Papers: General

Ringing in the new century

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INTRODUCTION

It is now a century since Christian Mortensen perfected the use of aluminium rings for the study of migration in the Eurasian Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* and half a century since the first bird was ringed in southern Africa (and the whole of Africa?), a Cape Griffon *Gyps coprotheres*. This new year, the first in a new decade, century and millennium, is a suitable and appropriate time for an assessment of where ringing in general, and SAFRING in particular, are going in the next few years. Modesty prohibits me from forecasting what will happen in the next 100 years! Rather, this is my wish list.

In the 20th century the ringing of wild birds in natural environments settled down to be a tool used by three different groups of people: scientists, conservationists and amateurs.

Bird ringing by scientists

Scientists are most diverse in their use of ringing as a tool for understanding birds. In general, scientists use ringing as a tool to give each and every bird a unique identity so that they can answer one or more hypotheses specific to the aims of their study. The aims of a scientist's study are usually of an academic nature and tend to focus on a deeper understanding of a bird's biology, life-history, behaviour, etc. rather than conservation. Ringing is currently one of the most important tools that a bird biologist can use and it is likely that ringing will continue to be important for many years to come.

Bird ringing by conservationists

Conservation Agencies differ from scientists in that the primary aim of their ringing campaigns tends to be monitoring rather than insight or understanding, though there is some overlap. The most active conservation agency in southern Africa, in terms of bird ringing, is Marine and Coastal Management (formerly the Research Institute of Sea Fisheries) who ring many colonial sea birds each year, mostly African Gannets *Morus capensis* and African Penguins *Spheniscus demersus* and terns. For reasons that I do not understand most of the terrestrial conservation agencies seem to frown on bird ringing; they seem to view it as a hobbyist activity and not as a serious tool in wildlife management. (Perhaps they are mostly just frustrated ungulatologists!)

Bird ringing by amateurs

In southern Africa, as in the rest of the world, amateurs undertake most bird ringing, generally with the aim of ringing a bird and having it recovered somewhere far away, preferably on another continent! Most amateurs ring for the fun of it, they like the excitement of outwitting a bird, they like going to wild and interesting places and they like the sense of adventure that surrounds bird ringing. Some have more specific objectives, such as the study of local movements; some combine ringing with a study of breeding, etc. In my experience, most have an appreciation of the scientific applications of ringing and the ways in which ringing can be used by conservationists.

THE FUTURE

Ringing by scientists

Scientists will use the most appropriate ringing tool to answer the questions that they pose in terms of the hypotheses that they wish to test. This presents no intellectual or philosophical questions for ringing in the subcontinent but does, unfortunately, raise a number of organisational issues. Because rings are often used as part of a wider academic study, scientists can be a little cavalier about record keeping and returning their SAFRING schedules on time. Students undertaking studies often do not have sufficient time to learn bird ringing techniques and as a result some are not as professional as they could be and this has led to conflict with various Nature Conservation agencies in the past. No doubt this will continue in the future! An excellent solution to this is to recruit amateurs to assist with both bird ringing and with the training of students. In 1998 I visited a University of Stellenbosch Cape Sugarbird study site where two students had undertaken research projects in which Mr Gordon Scholtz, a ringer of many years' standing, helped with the ringing and trained the students.

Ringing by conservation agencies

Marine and Coastal Management have a well-established seabird-monitoring programme that could be made even more effective by amateur participation in three ways.

1. **Resighting ringed African Penguins.**
When I was in Cape Town a year ago I put a day aside to go to Boulders Beach and wandered around looking at all the ringed penguins and reading their rings. Then I went to the offices of SAFRING to look up the original ringing data. It was exciting to find birds that had lived more than ten years, had survived being oiled or had moved far from their original place of ringing. It was also very irritating to find that many well-known bird ringers had not yet submitted their returns from more than a few years ago and so their data was outstanding!

There are a number of places along the southern African coast where African Penguins come onto the shore and are sufficiently confiding that one can read their ring numbers. I'd encourage all ringers to do this. Remember that a correctly resighted ring is probably worth fitting ten new rings!

2. **Recapture ringed terns and gulls.**
The majority of gulls and terns are ringed as pulli and so any ringed bird recaptured immediately yields information about movement and survival. Recapturing seabirds is not easy: it often requires a nocturnal expedition, and terns certainly require special handling, as they are very sensitive to heat stress. Please contact SAFRING for guidance before you target terns.

3. **Beach walks.**
Searching the beach just after dawn can often turn up dead or injured birds and once in a while you will find a ringed bird. These data are very valuable to the conservation of our seabirds. Please let SAFRING know what you find.

Ringing by amateurs

There was once a time when it was the official SAFRING policy that amateur ringing had to be project-based. This is no longer the case and the most important point I wish to make about ringing by amateurs is the following:

It is good to ring any healthy, wild bird in any natural environment.

All such ringing is good; it does not have to be of Palaearctic migrants and it does not have to part of a specific project with scientific objectives. *All* ringed birds have the potential to generate an interesting longevity or movement. We know so little about so many of our birds that we should ring as many as possible. The ringing of local birds can be made even more valuable in the following ways:

1. **Long-term ringing stations.**
   By ringing at a particular station for an extended period of time, it soon becomes clear that there are seasonal variations in the bird community. In almost all of southern Africa there are changes in the bird community in response to periods of above- and below- average rainfall and only a long-term station can show this. Such stations have the potential for generating longevity records, an urgent necessity in understanding our birds.

2. **The more places at which you ring the better.**
   The more places you go to ring, the more likely you are to catch a ringed bird from someone else or even from overseas! We need to spread out our ringing localities across the sub-continent. So next time you want to try out a new locality and your spouse, your significant other, or your children complain, tell them it's in the interest of science!

3. **The wilder the better.**
   The majority of our ringers go to places near to their homes in the big cities. We really do need people to go to wilder places that are less influenced by urban environments. Most especially we need to find those folk sitting on our farms and in nature reserves who can start to ring regularly in their backyards. So visit your farmer friends and get them interested!

IMPORTANT FUTURE TRENDS

I'd like to see the following five trends established and encouraged in southern Africa.

1. **More ringers.**
   By comparison with the numbers of people in Britain we should have about 1200 registered ringers but by comparison with the area of Britain we should have about 20 000 ringers. We actually have about 150 registered ringers! So we desperately need to recruit about 10 new ringers each; go out there and get them!

2. **A wider representation.**
   To date we have drawn almost all our ringers from the so-called 'white community'. We need to change this. There is a growing interest in the environment in schools across the country and we need to find ways of tapping into the community and recruiting new ringers.

3. **More detailed studies.**
   I predict that the new edition of *Roberts' birds of southern Africa* will have inadequate morphometric, ageing or sexing data for about half the species. In addition, there are variations in size and plumage for many species across the subcontinent which are yet to be described properly; there are probably even new races or subspecies or even species to be discovered! Ringers can quickly make good these deficiencies.

4. **Detailed long-term single species studies.**
   A number of ringers and amateurs have made significant contributions to ornithology in southern Africa by undertaking the study of a single species. A good example is that of Handley Laycock's study of the Thickbilled Weaver *Amblyospiza albifrons*. He started looking at this bird after he retired and published two excellent papers on it (Laycock 1979, 1982) greatly increasing our knowledge of this feisty little bird. A single- species study is easily undertaken by a ringer working on his (or her) own in a patch near his (or her) own backyard to which they have easy access.

5. **Community studies.**
   A group of ringers who enjoy going out together can readily set up a ringing station at a suitable locality and ring all available birds there on a regular basis for a number of years. Examples of localities well worked in southern Africa are sewage works, marshes, public gardens and small farm dams.

My final take-home messages to the ringers of southern Africa are as follows:

1. Any ringing of wild birds in a natural environment is worthwhile.
2. There are more unstudied birds in southern Africa than there are bird ringers. Choose one near you and study it now!

REFERENCES

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Organising ringing groups

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Working or ringing as a group has many advantages in making the ringing effort more successful. This short article is a summary of how bird ringing is organized in the Pretoria Bird Club (PBC) and the benefits of working in ringing groups.

PRETORIA BIRD CLUB RINGING GROUP

A bird-ringing subcommittee in the Pretoria Bird Club was established in 1996. Madeleen van Loggerenberg was chosen as Secretary and Andrew Tucker as Treasurer.

Meetings are held every 2–3 months where matters are discussed such as:

1. Organizing ringing camps to far-off places such as St Lucia and Messina Nature Reserve.
2. Identifying new ringing localities and localities to be visited in and around Pretoria, in order to establish local bird movement in the long term. The PBC ringers are also training ringers in the Rustenburg Bird Club to establish a ringing group there and also investigate bird movements along the Magaliesberg Mountain range. This idea was sparked when Madeleen retrapped a Black Sunbird in her garden in Orchards, Pretoria: the bird had been ringed at Stafford Farm, Rustenburg, by the late Frank Douwes.
3. Sorting out ringing related problems, such as trainee progress.
4. Discussing general issues concerning ringing, such as trapping methods for catching different bird species, and methods of sexing and aging birds.

In the past all ringers and trainees attended the meetings but since the group has grown it is now restricted to qualified ringers. Having 'adopted a trainee', the ringers then pass on what was discussed at the meeting to trainees.

Since the ringing effort depends largely on the cooperation of the public in reporting recoveries of ringed birds, talks on bird ringing are given to several groups and schools to make them more aware of this project.

All new ringers receive a letter to welcome them to the ringing group and inform them of what they should do and know in order to qualify. This is also to motivate all new trainees. A file is kept to record the trainees' progress in the form of progress reports and questionnaires. The training includes trapping birds on Balchatri traps and in flap traps.