EDITORIAL

Although I had earlier predicted (*Safring News* 23: 1) that the 1993-1994 ringing year would probably be the one in which a new annual total would be achieved, it was not to be. The total for that year fell short of the required 70 000 birds ringed by over 1 400. However, in spite of widespread drought and its noticeable effect on bird populations, the 1994-1995 total has passed the 70 000 mark and currently stands at 71 362. This is the highest annual total of birds ringed in the 47–year history of the South African Bird Ringing Scheme and it continues the steady upward trend in ringing effort which has characterised the last decade.

Much of the credit for the steady increase in bird ringing over the past five years must go to those clubs which have actively fostered an interest in this activity and gone out of their way to train new ringers and set up networks of ringing stations. The Wesvaal and Tygerberg Clubs, in the Northwest Province and the Western Cape respectively, have provided examples of what can be achieved in this regard. It is to be hoped that this initiative can be maintained.

Over the years new ringers appear in our lists, are active for a while, then cease schedule submissions and communication. A few do inform SAFRING that they are unable to continue ringing but would like to stay in contact. Aside from the old stalwarts who keep on keeping on, there is a steady turnover of ringing personalities. This is a natural enough phenomenon; it happens in any society's membership list, but in bird ringing the turnover seems rather more rapid.

My concern over this matter is not with the possible explanations but with the consequences. Results from bird ringing are best realised in the long term. This is true not only of most recoveries, but also, and especially, of retrap data. The birds ringed by an individual who is active for only three years stand as good a chance of recovery as those ringed by another active for 10 or more years, but the same cannot be claimed for their retrap prospects. Retrap sets from most sites in the SAFRING data bank are truncated and come nowhere near to reflecting complete population turnover for even comparatively short-lived, small seedeaters such as waxbills and firefinches (5-6 years), let alone bulbuls, robins and sunbirds which, on present evidence, require as much as 15-20 years for complete replacement of the population.

Few individual ringers could guarantee to maintain such long term studies, but there is a possible solution if the emphasis is placed on the site, rather than on the ringer. Ringing effort at a particular site could be maintained by a succession of different ringers, each of whom ensures continued monitoring of the investment in ringed birds at that particular locality. This sort of continuity is best achieved at club level, and one would envisage priority ranking of each of the ringing sites in the network operated by club ringers.

The democratisation of the new South Africa portends that black South Africans will ultimately come to be represented in most activities in approximate proportion to their numbers in the population. Currently there are no black Africans active in bird ringing in South Africa, for seemingly obvious socio-economic reasons. Is their previously disadvantaged status the sole reason for their non-participation in bird study?

Why are there so few black African botanists, zoologists, ornithologists, ecologists or any other type of biologists in Africa or, for that matter, in the USA? They are well represented in medicine, law, education, health and numerous other disciplines. Faced with these

facts it seems reasonable to assume that the natural sciences hold little interest or reward for them, and that a cultural difference of outlook is involved. But this cannot be so, as anyone who has spent time in the bush with a self-taught black African naturalist can attest.

There is, I believe, a more fundamental reason, and it has to do with role models. Any black African child growing up in a rural community may encounter bus drivers, school teachers, nurses, doctors or priests on a fairly regular basis; such people are likely to be permanent or, at least, regularly visiting people in their community. The likelihood of an ecologist or any other 'ologist' occupying such a role is virtually nil. The famous American ecologist George Schaller reputedly counselled Africa-bound students to "Get in, get your data, and get out". This attitude, together with the short term nature of many projects, epitomises the attitude of too many researchers.

The catching and ringing of birds is a fascinating activity for children of all ethnic groupings. Long term permanent ringing stations in rural areas have the potential to bring the study of natural science within the ambit the local people, to provide the opportunity for participation and informal learning to young people, and perhaps to inspire some of them to seek a career in environmental work.

Conservation, in the final analysis, is in the hands of the land occupier. If we wish to influence this in any way, our interest must be seen to be unflagging and permanent. Long term effort will not only impress, it will also bring greatly improved understanding of the importance of birds in our environment.
