# EDITORIAL

In September 1994 I crossed the Atlantic for the first time to visit the USA. The purpose of the journey was to attend the EURING 94 conference on state-of-the-art data analysis on studies of marked birds.

To many, it must seem incongruous that a EURING meeting should be held in North America, but scientists from the United States and Canada have been prominent in supporting the previous three EURING technical conferences (for respective reports see *Safring News* vols. 15:52-55; 18:56-58 and 21:19-21) and the EURING council accepted the offer of the Bird Banding Laboratory at Patuxent in Maryland to host the fourth conference. So it was that participants from 15 different countries gathered in the beautiful setting of the Patuxent Wildlife Reserve at Laurel, Maryland, to discuss and share ideas on the dynamic field of mark-recapture data analysis. A report on this meeting will be featured in the next issue.

The EURING meeting marked the culmination of a journey in which I took the opportunity to visit bird ringers/banders and Institutions in England and the Netherlands as well as in the USA. Hands-on involvement in capture and ringing operations provides opportunities to appraise techniques and to find out how the ringers or banders feel about what they are doing.

On the other hand, visits to institutions allow one to find out what the administrators of a scheme feel about what the ringers are doing, as well as to learn how they tackle the workload that the scheme generates. Also of interest is to hear how scientists working in institutions that have nothing to do with bird ringing view the activity and the information derived from it.

It was encouraging that the scientists in the latter category to whom I spoke all approved of bird ringing and the data it could generate. Where they had reservations, they were concerned with access to data, and they perceived a need for data sets to be made available to environmental agencies involved in conservation management.

The concerns of ringing scheme administrators varied considerably, but a frequently encountered anxiety was that of justifying the activities of amateur ringers/banders in the face of widespread tightening of public money purse strings. This, of course, is a particular concern of those schemes (the majority) that supply all rings/bands free of charge.

On the other hand, there is a trend amongst ringers who have to pay for their rings not to ring all the birds that they catch in their nets because of the loaded cost of rings for some of the more common species. Such selectivity could obviously undermine the value of ringing totals for population monitoring.

Chris Mead, Head of the Ringing and Migration section of the British Trust for Ornithology, feels very strongly that one of the most important ethics for bird ringers should concern the scientific integrity of their data. I doubt that there is a single ringing scheme administrator that would differ with this viewpoint. What it means to you, the ringer, is that irrespective of your motive for ringing birds (whether for research or recreation), you owe it to the scheme to ensure that every item of information you record for each bird ringed is correct, including such details as ringing site coordinates, which will become increasingly important as we move into the era of computerising all primary ringing data.

Participation in ringing/banding activities in two continents provided a kaleidoscope of highlights. In England, Goldcrests, Chiffchaffs, Willow Warblers, Willow Tits (or Marsh Tits?) and House Martins; in the Netherlands (where bad weather precluded much ringing activity) Blue Tits, a Reed Warbler and, best of all, a Grasshopper Warbler! In America, every bird in the net was new and many unidentifiable, at first. The nine-primaried leaf warblers were in fall migration plumage and many of them looked confusingly similar to the unpractised eye.

There were lots of interesting field techniques and items. One of the simplest, which every solo mistnetter could usefully adopt, was a rock climber's snap hook, suspended from a cord around the ringer's neck, which allows any number of loaded bird bags to be secured against the chest instead of being temporarily hung on shelf-strings or bushes in order to leave hands free for other extractions. The most sophisticated and impressive item was a miniturised digital playback system for bird calls which consigns tape-lures and their accoutrements to the Ark. It can be programmed to turn itself on and off at set times, and the sound quality and amplification that it puts out is awesome, yet it draws very little current. It was being used with great effect to lure Sora Rails into traps and nets in the Chesapeake Bay marshes, and has been instrumental in increasing the capture rate of these birds from less than five to over 600 per annum! It is hoped to feature the design and broad specifications of this magic black box in a future issue of this journal.

As I reflect on all that I saw and heard and learnt on this journey, I am left with two major impressions. The first concerns how thinly spread ringers are on the land surface, and this applies everywhere, even in Britain, which must enjoy one of the highest ratios of ringers to land area. The birds we actually manage to lay hands on are, in most instances, incredibly small subsets of the avian population, especially where small songbirds are involved. One way to offset this problem is to have networks of ringing stations so that the potential for monitoring local movement and survival of marked birds is increased. In southern Africa, we have an advantage over the northern hemisphere countries in that our small birds are longer lived, so the chances of recapture are increased.

My other major impression concerns the wonderful camaraderie that ringers enjoy, irrespective of language or status. At Patuxent there were on occasion ringers of ten nationalities from four continents at the early morning banding sessions, all with a common purpose. It was a great experience.