

EDITORIAL

SAFRING NEWS 20

Once again it has been necessary to combine the normal two issues of the magazine into a single issue, and this copy will be belatedly received in 1992. On this occasion it was not shortage of copy that was the problem, but shortage of staff. To say our staff has been reduced by 50% sounds very dramatic, but essentially this was the case for much of 1991. Once again I am grateful to all those who have contributed texts for this issue and I apologise that some have had to wait so long to see them in print. I hope this issue will stimulate more contributions so that the journal can get back on track in 1992 with two issues.

FAREWELL TO MIRELLA

After ten years of loyal service to the Bird Ringing Unit, Mirella Rammesmayer resigned early in 1991 to return to Europe. She brought to the Unit a rare organizational ability, and she was responsible for the actual work required in putting each and every issue from Vol. 10 to Vol. 19 of this magazine together and getting it to the printer. This 'getting together' process involved, amongst other tasks, personally checking the validity (including page numbers) of every reference cited in every article submitted. Most active ringers over the last decade will have had contact with her - she was also entrusted with the issue of all rings and equipment - and on behalf of the Safring fraternity I take this opportunity to thank her for her staunch support and wish her all of the very best in her new position in Switzerland.

IN AT THE DEEP END

It is no easy task to follow an act like Mirella's, but the very fact that you are reading this text proves that somebody has taken the plunge. Welcome to Cynthia Best, who is the new assistant at the Unit. Hopefully this will mark the start of another successful decade for Safring.

WHAT TO DO WITH MENSURAL DATA

Tony Tree, Ringing Organiser for the Ornithological Association of Zimbabwe, wader (and now sunbird) enthusiast, has asked me to tell ringers how best to use all the mensural data that they have dutifully collected from birds they have ringed over the years. For many ringers these meticulously recorded data are languishing in field note books and in some cases the enormous amount of data collected seems a salutary deterrent to any form of analysis.

The moult card scheme has at least provided an outlet for some of the data. Ringers like Alec Manson, George Underhill and Mike Fraser have already dredged their archival records and each submitted well in excess of a thousand cards to the scheme.

That still leaves a lot of weight and measurement data. In the Editorial of Volume 17 (1) I said that I hoped the ringers were not collecting such data for no better reason than that their trainers had told them to. It is a tradition of ringing in many countries that whilst you have a bird in the hand you get as much information from it as possible. Thus each bird caught has to be not merely ringed but 'processed'; to do less is to descend to the level of 'ring and fling'. I believe and hope that thinking ringers are not slaves to such dogma and that they exercise discretion on when and how much to 'process' a bird. Some of the 'standard' measurements are neither accurately repeatable nor very informative for small and commonly caught species - why, for example, measure the tarsus of white-eyes? In species which are difficult to identify however, there is good reason to measure everything, since the data may help to build up an identity guide. Juvenile sunbirds are a good example of such a category; they can be notoriously difficult to identify, as evidenced by the many incorrectly labelled museum skins. Ringers have a big advantage over 'what-is-hit-is-history' collectors - they may retrap their birds in a later and less ambiguous plumage stage.

But what to do with all, or at least some of the data already collected? If you know what, and roughly how many (number of individuals measured) records you have for any given species, contact Frank Douwes at Box 9807, Johannesburg 2000. Frank is heading a voluntary project to put together a nucleus of an 'Afro-Svensson' ageing and sexing guide and is looking for comprehensive mensural data. This is a very worthwhile project and by supporting it you will at least have the satisfaction of knowing that the effort of extracting your data from those yellowing field sheets or notebooks will not be wasted.

Terry Oatley