

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Sir,

Since the launching of Safring a year ago it has done a great deal toward breaking the isolation between ringers within southern Africa. However I feel that there must still be some international isolation. I received my ringing training in the Cape, but since I returned to England (I am now doing my apprenticeship with the BTO ringing scheme) I realise the blissful ignorance I enjoyed, in South Africa, of bird-in-the-hand techniques used elsewhere.

As yet little is known of ageing and sexing criteria for African birds - indeed many of the ringing projects registered with NUBRA are concerned with this problem. But much of the spade-work has already been done on European birds, so why not cash in on it? One is dealing with different species in Africa, but the basic biological processes e.g. moult of the birds are unlikely to be radically different. The applicability of techniques used in Europe for ageing of passerines could be tested on similar African species fairly rapidly - at least a good deal quicker than rediscovering them! At worst they can give an indication of what to expect, and therefore what to look for and record e.g. some juvenile feathers retained in the greater coverts or the alula, contrasting with adult feathers.

Far be it from me, a novice with these tools, to write an article on their use! Nevertheless may I suggest that a copy of the "Identification Guide to European Passerines" by Lars Svensson, should be in the possession of every serious South African ringer. It is obtainable from:

Naturhistoriska Riksmuseet,
The Museum Department,
104 05 Stockholm 50,
Sweden.

I was particularly interested in Mr. Piper's article on the analysis of ringing data. Most of us do not have the statistical background to make full use of the information we are collecting - and Safring is just what is needed to disseminate this knowledge. Let's have more of these articles!

Yours sincerely,
John Harwood,
2 Montague Mews South,
London W.1., U.K.

Dear Sir,

Reading in the Ostrich Vol.44 No.1 page 81, about "Red-backed Shrikes returning to the same Wintering Grounds" by David M.Skead. I might contribute with a small article of the same observation for publication.

A Red-backed Shrike female Lanius collurio was trapped and ringed in Windhoek, South West Africa on the 19th December, 1970. It was retrapped in the same area on the 6th February, 1972.

Yours sincerely,

D.F.Ludwig,
P.O.Box 472,
Windhoek, S.W.A.

Dear Sir,

Tom Choate's article on "Economical Colour Banding" (Safring News 2,2;18-20) seems to have raised a certain amount of controversy, some of it rightly so. As I am probably the only person, other than him, to have used this method in southern Africa I feel justified in answering some of the comments made.

Tom Choate has used these rings only on garden bird studies, particularly with House Sparrows and Masked Weavers. To date one House Sparrow has been found with its colour ring entangled in the nest material and I would agree that this sort of ring should not be used on birds using this type of nest as the danger of entanglement is increased.

However, I have used it quite successfully on my Kittlitz Plover studies at Lake Mollwaine and have only one adverse comment to make about its usage; extreme care has to be taken in stapling the excess portion of the ring to ensure that it is not too tight or too loose. Incidentally I always colour ring plovers around the fibula/tibia to obviate the ring becoming wet and dirty. Suitable wader colour-rings from U.K. cost £3.00 per hundred so in this case the saving over a period of a year becomes very great especially when extra money is required everytime one orders a new batch of mist-nets. In the field this type of ring is much easier to see than the conventional type.

There was no indication that either eggs or chicks were damaged in any way by these bands, intensive observations being made on many clutches and broods of plovers.

One must not be too scathing about attempted new methods until they are proven unsatisfactory. Remember that when the cannon-netting technique was first used on waders in the U.K. the mortality rate was as high as 10%. This was eventually overcome but if everyone got up in arms about it at the offset we might not have the most useful wader catching device in use today.

Similarly with Tom Choate's colour rings, we can only learn from our mistakes and in time it will be found on which birds these rings may be used satisfactorily.

Mist-nets are widely used and I would be very surprised if any ringer can tell me that he has a nil mortality rate. Should the mist-net then be banned?

Yours sincerely,
A.J.Tree,
6 Glenside,
Glenside Drive,
Strathaven,
Salisbury, Rhodesia.

Dear Sir,

In Safring 2,2; 3-4 mention was made of flood-lighting acting like a lighthouse to migrating birds and specifically mentions Whitethroats, Thrush Nightingales and Red-backed Shrikes being attracted in this way. My wife's father has a ranch in the Darwendale District of Rhodesia and, owing to the regular terrorist incursions of the last two years a little further to the north, has had extremely powerful flood-lighting put in around the farmhouse. We spent this last Christmas on the farm and on arrival found a few warblers flitting around the garden. I quickly stuck up some nets and the main catch was of Whitethroats (all of the race icterops) and European Marsh Warblers, but also Thrush Nightingales and Red-backed Shrikes as well as a good variety of other birds that were no doubt attracted by the large numbers of insects that hid in the bushes having been attracted by the lights during the night. An interesting point to all this is that I have not recorded either Whitethroat or Thrush Nightingale in that area before nor could they be found anywhere but around the garden at that time; the habitat is also atypical of that normally required by the two species.

On a short visit to the farm in November large numbers of Willow Warblers were present around the garden and being nocturnal migrants as well were probably attracted in the same way as the above species. Thus it was interesting to note that in late December not one Willow Warbler was seen thus their migration had obviously ceased but the above species were all still on migration at this late date. No birds were retrapped, even on the day of ringing.

Yours sincerely,
A.J.Tree.