

BIRD RINGING - THE NATAL SCENE

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Being obliged by an official edict to write an annual review of bird ringing in Natal, I am devoting this first one to an historic look at the local bird ringing scheme.

Like all good Natalians I put off the task of writing this review until such time as it came to the top of the priority list, hoping that in the meantime my subconscious ideas-generator would mull the matter over and come up with something useful. But alas, all that came to mind was the subjective impression that although a fair amount of ringing has been done in Natal, there isn't much to show for it? Or is there?

In an effort to find out, I've been through SAFRING NEWS from Vol. 1 no. 1 to the last issue to see where the contributions have come from. Excluding letters and all contributions penned by the successive long-suffering Ringing-Organisers, the geographic distribution is as follows:

Cape Province, 40; Transvaal, 39; Rhodesia, 18, Natal, 12 (5 of which were in the last issue); Kenya 4; Malawi 3; SWA 3.

A glance at the 19th Ringing Report which gave figures for 1975 - 1976 ringing year, showed that the percentages of total

birds ringed that year by the different regions are: Transvaal 44,7%; Cape Province 20,5%; Rhodesia 17,5% and Natal 8,4%. Without going into reams of analyses on these figures the following two points seem obvious:

1 Allowing for the fact that inclination to put pen to paper is a rare trait in bird ringers, there seems to be a disproportionate number of ringers with this trait in the Cape Peninsula. Or is it simply that local environmental factors in the shape of the Ringing Organiser and the Hon. Director of SAFRING exert a constant stimulus on the local talent?

2 The Transvaal, with its large population of dynamic people, have matched the Peninsula community in output; the higher percentage of birds ringed is in large part due to the activities of the Transvaal Nature Conservation Division's Ornithological Research Station at Barberspan.

In short, Ornithological Institutions like the PFIAO and SAFRING are bound to create a local incentive to publish results of ringing work, and when a Conservation Authority has a vested interest in ornithological research this fact is likely to be reflected in the returns of the relevant Province.

Natal has not hitherto been blessed with such incentives and had in the past to rely on the efforts of a small band of ringing stalwarts headed by Walter Lawson, Ray Parker and Gary Little. In those long past halcyon days of cheap petrol these enthusiasts did not attempt to achieve an impressive list or total of different species ringed by driving at random through the Province and ringing a bird here and a bird there, but instead devoted their energies to group ringing activities. One such centre was

at Kwa Mashu where, by 1967, Walter Lawson and his band of helpers had ringed 9000 European Swallows, 29 of which were subsequently recovered in Russia. Walter never got around to writing this up, but Bunty Rowan did! (The Cape 'climate' is of course so much more conducive to putting pen to paper!) The bush bird community study at Kwa Mashu, under the leadership of Ray Parker and Gary Little, was just starting to yield interesting results when the bulldozers moved in and eliminated the habitat.

The early 70's saw a downswing in ringing activity in Natal as the demand for project-orientated ringing took its toll. Walter Lawson left for Australia, and only a few monomaniacs continued ringing things like Starred Robins and Thick-billed Weavers and bats.

From this low point however, ringing activity started on an upward trend. Post-graduate bird studies in the Pietermaritzburg area and the immigration of Steve Piper revitalized the Natal scene, and in 1979 the Natal Parks, Game and Fish Preservation Board appointed its first full time professional Ornithologist.

We enter the 1980's with confidence. The Natal Parks Board, in liason with the Natal Bird Club, will encourage community ringing studies in those proclaimed Nature Reserves which are conveniently situated in or close to large population centres. Apart from the potential of such studies to yield useful demographic data on bird populations, such group ringing programmes provide opportunities for the encouragement and training of

young ornithologists. It is to be hoped that the quite unprecedented local burst of literacy which resulted in five of the 14 articles in the last SAFRING NEWS being penned in Natal is but an indication of the new look in Natal ringing activity. But for objectivity's sake it must be mentioned that the Ringing Organiser paid an historic first visit to Natal ringers last October. Is there perhaps a correlation?

Steve Piper, Branch Ringing Organizer in Natal, lectures in the Department of Land Surveying at the University of Natal's Durban campus. As a mathematician, he has computerised all his own ringing data, as well as drawing up a number of exciting new programmes for the storage and retrieval of all kinds of ornithological data.

