

# NEWS AND REPORTS

SAFRING STATISTICS FOR THE 1987-1988 RINGING YEAR

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This is the seventh report in the series of annual bird ringing statistics which was inaugurated in this journal in 1982. The purpose of these reports is to provide details of ringing effort, trends in recovery rates and other regional statistics which have no place in a formal scientific paper but are (or should be) of interest to the widely-scattered bird-ringing fraternity in southern Africa.

The staff of the Ringing Unit (all two of us) are normally so busy with the nuts and bolts of administering the Scheme that the compilation of a report such as this provides a needed opportunity to take stock of the progress of the Scheme and to ponder the import of various statistics which can be derived from the annual figures.

It has been my privilege, over the course of the past year, to participate in ringing activities in three Provinces and to see at first-hand the efforts being put into the training of new (and usually young) ringers. I have been impressed with the enthusiasm and keenness of the trainees, not to mention the dedication of the trainers, and this augurs well for the future. How many youngsters will ultimately retain their skills and interest to become permanent part-time ringers is anybody's guess, but some good community ringing is taking place in the training process and will yield continuing retrap and recovery data. Increasing ring costs, however, may well put a brake on amateur ringing effort and threaten to slow down the momentum maintained in recent years. This report covers the 1987-1988 ringing year, not the one just ended, and shows no indication of declining ringing effort, but those who annually ring hundreds or thousands of birds and have had to renew stocks recently will be aware of the cost impact inflation is having on their activity.

## RINGING EFFORT

After several years of sitting in second or third place the Transvaal has finally made it to the top of the ringing effort rostrum (Table 1 overleaf). Although their margin over the Cape is slender, it must be mentioned that the Transvaal figures are largely contributed by amateur ringers, whereas the Cape totals include some official projects such as the gannet project at Bird Island, Algoa Bay.

TABLE 1

## COMPARISON OF REGIONAL RINGING EFFORT IN THE 1987-1988 RINGING YEAR

REGION	NUMBER OF ACTIVE RINGERS	NUMBER OF SPECIES RINGED	NUMBER OF BIRDS RINGED	% OF ANNUAL TOTAL
TRANSVAAL	21	224	11 351	30,0
CAPE	27	139	11 160	29,5
ORANGE FREE STATE	7	139	4 371	11,6
NATAL	13	216	4 065	10,8
SUB-ANTARCTIC	5	7	2 099	5,5
MALAWI	4	150	1 964	5,2
NAMIBIA	12	164	1 869	4,9
ZIMBABWE	4	89	921	2,4
MOZAMBIQUE	1	17	31	0,1
TOTALS	94	462	37 831	100,0

Number of chicks ringed = 7 609, or 20,1 % of total

The provisional total of birds ringed (some returns are still outstanding!) is marginally up on the previous year. Table 2 lists ringers or amateur ringing group leaders who have achieved totals in excess of 500 or 1 000 birds. The sobering fact to emerge from these totals is that 48,5 % of the birds are being ringed by only 11 % of the ringers. The upward trend in ringing effort is thus very susceptible to reverse if any of the ringers/groups in Table 2 scale down or cease their ringing activity. This comment is not made to exhort those named to ever greater efforts but merely to underline the point that the current upward momentum in ringing is dependent on a relatively small number of ringers.

TABLE 2  
RINGERS AND AMATEUR RINGING GROUPS WITH HIGH ANNUAL  
RINGING TOTALS

RINGER	REGION	NO. OF BIRDS RINGED	
		500-1 000	>1 000
JOHN BUNNING	TRANSVAAL		1 882
DIGBY CYRUS	NATAL	687	
FRANK DOUWES	TRANSVAAL	813	
ROY EARLE	O.F.S.		2 647
MIKE FAGAN	TRANSVAAL	675	
MIKE FRASER	SW CAPE		1 513
DALE HANMER	MALAWI		1 303
KOTIE HERHOLDT	O.F.S.	536	
DAVE JOHNSON	NATAL		2 280
PAUL MARTIN	E. CAPE	641	
STUART MCLEAN	NATAL	536	
KOBIE RAIJMAKERS	TRANSVAAL		1 471
SKONIE RAIJMAKERS	TRANSVAAL		1 463
TED ROBSON	TRANSVAAL		3 206
LONNIE & MATHILDA ROOS	O.F.S.	776	
WILL STEELE	SW CAPE		1 296
LES UNDERHILL	SW CAPE		1 294

Which species were most ringed in the 1987-1988 ringing year? In Table 3 (opposite) I have deliberately excluded penguins, albatrosses, gannets, cormorants and gulls which have been the focus of professional projects; this allows six additional land birds into the listing. Also included for comparison are the species' rankings (position in top 20, seabirds excluded) for the previous ringing year. Because seabirds are excluded, only three non-passerines appear in this list. Four species are palaeartic migrants and it is noteworthy that the European Swallow has again become a popular focus of ringing effort.

#### RECOVERIES

There were 403 recoveries in the period July 1987 to June 1988, of which 28 were foreign-ringed birds. Three of our birds were recorded in Europe: a Common Tern of unknown age ringed at Langebaan Lagoon in March 1985 was found dying at Hudiksvall, Sweden, in August 1987 (29 months, 10 549 km); a Curlew Sandpiper ringed at Langebaan Lagoon in December 1985 was controlled at Swibno, Poland, in July 1987 (19 months, 9 733 km) and another Curlew Sandpiper ringed at Port Elizabeth in February 1985 was controlled at Dubai in September 1987 (31 months, 7 145 km).

Local recoveries yielded respectable longevities for some species: -

White Pelican	(Chick)			
	12.01.71	Walvis Bay		
	01.88	Walvis Bay	204 mths	
Bank Cormorant	(Chick)			
	29.12.71	Dassen Island		
	17.01.88	Yzerfontein	193 mths	14 km
Blackheaded Heron	(Chick)			
	28.11.69	Westdene Pan, Benoni		
	13.11.87	Heidelberg	216 mths	34 km
Blackheaded Heron	(Chick)			
	03.11.69	Westdene Pan, Benoni		
	06.88	Jan Smuts Airport	223 mths	7 km
Sacred Ibis	(Chick)			
	04.03.72	Barberspan		
	04.10.87	Eldorado Park	187 mths	233 km
Turnstone	(Adult)			
	13.12.78	Swakopmund, Namibia		
	29.04.88	South of Swakopmund	113 mths	8 km
Heuglin's Robin	(7-12 months)			
	11.07.76	Nchalo, Malaŵi		
	09.07.87	Nchalo, Malaŵi	132 mths	

TABLE 3

TWENTY MOST-RINGED BIRDS (EXCLUDING SEABIRDS) FOR THE PERIOD  
JULY 1987 TO JUNE 1988

87/88 RANK	SPECIES	86/87 RANK	PULLI	FULL- GROWN	TOTAL
1	EUROPEAN SWALLOW	10	0	3 637	3 637
2	S.A. CLIFF SWALLOW	1	751	1 253	2 004
3	MASKED WEAVER	2	10	1 882	1 892
4	RED BISHOP	4	5	1 417	1 422
5	CAPE WHITE-EYE	3	0	1 199	1 199
6	CAPE SPARROW	6	41	645	686
7	CURLEW SANDPIPER	9	0	584	584
8	BLACKEYED BULBUL	13	0	576	576
9	LAUGHING DOVE	7	0	555	555
10	CAPE SUGARBIRFD	8	2	520	522
11	REDHEADED FINCH	-	0	411	411
12	CAPE WEAVER	11	0	404	404
13	AFRICAN MARSH WARBLER	17	0	384	384
14	LITTLE SWIFT	-	59	302	361
15	MALACHITE SUNBIRD	-	0	340	340
16	OLIVE THRUSH	18	3	285	288
17	GARDEN WARBLER	-	0	275	275
18	OLIVE SUNBIRD	-	0	270	270
19	WILLOW WARBLER	-	0	265	265
20	REDBILLED QUELEA	5	0	246	246

TABLE 4

RATES OF FOREIGN RECOVERIES AND CONTROLS OF SOME  
PALAEARCTIC MIGRANTS RINGED BETWEEN JULY 1976 AND JUNE 1988

SPECIES	NUMBER RINGED	NUMBER OF FOREIGN RECOVERIES & CONTROLS	PERCENTAGE RECOVERY RATE
STEPPE BUZZARD	668	8	1,20
TURNSTONE	1 002	11	1,10
GREY PLOVER	354	1	0,28
CURLEW SANDPIPER	6 518	6	0,09
LITTLE STINT	3 050	2	0,07
KNOT	1 216	7	0,58
SANDERLING	1 416	7	0,49
RUFF	1 220	2	0,16
GREENSHANK	263	5	1,90
WOOD SANDPIPER	1 141	1	0,09
COMMON TERN	459	6	1,31
EUROPEAN SWALLOW	11 227	11	0,10
GARDEN WARBLER	1 077	0	0,00
WILLOW WARBLER	1 266	0	0,00
EUROPEAN SEDGE WARBLER	1 554	0	0,00
TOTALS	32 431	67	0,21

Some respectable survival times have also been recorded in the retraps for the review period; most of the best are amongst Dale Hanmer's data and are covered in separate articles by her in this issue. Unfortunately she has had to leave Malaŵi, thus terminating one of the most valuable long-term community ringing studies in the history of this ringing scheme.

All in all, the 1987-1988 ringing year has yielded some nice data, though one could always wish for more. Judging by the longevities listed above, some of the ringing being done now will only yield results ten or more years hence. From July 1976 (which is as far back as I have managed to computerise comparative ringing and recovery data at the time of writing), 320 151 birds of 710 species have been ringed with SAFRING rings and there have been 3 415 significant recoveries during this period, giving a mean percentage recovery rate of 1,067. A substantial number of recoveries have been of birds ringed before July 1976, but the 1 % recovery level has tended to remain constant as each additional year's records are added to the file. 710 species may seem like a lot, and the figure impressed me, but the sobering statistic at this level is that only 59 species have had over 1 000 individuals ringed in this 12-year period. To put it another way, 8 % of the species account for 75 % of the rings used.

In view of the current effort devoted to European Swallows, it might interest southern African ringers to see the foreign recovery rates for a selection of palaeartic migrants. These are given in Table 4 (opposite). The recovery totals do not include those for birds ringed prior to July 1976, nor do they include local recoveries showing movement within the southern African region south of the Zambesi-Cunene Rivers.

The resulting figures clearly indicate that some species yield disproportionately more recoveries than others, and there is good news for raptorphiles and wader enthusiasts. Swallow ringers can take comfort from the fact that they stand a much better chance of getting foreign recoveries than do ringers of other Palaeartic migrant passerines.

By way of comparison the BTO recovery rate for the 'swallow' based on their ringing and recovery totals as at December 1987 is 0,74 %. This represents all records, however, not only foreign recoveries. But it is still much better than our all-records rate of 0,169 %. The fact that four out of five European Swallows wintering in southern Africa are probably of Russian origin almost certainly influences our low recovery rate. Of course, recovery reports may only be submitted years after the event (see page 58) and although ringers would probably prefer to receive ring recovery notices while they are still alive, it is well to remember that in ringing data, all totals are provisional.