

LETTERS

The Editor,
Sir,

SERVICE TO THE SOCIETY

A quarter of a century ago it was my pleasure, as Secretary-Treasurer, to acknowledge year after year a donation to the Society's funds from Miss B. McDougall. Although lists of donations received regrettably did not appear in *Notornis* from volumes 8 to 14 inclusive, I believe her generosity continued and recent years have shown she is still a regular contributor of increasing amounts. What devotion she has shown over the years to the welfare of the Society!

Another example is that of Dr R. A. Falla who is I think the only member who has served continuously on the Council since the foundation of the Society. I am sure all members will join me in congratulating these two members whose records of service stand unsurpassed in their respective fields.

J. M. CUNNINGHAM

Wellington
27 July 1972



The Editor,
Sir,

Mills, J. A. 1971. *The reliability of sight recoveries of banded Red-billed Gulls. The Australian Bird Bander* 9 (4): 83-84 (Department of Internal Affairs, Wildlife Publication No. 131)

The review by J.M.C. of this paper was most interesting and we can agree on the importance of checking the work. In some instances simple book-keeping checks are adequate, appropriate to dead material but often needs-be, other checks are required for live birds. This paper is one such check. More generally the accuracy of the data will determine the precision of the deductions.

My experiences may be relevant.

During the six years 1959-64 I recovered by sight more than 1700 Red-billed Gulls, and made six definite mistakes among the birds sighted, one of a bird handled, and one of a band found squashed into the road. The first six mistakes were of three types; simple numerical slips (Hartree, 1952: 5-10) such as inversion of the order of two digits; secondly the repetition of a digit probably often when it has been difficult to obtain a view of the whole number; and thirdly anticipation. Bands of two diameters, "E" diameter and "H" diameter were used on Red-billed Gulls. All E bands were pre-fixed with E and most H bands with H. Some H bands had only a number. Now these bands could be recognised apart at a glance; further often those of different years of the same size could be recognised, so

usually it was only necessary to read the final three or four digits of the five figure number. The first one or two digits could be guessed, perhaps hardly consciously.

However, lack of this anticipation was one of the striking confirmations of the accuracy of my work. A gull from a remote banding station was recognised by the reading of the first two digits of its number and no impossible combinations were read.

Also for some years colour-banding was used to distinguish the colony where the gull had been banded. Certainly the initial digits of birds from all colonies were read correctly.

Another test of accuracy was the reading of both numbers of gulls with two numbered bands on and of the number of Black-billed Gulls (*Larus bulleri*) colour-banded to distinguish the individual. Among the latter there was disagreement because of loss of colour bands and the bad-fading of many colours, as was experienced with gulls coloured banded to indicate the colony.

Further tests are possible. The recoveries of different hundreds of one year's gull chicks from one colony would be expected to be distributed binomially. This was found for several years; for other years when the recoveries did not have a binomial pattern there is good independent evidence suggesting that the pattern based on sight recoveries was showing a real effect.

It may be of interest to explain the mistake made with the squashed band. The gull was sighted, alive and well with the number that had been thought to be on the squashed band. The squashed band was on hand so it could be examined again.

Certainly there can be little doubt about the band number of gulls that were seen repeatedly in one locality. For the others little hangs on a single recovery; deductions should be made from several instances of similar recoveries.

It may be of interest to examine the alternatives of colour banding, of extensive re-trapping, or of making deductions from recoveries of banded gulls found dead.

Colour banding of Black-billed Gulls has already been discussed. Also birds with several bands on one leg are especially liable to be lame with that leg. I consider two bands on one leg as undesirable. And no colour-banding scheme could be used to identify the thousands of gulls that were banded each year.

Retrapping causes great disturbance of the birds. Many birds quickly learn to recognise the trap and become much more shy. Only the stupid and the very bold are frequently retrapped; the results are grossly non-random. Even my sight recoveries of gulls were non-random with too many male gulls and too many first-year gulls being identified. Also most traps are not light and mobile; overseas these traps are usually at research stations and are permanent structures.

If only recoveries from dead birds are used then most of the interest and detail that can be learnt from banded birds is lost. Also the recovering of banded birds is the work of a banding project and surely it is most undesirable that this be passed to the general public. The expense of obtaining these recoveries remains even though it is now spread over many heads.

Now, how is the worth of a technique, method or theory judged? First it is judged by an internal criticism of the results and secondly by checking independently the more extreme deductions, easily accessible to checking.

These criteria will apply to results obtained by sight recoveries of banded birds.

An original "aim" of our Society was "the study of living birds in their natural state." I believe a careful and intense programme of obtaining a wealth of sight recoveries of banded birds is one of the best policies in such a study. "Best" in that it is relatively simple, easy, and of low cost; and skilfully carried out with minimum disturbance to the birds observed.

REFERENCES

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Bird study in New Zealand.

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21 July 1972



The Editor,
Sir,

CONSTITUTIONAL PROCEDURE AT THE AGM

In the report of the Annual General Meeting for 1972 (*Notornis* 19 (2): 176) concerning the "matter of joining CoEnCo" Dr R. A. Falla is reported as saying "this was the place for members to instruct Council . . ."

Unfortunately this is not so. The 1953 Constitution of the Society provided for the Council to manage the affairs of the Society "subject to the direction of the Society in general meeting." Members will recall that in 1968 and again in 1970 I fought tooth and nail against certain proposed alterations to the constitution, including the dropping of this desirable provision, in the new and unsatisfactory constitution which was finally adopted in Christchurch in 1971 in my absence.

Members will now realise that they have surrendered control of their own society to the ruling council as their only practical recourse (if they should wish it) is to unseat its members, one third at a time, over three years. Let us hope that the council will in fact, continue to act as a "benevolent dictatorship."

J. M. CUNNINGHAM

Wellington
27 July 1972