

# NOTES

## GREAT WHITE HUNTERS AND PEEPING TOMS

Warwick Tarboton

As a solitary and modest birder (with a tally of less than 100 birds in the last 8 years), I spent Friday 16th September sitting uncomfortably sandwiched between ringer no. 460, who has ringed 25 000 Cliff Swallows in the last eight years and ringer no. 019 who has, in the same eight years, taught many hundreds, if not thousands, of schoolkids and other would-be ringers how to ring. Escom's Megawatt Park in Johannesburg was the venue for the Bird Ringing Workshop, which preceded the S.A.O.S.'s AGM, and it was attended by about 20 people.

What did I learn and what were my impressions? That about 35 000 birds per year are currently being ringed through SAFRING, that SAFRING is at last financially tenured through funding by the Department of Environment Affairs ("we need a South African ringing scheme as much as we need a telephone service") and that SAFRING would be a lot worse off without the skilful and efficient presence of Terry Oatley at the helm. Most of the meeting was open-ended discussion on topics like permits, training of ringers, ring quality, availability of colour rings and so on. A plaintive call was made to the conservation authorities to standardise on their policy towards ringers and to streamline permit issue. An annual ringing 'binge' was suggested where would-be ringers could come and formally learn why birds are ringed, and how they can be caught, identified and ringed, and the Natal Bird Club went ahead and organised just such a do in October. We learnt that the boycott on South Africa by Scandinavian countries has made metal rings more expensive and hard to come by and that the new surcharges are going to push up ring prices still more. More ringing, it was suggested, would help contain costs by economies of scale. Frank Douwes demonstrated his use of DBase III Plus for storing and analysing ringing data and Steve Piper did the same with his customised Longtailed Wagtail database which included a graphic wagtail that defecated if you entered an impossible combination. Roy Earle demonstrated his bird parasite collecting kit and urged ringers to take blood smears and to collect samples of the mites, lice, flies and ticks from birds they ringed.

Towards the end of the day, when the refreshment lounge loomed large in everyone's mind, the subject of a new ringing manual came up and some swift decisions were made on who, when, and how it was to be produced. Basically it is to be a manual for field use and Terry Oatley, John Bunning, Frank Douwes, Mike Fagan and Steven Piper undertook to prepare the envisaged six chapters by the end of 1988 so that the manual could be available to ringers in June 1989 at a cost of about R20.

The dilemma that bird-ringing in South Africa faced about a decade ago nearly surfaced a few times and was in my mind throughout the meeting. We need more birds ringed in South Africa. Why? To bring down the unit cost? To justify the maintenance of an efficient SAFRING? To spawn the next generation of ornithologists? Or to learn more about birds? Bird-ringing nearly collapsed a decade ago when project-orientated ringing came in and ring-and-pling went out. Overnight catching and ringing birds for enjoyment, rather than in the quest of knowledge, became as taboo as a socially embarrassing disease and many packed up their nets and left the scene. Now the cry for more ringers and more ringing is on again - hold ringing binges, relax standards, make ringing permits easier to get, let the kids of this decade experience the Great White Hunter syndrome and catch birds (and ring them).

If, for most people, the motivation for bird ringing is simply experiencing the Great White Hunter syndrome, perhaps the attitude taken by the Orange Free State Division of Nature Conservation of charging ringers R25 and issuing them with a hunting licence isn't so hilarious. It's a hackneyed saying that ringing is simply a tool to learn more about birds, just as binoculars, blood smears and telemetry are, and it is an equally hackneyed saying that history has the habit of repeating itself. But if ringing develops simply for its recreational value then I suggest that history will repeat itself in the same painful way; ringing will lose credibility and many of its stalwarts will give up yet again. On the other hand, without volume, the viability of SAFRING will be on the line and the ringing 'industry' as a whole will suffer. Those that are using ringing as a scientific tool stand to lose out as much as the Great White Hunters. At this time and place the one needs the other.

Does bird-ringing spawn future ornithologists? Comments at the workshop suggested not, or at least at a very high drop-out rate. I suggest that, instead of fostering the Great White Hunter syndrome in your ringers, another, the Peeping Tom syndrome, be encouraged. Demonstrate at ringing binges and training sessions that there is endless interest to be had in learning all the salacious details of the private lives of the weavers, robins or wagtails living within one's suburban garden. Ringing, of course, is essential in opening up this new world, but the perspective is different: it is the means and not the end. Apart from ringing's credibility remaining intact, I suspect that more self-motivated young ornithologists with an enduring interest in birds will be spawned by this than by the Great White Hunter syndrome.

W R Tarboton, P O Box 327, NYLSTROOM, 0510.