and Magda Remisiewicz described the techniques used there to capture waders. In addition she addressed measuring techniques and standards as a timely reminder for the need for accuracy and repeatability.

Trophic level refers to the position occupied by an organism in the succession of steps involved in the energy transfer in a community. Craig Symes examined the

relationships between C and N stable isotopes (which are a function of food type) and the partitioning of food in afro-montane forest birds occurring at different trophic levels. This study would not have been possible without the contribution of ringer's trapping skills.

Mike Ford described, in his inimitable style, his experiences as a volunteer ringer in Turkey. He worked on two sites under difficult conditions with inexperienced assistants who spoke less English than he does Turkish. His achievements (2000 birds ringed) were particularly impressive given that most of the species (75 out of 76) were new to him. A fascinating observation was that by far the majority (80%) were immatures or females. His talk illustrated the successive waves of birds that pass during migration.

A round table discussion at the end of the Saturday session was very ably chaired by Mark Brown. Inevitably the thorny problem of funding for SAFRING featured prominently. Faced with rising costs and a UCT administration that is not as supportive as we would all like, it is difficult to see a clear way out of the funding impasse. One of the possibilities discussed was for groups of ringers to club together to buy rings rather than to rely on the ADU agency.

Ecotone was represented by Magda who had brought plenty of stock with her and a number of us were able to give ourselves early Christmas presents.

Most ringing took place in the reed beds and in the wetland upstream of the main dam in front of the camp site. Predictably Red Bishops and weavers predominated but the occasional special came to hand.



Fig. 2. The conference venue (photo: Doug Harebottle)



Fig. 3a, b. Mark Brown with an African Pygmy Kingfisher *Ispidina picta* (photos: Doug Harebottle)