

IN MEMORIAM

A TRIBUTE TO FRANK DOUWES

After falling ill in December 1995, Frank died in January 1996. News of his death came as a great shock to those of the ringing fraternity who knew him well; Frank's robust enjoyment of whatever he turned his hand to and of life in general led most of us to accept that he was a permanent fixture, as it were. We will miss him sorely.

Frank could look back on a life filled with achievements in a diversity of occupations. He started bird ringing in 1983 as a member of the Witwatersrand Bird Club and a trainee of John Bunning. Once he had obtained his own A-permit he soon started training other aspirant ringers and his farm Staffordtuin, on the northern slopes of the Magaliesberg, became a weekend home-away-from-home for many people, young and young-at-heart, who did the rounds of the nets and gathered in relays for sumptuous Sunday morning breakfasts in which the stable item was a Maggie Douwes speciality with the aptly descriptive name of 'train smash'.

As with all the activities in which he partook, Frank put as much into his hobby as he got out of it, and more. He used to ring about 1 100 birds a year on the farm, and his recapture rate was impressive. His best recovery was a Paradise Flycatcher found over 500 km distant in Zimbabwe.

An exciting incident occurred in 1988 when an opportunistic and hungry, young Boomslang climbed the netpole guy rope and seized a Masked Weaver that Frank was in the process of extricating from the net. Fortunately, Frank knew his snakes as well as his birds and everyone survived the affair intact (see 'Who says ringing isn't hazardous?' in *Safring News* 17: 33-35, 1988).

On the occasion of a Witwatersrand Bird Club ringers AGM that he hosted at Staffordtuin, Frank asked me what he could do to ensure that his ringing effort would contribute meaningful data to the SAFRING data banks. My reply was that he should continue regular ringing at the farm for as long as was possible, adding that his data would only start to become really interesting after seven or eight years. He never forgot my words, and his delight in 1995, when he retrapped birds he had caught when he first started ringing at the farm, was a vindication of his persistence and effort.

Prior to his retirement, while he still had his own manufacturing business, Frank kept SAFRING in stock with wing rules, getting his skilled employees to affix end stops to stainless steel rules at times when they had no other tasks to perform. This work was done at no cost to SAFRING and enabled us to reduce the price of wing rules to less than 10% of that of the imported item.

Frank's greatest claim to fame in the South African ringing fraternity was his single-handed mastery of measuring pelvic gap as an aid to sexing all those birds in which the males and females appear identical. It takes a lot of practice and a very deft touch to do this with any degree of confidence and, to the best of my knowledge, Frank was the lone exponent of this technique.

Frank had little time for shirkers or for people who gave less than their best to whatever they were doing, but he had endless patience and understanding for those who tried. He computerised all his ringing data and had updated printouts on the ringing table whenever the nets were open. This enabled instant cross-checking of mensural data against the range

of previous measurements, to the considerable discomfort of trainees who made mistakes!

Those ringers who trained under him will attest to his rigorous standards, but will probably remember him best for his unstinting hospitality and the enthusiasm he brought to all that he did. It was his dying wish that the ringing project at Staffordtuin be continued so that the legacy in ringed birds there be maintained and monitored as frequently as possible.

In order to honour Frank's wish, furred nets are maintained at the standard net sites on the farm and his rings are available for use on new captures. Miss Claudia Holgate (who served her ringing apprenticeship on the farm), is coordinating the Douwes ringing programme and any ringers in the region who

wish to get involved over weekends should contact either Claudia (tel. 011-463-2052) or Mrs M Douwes to make the necessary arrangements. A modest visitation fee will be levied to make provision for the occasional replacement of mist nets. This is an especially good opportunity for new A-permit ringers who cannot afford the purchase of substantial stocks of rings or buy as many nets as they could operate. Visiting ringers can get into action with minimum delay as no time has to be spent on clearing sites and erecting nets.

Staffordtuin has the potential to become the oldest long-term ringing site in Africa. It would be a worthy tribute to Frank if this came to pass.

Terry Oatley

