SAFRING - HOW IT ALL BEGAN

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The South African Ornithological Society emerged from the second World War in remarkably good shape and could claim to be the largest society of its kind in the British Empire. In those days, that was some boast! Its strength came from the public interest in birds aroused by Roberts' "Birds of South Africa", for whose publication it could justly claim some credit. But John Voelcker, its farsighted president, realised it should do more than just bask in the reflected glory of this remarkable work and urged it, at its Annual General Meeting in 1946, to "take up a more active and progressive policy in certain branches of its activities". One of these - in his opinion "the first of all" - was the study of migration. This had long been mooted but had been put off by the war; it would obviously involve ringing and would necessitate the establishment of a centrally controlled scheme, similar to the British bird marking scheme of which he had had personal experience in England.

The suggestion was politely received but elicited little positive reaction. A year later, Mr Voelcker, on behalf of the South African Bird Book Fund trustees, offered the then princely sum of £200 to get the scheme started. Still no takers. So the newly established Witwatersrand Bird Club, keen to undertake various scientific projects, rose to the occasion and sent me along, with their backing, to parley with Mr Voelcker. The upshot was that on his motion at the S.A.O.S. A.G.M. on 24 April 1948, I was given a free hand to form my own "Migration Committee", with the suggested co-option of Dr Neil [illegible] appointed biologist to the Transvaal Provincial Administration.

The Bird Book Trustees also increased their grant to £250.

As I firmly believe in one of Parkinson's laws, that a committee's efficiency varies inversely to its size, my "Migration Committee" was limited to one. It kept no minutes and held no regular meetings, but with Dr Nel's assistance it liased with anyone and everyone who was interested. Jack Skead's letter to Dr Hewitt of 24 April 1946 (Ostrich July 1947 pp 119 - 122) was a valuable guide to the matters that had to be attended to. The British bird ringing scheme and the United States Biological Services advised us on ring sizes and material specifications. We had insufficient money for a full range of sizes so only six series were ordered from the South African Mint who undertook to make all except the smallest sizes. These latter were supplied by the Americans through the good offices of Dr H Friedmann, some immediately and others four years later. In 1950 we were also able to order the large C-clip rings from the Mint. The only disappointment we encountered was that the aluminium did not withstand salt water corrosion, so unfortunately before they could be replaced with more resistant anodised rings, quite a lot of potential records were lost.

A lot of thought and discussion went into the crucial question of name and address. Eventually, with Dr Bigalke's generous support "Zoo Pretoria" was chosen as best fulfilling the vital criteria of brevity, clarity and permanence. It may not be perfect but no one suggested anything better. One objection of which we soon became aware is that some finders, thinking the bird was an escapee, might be deterred from reporting their find for fear of being accused of shooting government property, but we concluded that this possible disadvantage could well be compensated by the concerned interest of others, anxious to let the Zoo know what happened to its bird. What was beyond doubt is the great debt that the S.A.O.S. and all interested in ringing owed - and still owe - to Dr Bigalke and his successors at the Zoo for this generous cooperation in receiving and forwarding information about recoveries.

The very first ringing took place over the August holiday weekend 1948, just three months after the scheme had been given the go-ahead by the A.G.M. The rings were ready a matter of hours beforehand and were in fact collected in Pretoria en route for the Kranzberg. It was organised jointly by the Witwatersrand Bird Club and the Transvaal Mountain Club, who were essential as we had decided to give the Cape Vulture Gyps coprotheres the honour of being the first recipients of the S.A.O.S. rings. I cannot remember why this choice was made unless it was that Royce Reed was an ardent member of both clubs and that an expedition of this sort was sufficiently way out to celebrate so important an occasion. Anyway 31 birds were ringed and a very good time was had by all, except the newspaper reporter who had come along in leather-soled town shoes and heroically insisted on climbing - or being hauled up - to the nesting sites.

This was not actually the first occasion on which rings had been used in South Africa. Apart from pigeon fanciers, Dr Rand of the Government Guano Islands had been using rings in his Cape Gannet Sula capensis research, labelled UG, and I had been using coloured plastic rings on Cape Sparrows Passer melanurus in Johannesburg for a year or so. And there may have been others.

Ringing was not started with any particular scientific project in mind. We felt our primary task was to get this valuable research tool established and that the best way of doing so was ringing to encourage ringing per se - what is now somewhat derogatively dubbed "ring and fling". Rings were therefore issued on application, without being tied to any research programme, and without checking the applicant's credentials, other than membership of the S.A.O.S. or a recognised bird society.

Apart from the carelessness of a very few participants who failed to keep proper records and thereby made some recoveries valueless and apart from the waste of a small number of rings or isolated erratic ringing, this policy paid off handsomely,

and the scheme was soon firmly established as part of the South African ornithological scene. In sheer volume it soon rivalled the British scheme, which for years hovered around the 10 000 mark which we reached in five years. In geographical distribution it compared favourably with the American scheme - for we stretched from Entebbe, Uganda, to Marion Island, and Tristan da Cunha. We also had enquiries from Nigeria but felt they would be better served from England. But what was even more satisfactory was that it was soon being used in ornithological research. Dr Eggeling in Uganda (1949 - 1950) was the first to use it systematically and was followed at the Cape by Dr Rand and the Cape Bird Club, by Bunty Rowan at Tristan da Cunha, by Reay Smithers and Daryll Plowes in Rhodesia, the latter spearheading research into the movement of Red-billed Queleas Quelea quelea in which the governments of Tanganyika, Rhodesia, South Africa and Botswana participated. It was also ready to hand when Rondevlei Bird Sanctuary and Barberspan Research station were established. This table speaks for itself.

	48/49	49/50	50/51	51/52	52/53	53/54	54/55	55/56
Birds Ringed	133	297	4172	5145	11574	22399	22596	21907

(my apologies to those who might have been inconvenienced by this use of split years - calender years would have been better).

As the numbers of birds ringed rose, so recoveries came pouring in. Some of the early ones were spectacular and good morale boosters. The very first was a Yellow-billed Kite Milvus aegyptius ringed at Luanysha ten weeks after the scheme began and found two months later, also near Bulawayo. A mass of data soon began to accumulate such as retrappings of Cliff Swallows Petrochelidon spilodera by the Witwatersrand Bird Club, and recoveries of Cape Gannets all round the coast from Mocambique to Nigeria.

The only weak spot now was the administration. It was all getting too big and too important to be left as a one man band,

and a part time voluntary one at that. By the end of 1956 I handed it over, with very mixed feelings, to the Port Elizabeth Museum. I had greatly enjoyed running it and had made many friends but like the sorcerer's apprentice I was being swamped by its runaway development. I am very happy to see how it is progressing in its new phase and I wish it and all those connected with it continuing success.

The advent of the mist net had a profound effect on bird ringing, because it presented ringers with a highly efficient means of trapping birds in large numbers. Here John Bunning extracts a Masked Weaver from his net at Melville Koppies.