

# EDITORIAL

## The Honeymoon Is Over

In the early years after the Australian Bird Banding Scheme was first launched, the co-operation of amateur ornithologists was actively solicited—they were given free bands and equipment, they were told that they were doing valuable scientific work, they were encouraged to band wherever the opportunity presented.

Now suddenly, they are asked to justify themselves. Some banders are surprised, even hurt, by this apparent change of face. A little reflection will show that this is an inevitable consequence of the success of the Scheme, a natural result of its development, and in a sense a sign of its coming of age.

Australia was late in entering the field of bird banding. In the early 1950's, at a time when bird banding had been a well-established ornithological activity for some decades in Britain, America and several European countries, visiting ornithologists from overseas were astonished to find that apart from one or two special investigations, bird banding did not exist in Australia. Dom Serventy, in his now classical studies on the Bass Strait mutton birds, was using bands made for this particular project and stamped "Tasmanian Fauna Board". Effective bird banding at the Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition's stations at Heard Island and Macquarie Island was first started in 1952 by Max Downes, using bands obtained from the New Zealand bird banding scheme! With the expansion of the work of the Wildlife Survey Section of the CSIRO (now the Division of Wildlife Research), the need for a centrally organised national banding scheme became urgent, and it was natural that the Wildlife Survey Section should step in to fill the vacuum. The decision to extend the scheme to amateurs was in keeping with the best traditions of the CSIRO in its aim of fostering a wider interest in scientific ornithology. It was also a case of enlightened self-interest.

### Early Policy

In the complete absence of any appreciable experience of banding in Australia there was only one possible policy—to issue bands to competent ornithologists and give the banders a free go. Only by banding widely would it be possible to explore the possibilities and find out in what direction lay the most promising lines for development.

The amateurs responded well and the scheme has steadily grown. Native resourcefulness and knowledge of field conditions have shown how banding can be profitably adapted to the study of Australian ornithology, and there is no doubt that

banding has broadened the horizons of many amateur ornithologists and has done much to foster an informed interest in Australian birds among a wider public. However, for some there is also an element of competition in bird banding; in the first flush of enthusiasm some of us tended to lose sight of the real purpose of bird banding, and it became a matter of banding for banding's sake. Then came the mist nets. As pointed out at the Canberra conference in January of this year, the introduction of mist nets in 1958 led to an explosive expansion of the Scheme which could hardly have been foreseen by its originators. The apparently limitless increase in the flood of banding returns threatens to swamp the small secretariat of the Scheme, and it has been necessary to call a halt to further expansion in volume. The obvious remedy is to channel banding efforts by making banding more scientific.

Those who have been paying attention will realise that there is nothing new in this suggestion. This was one of the reasons for the formation of this Association and the production of the *Australian Bird Bander*. Our immediate Past President, Steve Wilson, has for some time been trying to improve the status of banding by preaching this at every opportunity.

### Defined Objectives

The organisers of the A.B.B.S. have no desire to hamper useful banding. But it has become necessary to ask banders to define their objectives more clearly and to refrain from banding which is irrelevant to these objectives. If this is conscientiously done, it will improve the quality of banding work and at the same time will, in most cases, substantially reduce the numbers banded. In this phase of change of emphasis, problems will inevitably arise, but we are sure that these will be sympathetically considered by the Secretary of the A.B.B.S., and we would urge any banders who are in doubt to discuss their problems with their regional organisers. It is to be hoped that no active banders will find it necessary to resign from the scheme. This is a period of heart-searching in which guidance is needed, and we hope to continue this discussion in future issues of this Journal.