EDITORIAL

The recent screening by SABC TV of a programme on the problems of controlling Redbilled Queleas (50/50, TV1, 14 May 1995) must have opened the eyes of many viewers to the real meaning of 'problem birds' and shocked quite a few with the graphic views of the explosive fireballs used to kill queleas *en masse* in their nocturnal roosts. The daylight scenes of the aftermath and of the appalling results of the alternative control practice – that of blanket aerial spraying of avicides – must also have distressed many people.

Sympathetic to the plight of those farmers whose grain crops are plundered by these birds, some ringers wondered whether they could not assist in the control of the birds by killing (rather than ringing and releasing) the hundreds of queleas that they catch in their nets. Would this really help?

Given the scale of the problem, the answer must be NO. In the previous ringing year (1993–1994), 1 503 Redbilled Queleas were caught and ringed. In the current 1994–1995 ringing year, with about half of the ringing schedules submitted, the total is already over 1 400. One can reason that by killing 3 000 queleas, one could prevent 1 500 pairs from rearing 3 100 new recruits to the population (assuming a normal clutch size of three eggs and a nest success rate of 69%, which has been observed in Zimbabwe). However, such numbers comprise insignificantly small percentages of quelea swarms, which may include any number from 500 000 to 2,5 million birds. Three thousand birds represent less than one percent of a half-million strong swarm, and comes nowhere near the sustainable yield of such a population. In their 1989 book *Africa's feathered locust*, Dr Peter Mundy and Dr Mike Jarvis mention that 500 million queleas were killed in control operations in Zimbabwe in the course of 15 years, so it seems that the quelea has the ability to sustain a cull rate of 33 million birds a year!

If little is to be achieved by killing 3 000 or whatever number of Redbilled Queleas that are regularly netted by bird ringers, do we achieve anything better by placing rings on them and releasing them?

Farmers would probably answer NO to this question and point out that there will be 3 000 more queleas eating their crops than there might otherwise have been. Nevertheless, the ringing of queleas has provided valuable insight into their movements and seasonality, as well as their potential longevity (the oldest retrapped quelea was over seven years old and a bird ringed in its first year was recovered after a lapse of seven years, both of these in Zimbabwe). Such information is vital to the understanding of the demography of these birds; without proper understanding, control efforts will always be no more than treating the symptoms of the problem without fully understanding the root cause. Because it is such a problem, much research has already been undertaken, but much more is still required.

During the 1994–1995 ringing year, the total of Redbilled Queleas ringed in southern Africa since the inception of the ringing scheme in 1948 has moved through the 100 000 level. The overall recovery rate for this species is only a quarter of one percent (0,25%). Most of the ringing has been done in Zimbabwe, much of it in the course of control operations, and one cannot be sure what percentage of ringed birds remained at risk of recovery after culling.

There have been two recoveries so far from the 1 503 birds ringed in the 1993–1994 ringing year. One of these moved 297 km from the

Ventersdorp district, northeast to the Tuinplaas area (a popular destination, as there have been ringed quelea recovered there in the past). The other bird, ringed in the Phinda Resource Reserve in KwaZulu-Natal, was recovered 1 455 km to the north in Malawi (see details in the SAFRING Recoveries Report on p.38).

For most ringed passerines, retraps outnumber recoveries by around five to one, yet there has been only one retrap of a Redbilled Quelea reported in the last 13 years, and that from an unsexed adult ringed at Banket in Zimbabwe in August 1978 and retrapped there 51 months later in October 1982.

Part of the reason for the zero retrap rate in most years may be because birds retrapped less than one year after ringing are not reportable in terms of SAFRING policy. Short distance movements of Redbilled Queleas tend to be erratic, and our ringing sites are too few and too patchily distributed to hope to monitor such movements by retrapping. Nevertheless, ringers should keep records of all Redbilled Quelea they retrap, including those caught less than 12 months after ringing.

The Redbilled Quelea is sufficiently important, in view of its pest status and crop destruction potential, to be considered a 'target' species for bird ringers. Currently, the possibilities of special funding for a quelea project are being investigated (see notice on page 52). One of the objectives of such funding will be to provide ringers with free replacement of all rings that they use on this species.

When birds become pests, they are apt to be the most difficult of all pests to control. When a pest species reaches plague proportions, it has already escaped the constraints of natural controls, but its population will crash before long from the weight of its own numbers. Mankind's agricultural activities supply food for queleas at a time when their preferred wild grass and weed seeds are in short supply. The problem is not going to go away, and is possibly exacerbated by current artificial control efforts. The more that we, as bird ringers, can add to the store of knowledge of this species, the better our chances of finding an eventual environmentally friendly solution.

Terry Oatley