

EDITORIAL

COLOUR-MARKING

This issue of Safring is dominated by the colour-ringing technique. Almost every article has some reference to it. To be able to mark birds so that they are individually recognisable from a distance, without subjecting them to any capture trauma, is a highly valuable exercise. And yet it is one for which so many ringers fail to appreciate the implications.

The first important implication is that even the commonest method, tarsal colour rings, is very likely to influence recovery rates. I have felt for some time that even on small passerines, the presence of three colour rings in addition to the single metal ring must make it more likely for someone to notice a dead bird and to read the ring address. At the same time one can be virtually certain that the colour rings themselves cannot be affecting the birds survival. Other methods such as wing tags must draw even more attention to a dead or dying bird. Thus in the new regulations on marking techniques, ringers are reminded that it is essential that details on colour-marks be filled in on their schedules.

The second implication which I think ringers often fail to realise, is that colour-marking birds is a largely useless exercise unless a systematic plan to search for the birds is carried out. It is generally accepted that to colour-ring birds to make them more conspicuous so as to boost the recovery rate is not itself worth the effort, despite the above paragraph. Although it may boost it by a few percent, the difference is unlikely to be very significant. Off-hand I do not know of any study in which colour-ringed and plain-ringed recovery rates have been compared. So assuming that this serves no purpose, colour-ringing should be used only to find out more than can be discovered by metal rings alone. It is surprising how often ringers colour-ring birds and then expect the additional information to fall into their laps merely through incidental observations of their marked birds. Most colour-marked birds are not easy to observe. One has to be close to the bird with a clear view in order to work out a three or four ring colour code. Sitting in a hide only a metre away from weavers, I found it easy to get mixed up between the left and right foot colour combination, especially when the birds moved around rapidly.

Despite these difficulties, given the time and patience, colour-ringing can be enormously productive. It can reveal intricacies of bird life which would otherwise remain in the realm of speculation. In the foreign news section of this issue, a reference is made to a paper on the New Zealand Robin. This shows how colour-ringing helped to unravel a basic bird problem - what happens to young birds of the year between fledging and the following breeding season. This was only achieved by diligent searching for colour-ringed birds in thick vegetation, a task requiring considerable application and good bush lore. Colour-ringing can also be used to tackle such problems as the precise age at which birds finish changing from one plumage to another, a question which will become of increasing interest to us with the new Age Code. Finally another problem which has always intrigued me is the study of survival rates by making 'visual retraps' of colour-rings and comparing results with survival rates determined from ringing recoveries. For a long time I have felt that most birds particularly passerines live longer than we think and that ringing tends to give an over-simplified picture. Grosskop (1964) showed that if survival was determined from long-distance recoveries, it turned out shorter than if determined from retraps made on the

breeding grounds. I think that if the same system was extended to visual retraps, we would find that survival was even better.

Finally I would urge ringers not to go into colour-ringing unless they have the time to look for their marked birds systematically. Or to start such schemes with, say, small but sufficient samples of ca. ten birds where this is appropriate, and then carry out an intensive study on this sample.

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

I have registered a project with NUBRA on the populations of the Cape Robin Cossypha caffra in my study area, and on an investigation of this species' weight fluctuations and moult cycle. It is difficult to obtain good samples of robins in one area because the bird appears strongly territorial. On the other hand many ringers must handle one or two robins each year. I would be grateful for information on weight and moult taken from birds ringed in Natal and the Transvaal. Please send the data to: Derek Chalton, Dept. of Biometry, Faculty of Agriculture, University of Natal, Private Bag 9021, Pietermaritzburg 3200, Natal.