

Address to EURING General Meeting, September 2017 by Niels Otto Preuss

(Niels is the last surviving member of the first EURING Meeting, Paris, 1967).

Good evening.

This week you meet here in Copenhagen to take part in a EURING General Meeting.

Why do we have an organisation such as EURING?

First: because bird ringing was invented,

Second: because most European countries adopted the idea.

Third: because somebody saw the importance of all bird ringing operating along the same lines and making information available for all.

The late Professor Wlodzimierz Rydzewski, in his exile in England, argued energetically for better co-operation between the many independent ringing centres, and was in contact with – among many others – Spencer, Etchecopar and Perdeck. Besides that he personally issued the magazine ‘The Ring’ where he argued for his ideas.

During the 13th International Ornithological Congress in Ithaca, USA in June 1962 there was a meeting where several of the leaders of the European ringing centres met with the North American banding Centre in Patuxent. Here we decided that there should be a meeting called for leaders of all European ringing centres with the aim of creating a European organisation of bird ringing centres. Obviously Etchecopar in France, Spencer in the United Kingdom and Perdeck in the Netherlands had previously held discussions on the matter. Subsequently a meeting was called for to take in Paris, 21st - 26th September 1963. At that meeting all Western European ringing centres were represented with the exception of Iceland and Italy but including Poland. The other Eastern European centres regretted that they could not attend.

The meeting was organised by Robert-Daniel Etchecopar – the leader of the French ringing centre in Paris. - and was a splendid mixture of hard-work sessions, exquisite cocktail parties, splendid dinners and marvellous excursions. The excursions included the Pyrenees and the Loire Valley with its many castles. Here we enjoyed a wonderfully superb French dinner hosted by the French hunters’ association (Conceil Superieure de la Chasse).

Half-way through the week we embarked on a night train to Biarritz at the northern foothills of the Pyrenees where an excursion to a traditional pigeon catching area in Col de Lazarieta took place, followed by a reception given by the Mayor in the little Basque village of Sare.

At the opening session of the conference, Etchecopar very clearly told us that the goal for the conference was to create a common centre for European bird ringing.

Now I will ask you to remember that in 1963 very few of the leaders of the ringing centres had visited other centres, and that most leader were convinced that their own results were not only unique but also their own. The thought of combining all ringing information was too overwhelming for some of the delegates. The question of combining all the European schemes in one centre was quickly abandoned because of the many languages in Europe.

Recoveries at the time were recorded by hand – or perhaps typewriter. Original letters were stored in as many ways as there were centres, if they were not destroyed. ‘Geographical co-ordinates’ were unknown words for many and, besides, at that time they were difficult to find. All centres worked according to their own rules and were not really prepared to change their procedures.

The inspired combination of receptions, working sessions and excursions brought us all very much together. Do remember that the most fruitful discussions can take place when you are relaxed with a glass in your hand.

The languages of the conference were English and French. Obviously few of us mastered both and were not used to negotiating in a foreign language, but even that problem was solved by Etchecopar who, after a few minutes, burst out 'Traduire!', followed by Laurent Yeatman's highly professional, competent and elegant translation between English and French. (By the way, Laurent Yeatman is known as the man behind the French Bird Atlas – the first in the World.)

In order to reach agreement, every little process of the daily work in the different ringing centres had to be negotiated. Etchecopar, Spencer and Perdeck had listed the questions and we were forced to discuss them one-by-one.

At that time, most centres had only two or three codes for the recovery data and manner of recovery. Few in 1963 had any knowledge of the new techniques concerning the punch card and even fewer knew anything about computer techniques so, for many, it was nonsense or incomprehensible to see what help they would be in the study of bird-ringing results. And, besides that, many wondered from where we should get all this new equipment.

Etchecopar recognised the problem and told us he would get all the necessary machinery in time; Perdeck backed him up. In the end Perdeck was more successful than Etchecopar.

All the items we discussed – not only at the first meeting in 1963 – but also on several of the following – may seem odd today but that was certainly not the case in the 1960s.

Slowly all, or nearly all, agreed to send their recovery data to a common EURING Data Bank. It was recognised that every single centre could co-operate at six different levels from no co-operation up to the delivery of complete punch cards. All the centres were asked to start with all the new recoveries and then work their way back to the very first recovery. In 1963 the only solution for handling all these recoveries was the use of the 80-column punch card, which limited us to using only the 80 characters for each recovery. A rather fancy formula with several copies was designed and quickly became in daily use in all centres.

In order to have a common input and because a future sorting should be made by machines it was necessary to make a list of common codes for the age of the birds, the manner of recovery, country/district and many other items. Such a code list was created in English, French and German by Gerhard Zink from Radolfzell and, in the following years, other European languages were added.

In former days it was common to send a recovery letter either in your own language or in German, English or French, but in 1963 it was a common desire to write in the finder's own language. Therefore such standard letters were created.

The introduction of Japanese and Italian bird catching nets around 1960 led to an enormous increase in the number of birds ringed – particularly adult birds. The situation called for a far better tool for ageing and sexing birds. The demand was followed by a series of books from Britain, Sweden, Poland and Switzerland, some even giving information about moult and skull ossification - new methods for ageing birds.

Already at the 1963 meeting the problem of several – and not always the scientifically minded – ringing centres in a single country was discussed, a matter often related to the laws in the specific country. The problem is not easily solved and is, apparently, sometimes still a problem. In my

opinion it is no problem if both centres have a real scientific aim but when the right to ring is used to camouflage bird hunting I do disagree.

From the very beginning the trade in bird nets and traps was one of the subjects of discussion. Among the many other subjects under discussion in the early years of the life of EURING were:
What to do when an old, worn ring on a bird is replaced with a new one?
Should a ring recovery belong to the ringing or to the reporting centre?
How do we source rings of the best quality and who can make them?
Can we improve the design of individual characters on the rings? (I know that the Polish centre came up with a splendid design but do not know if it was introduced)
How to cope with the many colour-marking projects?

It is my opinion that already from the beginning of the meeting in France that there was a great wish for co-operation. A few of the delegates were rather sceptical over the idea that we should all use the same codes and procedures and place recoveries in the Data Bank. But we did manage to agree to a common solution or, at least, to walk forward.

Even though I now have no involvement with bird ringing or EURING I would very much ask you all to update your home pages than is the case at present. It is depressing to note that some information may be many years old – please think about it.

... and a short note about the history of bird ringing in Denmark.

I suppose all of you know that the idea of the individually numbered bird ring is a Danish invention. To be honest, the idea was not far away from other ornithologists, so the idea of Mortensen was soon adopted by others.

The schoolmaster Hans Christian Mortensen ran his own private ringing centre from 1899 to his death in 1921 when one of his ringers, Holger Petersen, took over from 1922 to 1931.

In the meantime Peter Skovgaard – a former ringer at the Mortensen centre – started with his own rings in 1914 and continued to 1968. One of his ringers, Sigurd Kristensen, took over and continued until 1977 when, by law, he was forced to stop.

Starting in 1964 some young men started the Odense ringing centre ringing, mainly, gulls. They were too young to become ringers for the Copenhagen centre and they did not wish to become ringers for Skovgaard. They ringed with their own rings until the law forbade it in 1967.

The Copenhagen ringing centre did not begin until 1932 but rings with the Copenhagen address were used by the Nature protection Council some years earlier.

The leader of the Copenhagen centre was Richard Hørring who died in 1943. Then Knud Paludan and Poul Valentin Jensen took over for a short time until Professor Hans Johansen, arriving from Siberia, became in charge in 1944. He continued until 1962 when I took over. Since then Carsten Rahbek (1995 – 2005) and Kaspar Thorup (2005 -) have been leaders.

In 1950 the Game Biologist Station wanted to ring large numbers of game birds but the Copenhagen centre was not a financial position to cope with it. Therefore the Game Biologist Station created its own system which still exists but only ringing game birds. The Kalø ringing scheme was run by Knud Paludan followed by Ib Clausager.