EDITORIAL

In the last issue of SAFRING, a British article was reproduced for the benefit of South African ringers who were unable to read the original. The question asked was "What results justify ringing?" Similar questions are asked wherever thousands of birds are banded and few results ensue. Ringing is one of the most expensive ornithological tools. When all the costs, in terms of materials, labour and administration are added there is often little in the way of results to justify the expense.

You may say that the "frontiers of science" are necessarily expensive. For who can predict what will be found out if you don't spend time and money probing the unknown. But is ringing on the "frontiers of science"? It is a matter of opinion whether putting a ring on a bird and hoping for a recovery is science or just recreation for the ringer. What has been learnt from ringing in South Africa and what can be learnt?

At present there is no South African species for which we have complete data on its populations dynamics. There are many species whose breeding season and clutch size is known and, a few for which we know their breeding frequency and fecundity. There are even fewer species for which we know the rate of nestling survival or conversely how many nestlings reach reproductive age. Finally there is a very small number for which we know how long the adults survive. There is not one species for which all these data are known.

Current ornithological research overseas is showing that population dynamics parameters vary for each species according to locality, season and age of the bird. There are also age-dependent mortality and fecundity rates. Theoretical ideas are ahead of the fact and there is danger that they will be taken as fact before proven. Our research efforts lag a long way behind those from overseas. This is despite having ringed over 800 000 birds. Obviously no one ringer can hope to tackle the entire problem single-handed. But what one person can do is take a population of a species and attempt to find out as much as possible about it.

There are many suitable species - the Cape Robin, Cossypha caffra, Olive Thrush, Turdus olivaceus and Black-eyed Bulbul, Pycnonotus barbatus are good examples. The choice should be a common accessible bird. In a defined area, the birds should be monitored to give reliable data on numbers and fecundity. At the same time part or all of the population should be marked and by regular retrapping the survival rates estimated.

It is not necessary to work on a conspicuous bird. A species which is easily trapped and retrapped is suitable, and a good example of this is the work done on rails in the Transvaal. That work also illustrates a point that it is not necessary to find all nests, as breeding productivity can be based upon observations of adult to juvenile ratios.

The advantage of conspicuous birds is that they can be colour marked. By doing this, resightings can be treated as recaptures. This frees the ringer from having to spend all his time at traps and nets, and makes more time available for observations. Once colour marking is used, birds become individually known and aspects of their lives are revealed. This changes the emphasis of ringers' activities from ringing to studying behaviour.

The territorial behaviour of South African birds is little studied. The Bokmakierie, Telephorus zeylonus, Black Korhaan, Afrotis afra, Capped Wheatear, Oenanthe pileata, and Fiscal Shrike, Lanius collaris, are examples of excellent study subjects. What areas do they frequent? Is there any seasonal variation? How do they recognise their neighbours? And, in the case of Fiscal Shrikes, what use do they make of their larders?

The above questions are a long way from pure population dynamics but they indicate directions which can be taken by ringers. It is a matter of first asking questions about birds and then ringing them. The opposite of catching accessible birds and then trying to maximise that data collected while the bird is in the hand leads to massive collections of largely useless data. Most of that type of work can be done without ringing the birds, or by examining museum specimens. The case of data collection often leads to too much data being accumulated and the ensuing dilemma of how to process it all.

There is scope for all ringers. Take any species, preferably the one you find most interesting, and study it. The challenge is there - it is up to you to take it.

RINGING PERMITS

All ringers must be in possession of a ringing permit. These are issued by the conservation agencies in each of the provinces. In the Transvaal and South West Africa ringers have to apply directly to the Nature Conservation Departments. In Natal and the Cape Province ringers make their applications through their Branch Ringing Organisers and NUBRA.

In Natal, the ringers make an application for a ringing permit at the same time as they submit a project proposal. In other words all ringers must formulate ringing projects before they can obtain a permit to ring. This will be another step towards more productive ringing.

The permits will be issued to one applicant and will cover all persons assisting him. The permit will be valid for the duration of the project. The permit application/project registration forms are available from NUBRA or the Natal Branch Ringing Organiser, Philippe La Hausse. All ringers in Natal should work in co-operation with the Branch Ringing Organiser, who will give advice about the intended project.