

# EDITORIAL

Concern is frequently expressed at committee and club level about the low level of recoveries of ringed birds reported by the public in southern Africa. Over the past five ringing years the recovery totals have ranged from 426 (1984-1985) to 564 (1982-1983) with a mean of 484. Ringers who have put a lot of effort and money (in transport costs) into their ringing are not happy about this and the common call from all concerned is for more publicity. The public at large, it is felt, must be made aware of bird ringing and urged to look out for ringed birds.

In this context it is of interest to note that in North America the Bird Banding Laboratory of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Canadian Wildlife Service eschew publicity about band recoveries on the grounds that it results in perturbations in the level of band returns. This violates one of the basic assumptions in recovery analysis models, namely that numbers of bands returned are proportional to numbers of birds ringed and not influenced by other factors.

In October this year bird ringing in South Africa received, for the first time, nation-wide exposure on SABC TV1. Did the programme result in an increase in recovery reports? Yes, it did, but not quite in the manner anticipated. Many people dug out rings that had been lying in drawers for years, and sent or took them to the National Zoological Gardens in Pretoria. One gentleman reported a ring he found on a Turtle Dove shot in the Lichtenburg District in 1970. He had a good memory because the year was correct. The record was already on file as it had been reported by his wife at the time of recovery. But other finders could not remember in which year they had found the rings (in some instances more than one ring was involved) and these rings had not been previously reported. So we received quite a few ancient recoveries that we cannot really process satisfactorily. Perhaps, though, the programme has impressed on some members of the public the importance of reporting ring recoveries. One recent telephone caller to the Zoo gave a ring number and a recovery locality but adamantly refused to give name or address or telephone number or any other information!

In summary there has been no dramatic upturn in recovery reports following the TV programme, and the number of recoveries reported from 1 July to 10 December 1985 has been 117. On this basis, 1985-1986 promises to be an 'average' year again so far as recoveries are concerned. In other words, we can expect less than 500 recoveries in total.

The extent to which publicity is successful in boosting recoveries must be related to the probability of any member of the public finding a ringed bird within a certain period after exposure to the publicity. This probability may be too low at present for publicity to be effective. In earlier years there were two 'permanent' ringing stations in the country: Barberspan in the western Transvaal and Rondevlei near Cape Town. Bird ringing ceased some years ago at Rondevlei and has been phased down at Barberspan. The creation of a bird observatory at Marievale may provide a boost to ringing effort on the Witwatersrand but our annual totals of birds ringed are still meagre, even by comparison with another southern hemisphere country like Australia. They are rising, however, and the Unit has issued 35 000 rings in the last six months. Hopefully the increasing ringing effort will begin to tell in the recovery totals. In the meantime public awareness is perhaps best illustrated by a remark overheard on Fish Hoek railway station when a little girl saw a ringed Hartlaub's Gull walking about on the platform: "Oh mummy, look! That bird is married!".

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