

EDITORIAL

GUEST EDITORIAL

LORD OF THE RINGS

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Twice now, one of the editors of SAFRING has asked for ringers to start justifying their activities, and has even complained of the lack of response (SAFRING 5(1):28). It is, of course, a moot point whether we, the ringers, could similarly complain about N.G.S.R.A. and its supervision/advice or lack thereof. However, hopefully the discussion won't degenerate into the type of dispute that languid lovers have, and perhaps the present note will be thought a useful contribution to the earth-shattering and positively-meaningful debate we are about to have on "What Results from Bird Ringing?". In what follows, then, I make no apologies for taking vultures as my text.

Firstly, any results that do accrue are highly dependent on the type of person doing the research (synonym for ringing), and so a brief personal vignette is in order. I am a zoologist that happens to be studying birds: birds are ubiquitous, diurnal, generally noisy and conspicuous, pretty cheap to find and study, and besides, when I started in Nigeria there were only 'vulchas' and goats living in the place. I look at animals from the conceptual viewpoint of Darwinian evolution (synonym for spontaneous creation), and think of them in terms of survival of the fittest and strategies for improving survival, adaptation to environments, ecological competition, and so on. Hence, I am no anarchist.

Secondly, I am convinced that capturing and ringing of wild birds improves their chances of death. A first capture must be traumatic, and a ring and coloured markers must hamper the bird. If that is correct, then our reasons for interfering with birds must be good, answers to questions must be forthcoming, and answers must be communicated (and, for that matter, communicable). In the 1970's when so many species of animals are declining anyway, then we need extra justification for increasing that decline. And whether one believes that humans are simply naked but spiritual apes, or created in God's image, our dominion over the earth must be benign, humane and loving. Some humans are burdened with a great exploratory urge, and others may be sublimated great white hunters, but these are barely sufficient reasons.

Vultures as a whole are essentially wilderness-type birds, though one, the Hooded Vulture, has very successfully adapted to living with man. Their living space is disappearing and

of survival. Vultures have great aesthetic and inspirational appeal, they are useful in their way to the farmer, and they have been of powerful significance in the spiritual fantasies of developing man (e.g. the ancient Pharoahs, the modern Africans). Secondly, they are birds of very low reproductive rate and therefore of considerable academic interest. Also in several places, five or six species live together and this interspecific "soup" is well-worth investigating.

So, two primary questions are:

"How do vultures live and interact?"

"If they are declining how might we conserve them?"

We, therefore, want to know (among other things) where the birds move to and why; where they breed, how often they breed, how old are they when they breed; what their immature and adult survival rates are, and what are the causes of mortality. These questions can best, if not only, be answered by ringing the birds. In addition, the life-style of any animal is always greater in scope than is the imagination of the researcher, and each species holds many surprises in store for us. We should therefore at the outset of any project involving the capture of birds, individually mark them so that afterwards they can be recognised at a distance. Secondly, many species (including vultures) live in such a way that only group of workers could even begin to cope with the biology. I should be interested to know how many man/woman years of research have gone into the Great Tit, or into seabirds. It must be phenomenal. And are we any the better for those years, or any the nearer to salvation? Of course not, nor are we any the better for nuclear fission, red-shift, superconductivity or Concorde, just lazier, more knowledgeable and more horrendous. All this research gets done because of the exploratory urge, dynamism, imagination and intelligence of individual people, and of course, research into avian biology (call it bird-watching if you like) is as much on the 'frontiers of science' as is inventing the H-bomb. It happens to be not so earth-shattering.

Thus, we study birds because that is our bent, and ringing is an essential tool for getting certain answers. And two very important awarenesses emerge from our research efforts. We get first-hand knowledge of our one-ness with nature and the beauty and wonder of Planet Earth. Secondly, we are inspired by the feeling that Albert Einstein put in these words: "The incomprehensible thing about God is that he's comprehensible".

Being glorified baboons, we are primarily animals of vision and touch. That we have, therefore, if possible, to handle the objects of our interest comes to me as no surprise, and I have yet to see a bird-watcher that didn't marvel at a bird in the hand. The ways in which each one of us might need to atone for the insults and injuries (and deaths) that we hand to the birds remain, however, our own secrets.