# 20th century SAFRING – a personal perspective

***T.B. Oatley***

*PO Box 124, Barrydale, 6750, email cossypha@mweb.co.za*

Billows of dust, reflecting the yellow of the headlights in the predawn darkness; the rattling of the car on the rough corrugations of the gravel road; low trees and bushes fading into the darkness beyond the headlights' reach. Then the rendezvous, somewhere near Muldersdrift. The humps of other cars, muted voices, bundles being heaved out of boots and laid along both edges of the causeway. At the first lightening of the eastern sky, the nets were dropped simultaneously on either side of the culvert and there was an instantaneous 'thwack' as a seemingly solid layer of Cliff Swallows coated the inner sides of the mesh curtains.

The year was 1952 and I was a schoolboy recruit, a spare pair of hands, a gofer, fetching and carrying. It was my first bird-ringing experience. The second, in the same month, involved hands-on ringing (with no previous experience) of egrets in the reed-beds of Westdene Pan, Benoni, one of a party of recruits sent wading into the mud with rings and instructions and enthusiasm. We were soon all separated, wading thigh-deep in muddy water through the reeds, with nests everywhere containing young egrets of varying sizes. When our ring stock was finished, we emerged, and the tally of rings used (minus those dropped into the muddy water and lost) went to swell the ringing totals of the Witwatersrand Bird Club (WBC).

Were any of the Cliff Swallows ringed on that Muldersdrift morning ever recovered? Did one of 'my' Cattle Egrets survive to fly to the Bangweulu Swamps, in what was then Northern Rhodesia, eventually to be recovered there? I would never know!

My third brush with bird ringing was in May 1953, when the Natal Bird Club organised a weekend camp on the lower Tugela River, above the old main road bridge. On the first evening, David Calder, then Chairman of the NBC, invited Ian Tait and me to help him do a bit of ringing. It involved looking for Sand Martin burrows along the river bank. With the aid of nothing more sophisticated than a hand torch and a ladies hairnet held over the mouth of the burrow, David caught and ringed several Brownthroated Martins. I doubt that he ever had the opportunity to return in subsequent years to attempt to retrap those birds, but the potential to gain more information was there.

These events were fairly typical of ringing effort in the early years of the scheme, before the advent of mistnets. Most of the amateur ringing was directed at colonially nesting birds, especially waterbirds, vultures and cliff-swallows. Professional ringing was mainly concentrated on seabird nesting colonies in the southern and western coastal regions and on waterfowl at inland water bodies. Provincial nature conservation authorities were active in ringing ducks and so-called geese (there are no true geese in sub-Saharan Africa), especially in the Western Cape and at Barberspan in the old Transvaal. By the late 1960s, over 20 000 ducks and Red-knobbed Coots were being ringed each year at Barberspan!

Earlier, towards the end of the 1950s, the advent of mistnets and an incident in Bryanston in the northern Witwatersrand served to change much of the focus of amateur ringing effort. The late Royce Reed, who at that time was one of the leading ringers of the WBC, was lying in bed at dusk one summer evening, nursing a bout of influenza. He was by himself in the house, everybody else being festively out and about. There was no TV in those far-off days, so he was gazing dejectedly at the darkening scene outside the bedroom window. The weather was unseasonably misty and there was a light drizzle falling. It was all thoroughly depressing, until a European Swallow came fluttering into view and alighted on a branch of the garden

willow tree. It was quickly joined by many others and Royce realised that they were settling down to roost. It was an unprecedented event and too good an opportunity to pass up. Waiting until it was thoroughly dark, he donned a dressing gown and ventured out with stepladder and flashlight and managed to hand-pluck a few dozen swallows from their perches. When Mrs Reed arrived home she was unable to drive into the garage because Royce was sitting in the middle of it, surrounded by boxes of swallows which he was ringing and measuring. He was flushed with achievement and with a high temperature, and his lady was not amused! But one of the swallows Royce ringed that night was recovered in Georgia in the former USSR!

The reward of long-distance recoveries was (and still is) always a powerful incentive to amateur ringers, and the realisation that European Swallows could be caught in gratifyingly great numbers at their nocturnal roosts resulted in a new bird-ringing bandwagon. In terms of sheer numbers, the European (or Eurasian or Barn) Swallow *Hirundo rustica* soon became the most ringed bird in southern Africa.

The ease with which small birds could be caught in mistnets brought about a change in target species; there was less enthusiasm for the ringing of larger birds, except on the part of specialist groups such as the Vulture Study Group and the dedicated raptor ringers. Mistnets also greatly facilitated the capture of the smaller waders which had previously been caught in comparatively small numbers in walk-in traps. The Department of Agriculture seized the opportunity provided by mistnets to capture and ring many thousands of Red-billed Quelea *Quelea quelea* as part of an intensive study of this potentially serious pest of cereal crops.

With all this effort being put into ringing by both amateurs and by professional projects, the administration of the scheme became progressively more demanding of the volunteer services of members of the South African Ornithological Society. Indeed, towards the end of the 1960s, much of the record keeping and day-to-day tasks were being handled by the staff of the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology (under the Directorship of Prof. Jack Winterbottom) at the University of Cape Town. In 1970, a collective decision was taken to have the scheme placed on a national footing, funded by the provincial nature conservation authorities, and at the end of 1971 the National Unit for Bird Ringing Administration opened its doors in premises provided by UCT.

One of the first tasks of NUBRA (subsequently to become SAFRING) was to computerise all incoming recoveries, and to capture the backlog of all the recoveries that had accumulated in the course of the preceding 22 years. By present-day standards, computing in the early 1970s was quite labour-intensive; there were no PCs in those days, and access to the mainframe computer was through a slave terminal, but to capture data one had to use punched cards, and card-punching machines were not user-friendly. Errors could, and did, get into the records, producing unlikely recovery notices such as one which reported a Cape Vulture to have been caught in a fish trap in the South China Sea!

The setting up of NUBRA was, without doubt, the most notable event in the history of bird ringing in southern Africa. It signified the recognition of bird ringing as an effective research tool, worthy of government funding. One of the early advantages of the changed status of the scheme was the production, in 1972, of the first issue of *SAFRING News/Nuus*. The primary purpose of the new journal, as outlined by Clive Elliott, the first 'Ringing Officer' of the Unit, was to promote contact and exchange of information among the widely scattered members that made up the ringing fraternity in southern Africa. I believe that the journal has succeeded in this aim throughout its subsequent history, and was the vital thread that kept things together in bad times.

And there were bad times. By the end of the 1960s, the over-zealous striving for ever-greater ringing totals earned the activity a dubious reputation in some quarters and gave rise to the label of 'ring-and-fling' tech-

niques. The provincial nature conservation authorities, who were the funders of the Unit, decided that ringing ought to be conducted more scientifically, and various restraints were introduced, notably the need to register ringing projects. Many of the most productive stalwarts decided to hang up their ringing pliers permanently. Those that continued were urged to substitute quality for quantity. By the late 1970s, a fourfold fall in ringing effort reduced the lowest annual total to little more than 17 000 birds ringed.

Recovery rates were also falling, partly as a result of the 'winds of change' which had been dismantling the colonially nurtured infrastructure of communities in many African countries, and the flow of reports from north of the Zambezi dwindled steadily. Closer to home, it was suspected that many local recoveries were never reported because of the implied message implicit in the ring return address 'Zoo Pretoria'. As South Africa became increasingly isolated internationally, the trickle of recoveries from the northern hemisphere also diminished, and those that did reach Pretoria were often vandalised by stamp collectors who, in helping themselves to the envelopes, robbed the records of postage dates and addresses of the finders (which were not always included in their written letters).

The ringing scheme weathered these adverse times, however, thanks largely to several die-hard ringers and ringing groups, and began to increase in stature. The SAFRING of the 1990s is a very different scheme to what it was in the 1970s. The Unit changed its host department at UCT from Zoology to Statistical Sciences, in keeping with the international trend for more rigorous scientific assessment of mark-recapture data. In a noteworthy cooperative project, SAFRING ringers in the mid-1990s collected over 20 000 blood smears from birds all over the sub-continent, thereby dramatically increasing the available data on avian blood parasites in the Afrotropical region.

Ringing has taught us much about the incredible journeys undertaken by birds both large and small, but the new technology of satellite tracking can reveal more about bird movement in a few months than we can expect to learn from ringing in centuries. When it comes to determining how long birds can and do live, however, ring recoveries and controls stand alone. Some very significant advances to our knowledge of bird survival rates and population turnover have been made possible through ringing studies in southern Africa.

Bird ringing yields its best results in the long term, and many valuable records have accrued over the years from the efforts of those who enjoyed ringing in the 1950s and 1960s; the levels of ringing effort of the past 20 years will continue to yield useful recovery data throughout the initial years of the new millennium. Currently, there are still lots of questions to be answered, and there is as much scope for ringing studies now as there was 50 years ago. Who knows what the 21st century will reveal?

*Terry Oatley, SAFRING Ringing Coordinator from 1981 until his retirement in 1997, moved to the little town of Barrydale about three hours drive from Cape Town. He is enjoying the robins of nearby Grootvadersbos and it is a short distance to the Karoo where he has set up a study of Karoo Robins – Ed.*