

THE WITWATERSRAND BIRD CLUB'S INVOLVEMENT IN THIRTY  
YEARS OF BIRD-RINGING IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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"An afternoon meeting at Melrose Dam, the proposed first Bird Sanctuary of Johannesburg, was held on the 22nd February". So states a report on the Witwatersrand Bird Club (WBC) Activities during the first quarter of 1948 in the Bokmakierie Vol.1, p. 18.

What has this to do with "Thirty years of bird-ringing"? This place (later called Melrose Retreat and then the Melrose Bird Sanctuary), has played an important rôle in bird-ringing in the Transvaal, especially since the early sixties when Mr A D S (Des) Hewitt started organising the ringing of birds (notably the European Swallows), roosting in the reed-beds there. These Sunday evening operations led by Des have been the introduction and training grounds of many of today's WBC ringers. Des has made a major contribution to the understanding of the migration of the European Swallow by organising and writing up this long term project, which has earned him a mention in Moreau's book on migrants and migration.

In the same issue of the Bokmakierie (Vol.1, p.20) in the minutes of the first AGM of the WBC we read that Dr Hugh Ashton informed the meeting of steps which had been taken to bring about the inauguration of a Union-wide scheme for ringing migratory species of birds.

During this year, 1948, the WBC started ringing the Cape Vulture at Kransberg. This project has continued to date and has grown

from strength to strength into today's sophisticated "Vulture Study Group" whose researches and modern methods led to three members of the group being invited to give papers at the "World Symposium on Vultures" in the USA in March 1979.

In the early days Dr Hugh Ashton played a big part in the organisation of the WBC ringing effort. He held and issued the rings, and completed the paper-work. It is interesting to note in Bokmakierie Vol.1, p.49 is the following:- "The cost of the rings will be 7/6d per hundred. If any bird-ringer rings more than 100 birds a year additional rings will be supplied free of charge".

The first recovery of a Black Kite ringed as a fledgling in Rhodesia by Major Haydock was reported with obvious delight in the Bokmakierie Vol.2, p.11. of May 1949. In the same issue it was also stated that:- "So far about 3-400 birds have been ringed this summer, including kites, swifts, swallows, European Bee-eaters, rollers, Violet-backed Starlings, Little Stints, sandpipers and cuckoos - not to mention our famous vultures. About nine-tenths of all this has been done by three or four people - none of them members of the Bird Club. Can we do better this coming season?".

By 1951 ringing was well established on the Witwatersrand as the following quotation taken from the first WBC News Sheet shows. In March 1952 Mr Royce Reed wrote the following:- "The year 1951 saw the fine total of 227 Cliff Swallows and 271 Cattle Egrets banded. In addition to the Cliff Swallows which we banded, we recovered 89 rings from swallows that had been ringed on previous occasions. Of these no fewer than 13 had been recaptured on previous visits to this nesting site. We'll be enrolling these birds as members if they persist in turning up so regularly to meetings. We have now developed the trapping technique to such a fine art that very few birds ever escape our nets without a band (ring - do I note an American influence in those days?). On every visit birds yield quite a crop of parasites for study by the SA Institute for Medical Research.

"There is still, surprising as it may seem to those who have visited the heronries, vowing never to return, a brave group of ringers which is prepared to tackle these fruitful sites and be cut, covered in slime and half drowned for the doubtful satisfaction of banding the Ardea.

"Some notable individual efforts in banding are those of Major Hallack at Modderfontein who banded a young Secretary Bird and some Golden Bishops, Dr Harwin who carried out our first successful record of night trapping under difficult conditions, R. van Hoogstraten who banded two Cape Bittern chicks, P. Lawson who banded a White-fronted Sandplover while on holiday and D. Scott-Smith who secured three Brown-hooded Kingfishers which he banded.

"It is our wish to band all of the larger birds from Crowned Plovers up-wards, all the waders, cuckoos, swallows, swifts, hoopoes and sub-tropical species which sometimes enter our area. We are particularly anxious to discover where the European Swallows roost at night. So far no one has been successful in uncovering this closely-kept secret."

Royce goes on to appeal to readers for information on the European Swallow's roosts. His last paragraph interested me:- "We have just received permission from the Conservator of Fauna and Flora to continue our bird banding activities for a further twelve months. Anyone wishing to participate in bird banding during the coming summer should let me have his or her name and address." A far cry from today's stiff administrative cum paper-work test set by the Transvaal Provincial Administration, Nature Conservation Division which have to be passed before anyone in the Transvaal is allowed to ring birds.

In December, 1953, at a General Meeting of the WBC a suggestion was made that members "adopt" a ringed bird for 5/-. By March, 1954, it was stated that 27 birds had been adopted in this scheme. I wonder what was the outcome of this scheme?

A name inseparable from the early days of WBC bird ringing is

Royce Reed, who although he was involved in all aspects and projects of WBC ringing will probably be best remembered for his extensive ringing of the birds occurring on his farm "Tongvallei". This work was written up, in the Ostrich, by Mrs (Bunty) Rowan.

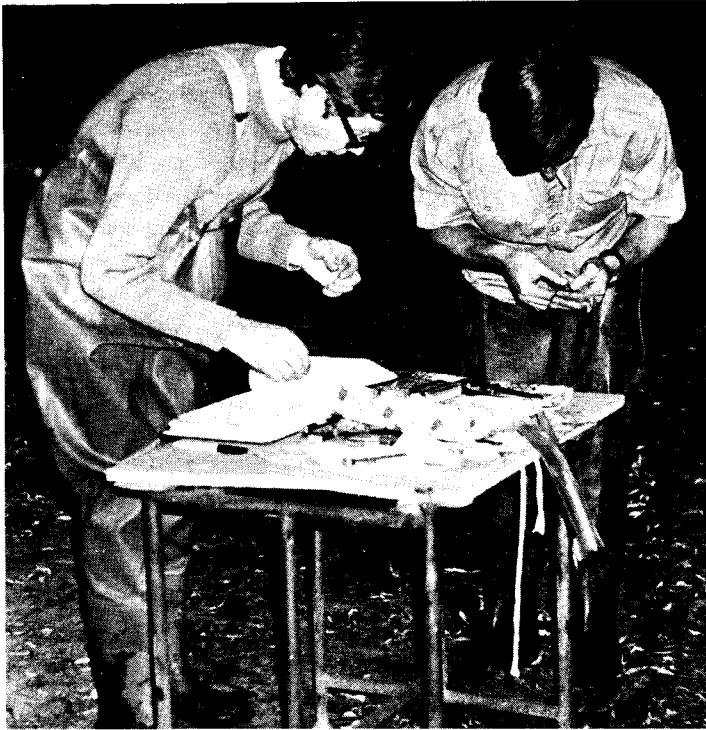
In 1968 Dr John Ledger produced a Bird Ringing Manual for the WBC which was later up-dated and used on a national basis. John was one of the early raptor ringers and leader and founder of the Vulture Study Group and amongst all this, and his position as a professional entomologist at the SA Institute for Medical Research (SAIMR), found the time to be Branch Ringing Organiser for a number of years and was responsible for negotiations in 1970 with Mr P. le S. Milstein (Senior Professional Officer of the Transvaal Provincial Administration, Nature Conservation Division) who introduced a new system for testing would-be ringers before issuing ringing permits. Mr Milstein in his report stated that:- "In the past, bird-ringing permits were issued on receipt of a recommendation by the WBC, and that malpractices in ringing occurred and justified complaints were received about the conduct of ringing operations. The whole system was overhauled and the way of issuing permits was discussed with the ringing sub-committee and leading ringers of the WBC on February 3rd 1969." Mr Milstein's system has been in use since that time to date.

In 1973 Mr Clive Hunter and other WBC ringers designed and made a ringing trophy. This is constructed out of flattened, used bird rings cut into the shape of an owl. It was firstly presented, by the ringing committee, to Mr A.D.S. Hewitt in appreciation for his years of work as recorder and Branch Ringing Organiser. From then on it has been presented at the WBC ringers annual "Get-together", held in June each year, to the person who the current holder considers has done the most to further the cause of bird-ringing in the Transvaal. It was presented to Royce Reed in 1974, Clive Hunter in 1975, to John Ledger in 1977 and John Bunning in 1978. Manfred Schmitt in 1976,

In 1976 on the two days preceeding the SA Ornithological Society AGM (17 - 18 June) the WBC hosted the first National Bird

Ringling Conference. Ringers from all over southern Africa, the SAOS and its branches, the various provinces' Nature Conservancy Departments, and The South African Bird-Ringing Unit (SAFRING) (then NUBRA) were all represented. It was at this meeting that "project ringing" was initiated as opposed to the "ring-and-pling" methods of old.

In 1976 at a meeting of the WBC ringers the previous system of one man acting as the Branch Ringing Organisator and having all the burden of the administration of the ringing group was discontinued and a sub-committee (Research and Records Sub-Committee of the WBC) of four persons was elected to not only administer the ringing programme of the WBC, but also to look after the research and records of the WBC.



The European Swallow ringing project undertaken by the Witwatersrand Bird Club was probably the most successful migration study ever done on the African continent. The man responsible was Des Hewitt (left) seen in action at night at Melrose Bird Sanctuary with Richard Sadler.