IN APPRECIATION

GEORGE UNDERHILL

1918 - 1997

It may seem strange that someone whom George described as "That bloody Scotsman who should have been strangled at birth" could write anything about the man that might even verge on appreciative. But the crime which merited this accolade was indeed a serious one – putting a ring on the left leg (I'm left-handed), while George was on the verge of adding another to the right when the bird was retrapped. As the comment was made with that typical Underhill twinkle, and knowing him as we did, it was impossible to take offence!

George was an idiosyncratic and colourful character, an eccentric with a manner which could be mildly intimidating at times, especially to those unfamiliar with his style. Fortunately there were many who knew him better. And, as Table 2 in the annual ringing reports has so often demonstrated, he was a tireless ringer. An interest in natural history burgeoned when he was keen to involve his son, Les, with wildlife, and his mistnetting career began in the 1960s when he joined the swallow ringers at Somerset West. Birding, nest recording and ringing subsequently became a passion for them both. George remained an enthusiastic amateur of the highest calibre, but it gave him immense satisfaction and pride to see Les achieve so much in the field of professional ornithology.

He spent his working life in the Post Office's mail-sorting department. His long hours (6 am to 8 pm) equipped him with the stamina and industry that served him so well in ringing in his later years. In the war he saw active service as a sergeant major in the signals in Italy, North Africa and Madagascar. After his retirement much of his time was spent nest finding, atlassing for the SW Cape and national atlases and recording bird song. He spent hundreds of hours sorting and coding atlas data, a job which must have been singularly tedious. It was over the last ten years of his life, however, that ringing became a particular obsession and he became well known in ringing circles. He was, indeed, instrumental in encouraging and training many new ringers in the western Cape and can be largely credited with the relatively healthy state of ringing in the region today. After some exploratory visits to a number of potential ringing locations within a reasonable distance of his home in Mowbray in the mid-eighties, he adopted three sites as his own – Rondevlei and Durbanville Nature Reserves and the farm Goedeontmoeting near Malmesbury. All three were worked at least once a month as Measured Effort Sites, but the last-named became perhaps his favourite and he caught more birds there than anywhere else. Initially he was a bit unsure that ringing hundreds, nay thousands, of Cape Weavers and Red Bishops was really going to be a valuable exercise, but it was not long before he had built up an excellent series of data and the recoveries had started to trickle in to show just how worthwhile it was.

Another important site was Betty's Bay where the Underhill family has a holiday cottage. Here a patch of pincushion bushes attracted hundreds of sugarbirds and sunbirds in spring and early summer, as well as a good variety of other fynbos bush-birds over the rest of the year. Dusk would find him netting in the reed beds for European Swallows and other birds coming in to roost; darkness often found him out on the beach dazzling shorebirds.

George kept meticulous records of retraps and moult, transferring great volumes of data to

disc when he mastered the computer under Les's tutelage. His SAFRING schedules were invariably amongst the first to be submitted, Indeed, he was rarely a day or two into the new ringing year without his outstanding records for the old year having been dutifully delivered by hand to SAFRING. It is hard to believe that his distinctive heron-like figure, typically becapped with black beret, will no longer be making its way up the long hill from Mowbray to UCT, while all the students take the bus.

A day's ringing with George was memorable as much for his company as for the birds we caught. Not to mention his picnic lunches – how many ringers can claim to bring not only a teapot but a tea cosy on their expeditions? He was as mustard-keen on his third or fourth outing of the week as he would have been if it were his only trip of the year. Like a cricket captain contemplating his field placings, George would constantly be on the lookout for any actions of the birds that would make them easier to outwit with a few judicious moves of the net or shakes of a bush.

Mistnets were only part of George's catching arsenal. He was an ingenious and talented maker of traps, including an array of bespoke zap nets. The sight of an elderly gentleman, crouching behind a hedge did not even turn a head in Roseberry Road, as the locals were accustomed to him waiting to pull the string of a zap net in his neighbour's garden. This labour- and time-intensive activity produced a remarkable total of doves and Rock Pigeons over the years. My favourite Underhill construction was an old wire lampshade frame adapted to make a "walk-in" trap for Fiscal Shrikes, a tethered grasshopper providing the lure. It worked!

When George wasn't ringing he liked to be talking about ringing. And he liked to talk like a fish likes to swim. No field-trip evening was ever dull if George was there beside the fire. His accounts of ringing exploits, from hours spent trying to secure a solitary cock Chaffinch in Tokai Forest, to the nets straining under the weight of weavers at the farm (and he could rattle off the life-history of each retrap), were always entertaining. As were his recollections of the war years. Indeed, anyone who listened to his tales of life in the army would (a) feel as if they had been through the campaigns with him themselves, and (b) wonder how the allies won the war at all. His stories were every bit as funny as Spike Milligan's and it is a shame he didn't commit them to paper. He also possessed a great wealth of knowledge about local history and the people who lived in Cape Town and on the Agulhas Plain (a favourite stamping ground, with friends such as the late Dirk Uys, for many years), and his recollections of people and places were fascinating.

For many years George was curator of the SAOS (as was) nest record card collection. He submitted hundreds of cards himself, his target species being the longclaws and cisticolas of Rondebosch Common (which he studied for many years), and the African Black Oystercatchers and Whitefronted Plovers of Betty's Bay. He bemoaned the decline in nest recordings and was at a loss to explain how it was that in the old days a single Cape Bird Club member could submit more nest record cards a year than the whole club does today. This trend now shows signs of reversing which George would certainly welcome. For many years he also participated in wader counts, beached-bird surveys and many Cape Bird Club activities, notably as a group leader on outings. He was a member of the Club for 40 years and served on its committee and on the SAOS Council. He was awarded an honorary Life Membership in 1994 for his services to the Cape Bird Club. His observation, not intimated publicly, that "They always wait until you've got one foot in the grave before giving you these things' was a typically modest and self-effacing reaction, but he was genuinely pleased at the honour, which is not lightly bestowed.

There was much more to George than birds and ringing. He was a skilled and knowledgeable gardener, his garden being a source of vegetables and, to me, amazement in about equally large proportions. The vast quantity

of produce which emanated from a tiny postage stamp of a plot was astonishing. He dispensed this largesse to his friends and neighbours with unstinting generosity. A major contribution to the garden's startling productivity was George's passion for compost. His two great steaming bins were a source of considerable satisfaction to him and his earthworms, which he delighted in showing unsuspecting visitors; "red spaghetti" he called them (the worms, not necessarily the visitors). Although his own garden and kitchen were the major suppliers of raw material, he was not averse to exploiting alternative supplies including a regular patrol of suburban pavements after dark to feel the bin bags for the distinctive texture of grass clippings. All this accumulated material was consigned to the compost generator and enriched by a potent liquid of domestic origin for which George had a number of polite and not-so-polite euphemisms, depending on the company.

George was also, let us say, a resourceful cook. Much of his baking was perhaps experimental, but the rejects soon found their way into the zap-net catching area and many a dove fell to the charms of his rusks. Perhaps he knew something that the rest of us didn't and was stocking up for some imminent disaster, but food seemed to build up relentlessly in his house. Never one to squander nature's bounty, his larder overflowed with a great variety of preserves, including curried green beans and *suurvy* of an alarming vintage. If he couldn't manage to eat his mince-meat at Christmas, he simply topped up the jars with brandy and resealed them for the next year. This led to the evolution of some mince pies, baked by himself, of an alcohol content which probably rendered the consumer well over the legal limit. Dried fruit was accumulated in prodigious quantities and he seemed uneasy in the knowledge that not everyone on the planet had access to this great source of energy and nutrients. Your editor will remember how difficult it was to thwart George's determination that he (TBO) should take great bags of dried peaches on the plane over to Les and family in Switzerland! He had a colossal appetite. Whole fish (not tiddlers, mind you, but 2 or 3kg or more) were pickled and then eaten over the course of a week or so. The leftovers of monstrous stews would be topped up from day to day with new ingredients and a fortnight could pass before there was none of the original stock remaining. He mastered a microwave cooker late in his career, but was not invariably in control of his pressure cooker, as the violent splashes and streaks (which, in my part of the world, might have earned substantial funding from the Arts Council) on the kitchen ceiling testified. Perhaps our most lasting culinary memory of George was finding him in his kitchen one lunchtime devouring a casserole of Yellowtail heads, whose clouded eyes gazed balefully from an ocean of onions as he hacked gleefully into their skulls with what seemed to us unnatural enthusiasm. We hope our refusal of a helping was suitably graceful.

His undoubted eccentricities were more than matched by great charm, and his consideration for others. George showed much kindness to even the most difficult and demanding of his neighbours and was forever running errands for those less energetic (and often younger) than himself. He was a devoted family man, and a long-time supporter of his local church. He will be sorely missed well beyond the realm of birds and ringing.

Doubtless a good number of George's birds will be recovered over the years to come, and the "Report on Selected Recoveries" in *Safring News* will, from time to time, remind us of this energetic and dedicated ringer. If ever the Cape Weaver bearing his regimental number comes to grief it should be stuffed and mounted as a permanent memorial to him! But even without his birds, all who knew him will have their own memories of this very special person. We mourn his passing, and extend our condolences to Les and Jane and his granddaughters Carryn and Jenny.

Mike Fraser
The Manse, Dirleton, East Lothian EH39 SEL Scotland