

RINGING IN EAST AFRICA

By: Graeme Backhurst,
E.A. Ringing Organizer,
Box 29003,
Kabete, NAIROBI,
Kenya.

The East African Ringing Scheme, run by the East Africa Natural History Society, started in 1960 and covers ringing in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Since the beginning nearly 100 000 birds have been ringed. All but one of the ringers are expatriate and amateur; from time to time professional ornithologists take advantage of the scheme and ring birds for a limited period. Rings, which are made in Great Britain and Sweden, are supplied to ringers at cost; the processing of recoveries is paid for by the Society. At present rings are available from 2,3 mm. to 11,0 mm. internal diameter and all bear the legend "Send Museum Nairobi".

Ringers fall into two basic groups: those interested primarily in Palaearctic migrants and those more interested in Ethiopian species. I will deal with these two groups separately. The large number of Palaearctic species which pass through, or winter in East Africa pose many fascinating problems which can be solved most easily by ringing. Before the scheme started the exact origin of most northern migrants to East Africa was unknown. Now, with over fifty recoveries in the Palaearctic, we have some idea for some species. Most of the recoveries are from the U.S.S.R. (as far as 126°E.), but there are some too from the Middle East, eastern Europe and one from West Germany. In theory it should be more profitable to ring birds in Africa for recoveries in Eurasia than the converse - this is because Eurasia is more densely populated than Africa and because literacy is higher. The theory is good in practice for some species, but not for others: one Little Ringed Plover Charadrius dubius was recovered on the Black Sea coast when only seven had been ringed; a House Martin Delichon urbica (out of 18 ringed) to Russia; a Redstart (out of 150 ringed) to Iran. Against these encouraging figures should be set the 5 000 Little Stints Calidris minuta which have yielded not a single recovery outside East Africa. Most Palaearctic-orientated ringers regard recoveries as unbargained for extras. The main reasons for the ringing are for studying weight changes associated with migration, moult, recurrence in later seasons and the distribution of species.

It is always a disappointment to me that no East African-ringed bird has been recovered or controlled south of political East Africa. Many birds ringed here are definitely on southward passage and must winter in Zambia, Malawi or southern Africa. I suppose the lack of recoveries merely reflects the vastness of Africa and the sparseness of the human population. I think also that there can be very little ringing done in Zambia, Malawi, Mocambique, Rhodesia, Botswana or the northern Transvaal. Otherwise, surely something ringed in East Africa would have turned up by now?

The "number one" Palaearctic species ringed here is the Yellow Wagtail Motacilla flava (over 30 000). Other migrants have been ringed in much smaller numbers but, nevertheless, several stand at over one thousand. Waders would seem to offer the best bet for controls further south but good numbers of passage warblers have been ringed in Kenya too, some of which should reach southern Africa. Only one ringer in East Africa has ever worked a Swallow Hirundo rustica roost (in southern Tanzania) - in strong contrast to the situation in South Africa. However with only 6 000 ringed we have had 22 recoveries of this species in the Palaearctic so far. There are no official ringing stations in East Africa but several places ((some in National Parks) are worked regularly throughout the year. The lack of permanent stations means that traps cannot be installed and the tiny numbers of ducks ringed are a result of this restriction.

The ringing of Ethiopian species is done mostly by people studying the birds of a particular area: data on population, seasonal variation in numbers, sex ratios, weight fluctuations, moult and longevity are collected. Quite often, species unrecorded for the area (or even for the country) are caught during ringing operations. Ethiopian species have, so far, given very poor recovery figures (except for duck): the 4 000 odd Ruff Philomachus pugnax ringed have yielded seven recoveries in the Palaearctic plus one in Kenya; the 2 000 Sulbus pycnonotus barbatus ringed have given no recoveries, anywhere.

As I said at the beginning, all but one East African ringer is an expatriate, and there are only about 15 of us distributed throughout the three countries (in area larger than South Africa and Rhodesia combined). New ringers seem to arrive more or less as others leave but how long this tenuous situation can last is anybody's guess. Attempts to put ringing on a more official (or even governmental) level have, so far, been unsuccessful. While a great deal of attention is paid to wildlife in East Africa by Government departments, the National Parks, universities and United Nations agencies, birds are sadly neglected.
