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Ringers' conference, Barberspan, NW Province, 10-14 March 2010

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At the Ringers Conference held at Ezemvelo NR in Gauteng in December 2008 there were presentations on the “exotic topic” (to me) of the ringing of waders and waterfowl by Magda Remisiewicz and Colin Jackson.

So when the opportunity arose to participate in the following Ringers' Conference to be held at Barberspan in North-West Province in March 2010, and which offered the chance to learn from those with expertise at ringing waders and water birds, I jumped at the chance.

To make sure I had the chance to see how the wader netting was done and how the walk-in traps for water birds worked, I arranged to get to Barberspan on Thursday, a day before the Conference officially started. Magda and Joel Avni were finalising accommodation arrangements for the delegates together with the site staff under Sampie van der Merwe's management, so I was fortunate to be able to go out with Magda's assistants, Sara Lipshutz and Yahkat Barshep to check traps and nets and we returned with the first Kittlitz Plover I had the opportunity to handle.

Other delegates started arriving and by the following evening most had arrived. Barberspan's accommodation was then popping at the seams as eventually there were 50 participants, including Barberspan staff and one-day official guests. Of these, 43 participants were South Africans and seven foreigners from as far afield as Nigeria, USA, Reunion, Botswana, Kenya and Poland. There were 27 ringers, 11 trainees, 12 birders and accompanying persons. Sampie and his team had worked wonders as until almost the last moment there were insufficient beds and in the one house the stove was limping along with one operating hot plate out of four. All these admin issues were resolved in time for the last delegates. Hats off also to Magda, Joel, Herman and Zephné for the behind the scenes organization.

Barberspan offered a range of different habitats, but the reed-beds proved to be the most productive as Herman and Zephné found to their dismay when they and Sylva Francis were swamped by Southern Red Bishops and help was called in from all available ringers.

Apart from the ringing in the mornings, there were presentations from a number of speakers in the afternoons. Some of the highlights of these presentations were:

- Mark Anderson's presentation on the flamingos at the pan in Kimberley
- A stimulating talk about how to age birds in the hand by Kenyan ringer, Colin Jackson
- An interesting talk by Zephné Bernitz of the recent capture of Amur Falcons and fitting of 10 of these with radio-telemetry equipment to track their migratory routes
- Derek Engelbrecht's interesting presentation on how to capture larks
- Issues of SABAP2 by Les Underhill and Sally Hoffmeyer spoke on how this has identified population shifts in certain species

- Sara and Yahkat spoke about their projects with Crested Auklets and Curlew Sandpipers, Dawie de Swardt spoke about his work on prinias and Magda gave a presentation on interpretation of moult and body mass data from waders. Peter D'Arcy spoke about the results of a ringing exercise at Lake Ngami in Botswana, and Steven Segang told delegates of his experiences during his visit to the International Crane Foundation in the US
- Mark Brown gave a stimulating talk on collaboration between ringers and rehabilitation centres
- Alan Brooks spoke on issues of SAFRING database integrity and emphasised the need for ringers to submit data in the standard format and to check all data before submitting.

And delegates did not only involve themselves with attending lectures as over the period of the conference: 1610 birds were handled of 82 species. Birds not ringed at Barberspan previously were Darter (10 chicks), Cloud Cisticola and Crimson-breasted Shrike. Of the retraps already reported, the greatest elapsed time was for two White-browed Sparrow-Weavers ringed in June 2008. Top species caught were Southern Red Bishop (743 – most by Herman, Zephné and assistants), Red-billed Quelea (183), Southern Masked-Weaver (128), Kittlitz's Plover (70), and Egyptian Goose (38). In addition as part of a conference project, the 183 Red-billed Quelea were colour ringed. Most of the delegates learned new techniques, both regarding capture and also with regard to the sterile processing of and taking of cloacal and throat swabs and blood specimens from water birds.

Sally Hofmeyr (Cape Town) and Johan van Rensburg (Standerton) qualified with their A Ringers licenses at the Barberspan conference. Four of the Barberspan group of trainees (3 rangers - Amos Kolotoi, Sydwell Setuki, Andrew Mvundle, and Steven Segang who trained with this group but now works for EWT) got their C ringers licenses.

My personal view is that the conference was well worth attending, both from hearing the high-quality presentations as well as the exposure to expertise with catching and handling waders and waterfowl, species I had not previously had the opportunity to ring. There was also the opportunity to get to know ringers from other parts of the country. I would recommend that all ringers try to attend future conferences.

