EDITORIAL

Another ringing year is past, and this is a good time to take stock of bird ringing in southern Africa and to see what we are achieving.

The articles and reports featured in this issue give a good indication of the diversity of interests and studies being currently pursued and highlight both the advantages and the shortcomings of the research tool we employ in marking birds.

For many ringers the capture and banding of long-distance palaearctic migrants holds great appeal. If you ring enough of them the chances are that sooner or later one of 'your' birds is going to be recovered at some point in Europe or Asia 10 000 or more kilometres distant. Swallows, waders and warblers are regular subjects for attention amongst 'amateurs'; that is those for whom bird ringing is not part of their day-to-day work. Waders are the favourite subjects and, incidentally, yield the best returns in terms of long-distance recoveries or recaptures. This high recovery rate seems to stem firstly from the fact that waders are 'sport' birds in many places in Europe and are actively hunted and, secondly, perhaps, because wader enthusiasts are numerous in the ornithological fraternity and tend to form themselves into well-organised, active study groups in many countries.

The elucidation of migration, though it provided the initial impetus in bird ringing all over the world, is today often a spin-off rather than the prime objective of many studies. Once a bird is individually identifiable, or merely recognisable as being marked as opposed to unmarked, the way is opened for the gathering of much additional information. Hence studies may be aimed at determining fidelity to winter quarters or to nest site, survival rate, and individual longevity, as well as individual behaviour. I deliberately exclude population size estimates because the mark-recapture studies make many assumptions that cannot be safely taken to apply in a field situation.

A great deal of work has been devoted in northern countries to estimating mortality rate from recoveries of ringed birds. In order to obtain reliable estimates large annual sample sizes are required. These can be obtained in temperate climes where there are few species and vast numbers of individuals of each. Here we have many species, the majority in relatively small numbers. This fact, coupled with a comparatively sparse human population (in terms of numbers per square kilometre), makes it

unlikely that our recovery data will ever lend itself to the extraction of reliable demographic estimates for land birds, particularly passerine species. For this reason recapture data becomes of paramount importance. Regular ringing and recapture at a single locality, either of single species or of everything that gets caught will, in the long-term, provide a very valuable data base, and indeed the only data comprehensive enough to enable reasonable estimates of species survival to be made.

For those who ring many species, selecting significant recaptures to report can be time-consuming if record-keeping is not well planned. Dr. Skead's article (page 6) shows one way of simplifying the task. However, as pointed out by Dr. Craig (page 8), recaptures involving netting of ringed birds are unlikely to provide a comprehensive picture in the short-term. Actively spotting or searching for individually colour-ringed birds will yield much more comprehensive results.

Overall it is evident that ringers are making diverse use of marking to turn in good studies of an increasing variety of birds. This is a healthy trend and one in which there is still unlimited scope in southern Africa.

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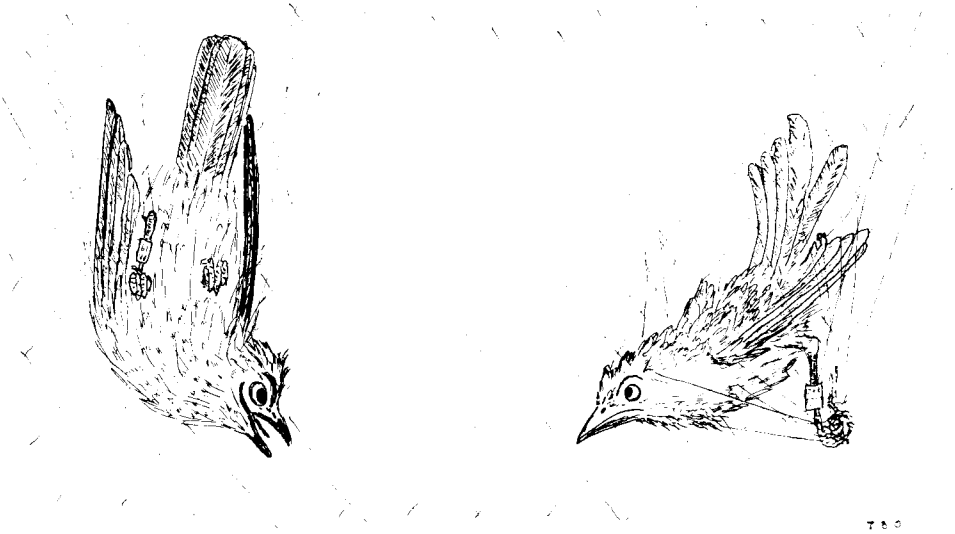

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