

NUBRA 1973

By: Clive C.H. Elliott,
National Bird-Ringing Unit,
U.C.T., Rondebosch, C.P.

Introduction

It has been suggested that ringers would be interested in knowing about the work that goes on at the NUBRA office. It is therefore intended to publish, in SAFRING, an annual report on our activities.

Habitat

The Unit's offices are situated on the first floor of the Old Chemistry building on the main avenue of the University. The building was renovated after the Chemistry Department moved into new premises and now houses an amorphous collection of departments such as the Dean's Office, the Health Centre, the Dept. of Environmental Studies and the Psychology I course from which filters the pungent smell of caged rats. More important is that the Unit is only a corridor's walk from the Computer Centre and the services of the powerful Univac 1106 Computer. Almost opposite on the other side of the avenue is the Zoology Dept. with the FitzPatrick Institute with its good library and ornithological expertise.

Population

The permanent staff of the Unit consists of myself as Ringing Officer, the Secretary Barbara Castle, and assistant Lawrence Cwati, with Prof. Roy Siegfried overseeing from across the road as Hon. Director. For the past year we have also benefitted from student vacation workers. We have been able to employ students usually with zoological backgrounds, often qualified ringers, and have found them much better at dealing with the backlog data than ordinary clerical staff.

Administration

One of the main administrative tasks is the processing of current recoveries. Recoveries are reported from three sources; letters to the Zoo Pretoria forwarded about once a week to the Unit; local recovery reports from ringers and permanent ringing stations; reports direct to the Unit from overseas ringing organisations. In the first nine months of 1973, 304 letters were received via the Zoo. Of these 189 or 62% were reported in English and 115 or 38% in Afrikaans. It has been suggested that this means that more publicity about ringing should be given in the Afrikaans press. The bulk of the work in processing these recoveries is carried out by the Secretary, but each one is checked by the R.O. and the details transferred to a computer form before it is sent out.

The other big task on which the Unit has been engaged is the checking and computerising of all recovery data since the start of ringing in South Africa in 1948. This has proved a big task with about 6 000 recoveries to scrutinize. For each one, the original letter is found and the details are checked against the original ringing data. The time taken to check each recovery can vary from a couple of minutes up to half an hour if the details are particularly complex. However the end is now in sight and we hope to have this work finished by the end of February 1974. It will then be possible to call for computer print-outs of all recoveries of a particular species. At this stage we will probably bring ringers into the picture by issuing print-outs of each ringer's recoveries and asking for them to be finally checked. After this the data will be in as good a condition as possible and probably will be in better condition than

anywhere else in the world, or so we hope. Recovery letters will be sorted according to species and ring number and will be available for research purposes.

Another big task performed by the Unit is the issue of rings and equipment to ringers throughout southern Africa. Up to September we made 156 deliveries to a total value of R 1 728.89.

Much of my time is spent in corresponding with amateur and professional ringers about all ringing matters but over the last few months specifically on problems concerning amateur projects. 92 projects have been registered since the start of the Project system. Of these, eight were recently registered and ten have been cancelled. Of the remaining 74, 62 or 84% sent in their progress reports on time.

The Technical Subcommittee of which I am the Secretary is the body which is perhaps of most direct importance to amateur ringers since the technicalities of the administration are discussed there and recommendations made to the governing body, the Steering Committee. On both these bodies, there is a representative of the S.A.O.S. In 1973, the Technical Subcommittee held one long meeting and problems such as the standardisation of ringing permits, the Ageing Code and project progress reports were discussed.

Liaison

One of the Unit's tasks is of course to see that three issues of SAFRING come out every year. The circulation is about 220 at the moment with about thirty copies going to ringers outside southern Africa south of the Zambezi. The cost of SAFRING currently runs at about R500 p.a. Personal contact with ringers and ringing organisations often helps to solve many difficulties and makes the task of running NUBRA that much more enjoyable. During 1973 I visited ringers at Barberspan, Jonkershoek, the Wits. Bird Club, the Northern Transvaal Ornithological Society and the S.W.A. Scientific Society. I am, of course, in close contact with all the Cape Bird Club and W.Cape Wader Study Group members and often join them on ringing expeditions. During this year I gave lectures on bird-ringing to S.A.O.S. Boys School in Cape Town, to the Helderberg College at Somerset West and on migration to the Cape Bird Club. I also talked about ringing on the Saturday radio programme Nature Magazine. Several articles on ringing were organised in the local press including one in the Cape Times and another in the O.F.S. National Museum publication.

Research

The weight of the administrative work, some of which has been described above, at present leaves little time for research. However we have squeezed in a continuing study on the migration strategy of the Curlew Sandpiper Calidris ferruginea especially the body condition, fat/protein, changes during the year. At lunch time the staff of the Unit can often be seen clambering over the University roofs carrying out a study of the Rock Pigeon Columba guinea. To date we have ringed about 70 chicks and are monitoring the progress of about 85 nests scattered over the roof tops.

Conclusion

I think it can be said that the Unit is now operating fairly smoothly, though there are still some outstanding problems and new things to introduce such as the Ageing Code problem, and the introduction of standard moult cards. Official ringing regulations must

be issued and a Ringing Manual for southern Africa prepared. The tasks never quite seem to come to an end but the real success of ringing in southern Africa can only be gauged one way. Results count and if these can be produced over the next few years with real significance to ornithology and to conservation/management problems, then our ringing efforts can be considered successful. Finally let us hope that all this can be achieved while retaining the enjoyment of handling birds and the camaraderie of working with pleasant people.



The NUBRA offices - a scene of considerable industry. From left to right - Miss Sue Ellis (student assistant), Lawrence Cwati (cleaner/assistant), Vernon Scheepers (student assistant), Clive Elliott (R.O.) and Barbara Castle (secretary).