EDITORIAL

THE AGE OF COMPUTERISATION

By the time this second issue of SAFRING has reached you, you are likely to have started already using or at least attempting to understand the lay-out of the computerisable schedules. The introduction of these new schedules is an important step for bird-ringing in southern Africa for two reasons. First, more data will now be collected and retraps will be monitored on a country-wide basis. Second, the data will now be in a computer punchable format and therefore more readily available for analysis.

The age of computerisation for ringers began with the issue of a computer-copy of ringing totals. Some ringers may well have been inclined to sit back and admire the computer's handy-work. But they should remember that computer calculations and analysis can only be as good as the data fed into the machine. These lists should have been checked carefully for mistakes. We are glad to say that a number of small errors were pointed out and the master-copy corrected. The real work for the ringer however, begins now with the more exacting standards required by the new schedules. More information is required and more thought needs to be given to the correct completion of the forms, for instance with regard to the new Age Classification. We feel confident that almost all ringers are more than up to these standards and will be able to cope with the new requirements.

To the layman, computers present one of two images. To some they are the gods of science, the lifters of the load caused by enormous volumes of data, the answer to all problems and the status-givers showing that one is up with the latest, fastest data-processing techniques. To others they are depersonalised monsters, creating redundancy and solving little. Probably the truth is somewhere in between, but computers have several big draw-backs. The most significant is that they are extremely expensive machines. The second is that unlike humans, they cannot spot anything but the simplest human errors. Thirdly, their operation depends on the whims and time of computer experts who often have little biological knowledge. In this connection, it is unlikely that N.U.B.R.A. will achieve its full potential until it has a full-time computer statistician on its staff.

The other tendency of laymen appears when they are faced with vast volumes of data. At considerable expense, they put it all in the computer and then stand back, scratch their heads and say "And what are we going to do with it all".

The importance of the new schedules is that data will now be collected in an easily computer-punchable format. Having decided on an analysis programme, it is intended <u>then</u> to punch-up the data and carry out the analysis. The clerical effort in preparing and extracting data from the old forms for punching, in many cases made this operation impractical.