

A RINGERS YEAR

Jan 2021: Some news from our 'Autumn' ringing station at Howick is of interest this month. First an adventurous Coal Tit, which was originally ringed on the 31/8/20 at Howick, was controlled (recaptured alive) at Rowlands Gill by the Durham Dales Ringing Group, on the 10/1/21. It had travelled at least 61 kms. Secondly a Goldfinch which had been originally ringed at Howick back on the 6/10/18 was found dead near Seahouses Farm (little over 1 km away) on the 11/1/21 probably having hit a window.

I also had a call from a resident who lives near Warkworth who had found a sick owl. The owl was apparently underweight and probably finding it difficult to feed in the snowy weather and unfortunately died. My finder had assumed (not unreasonably) that it might be from the local box where I had ringed some young owls back in June 2020 but inspecting of its ring number proved otherwise. I realised it was not one of 'my' owls and so sent the number off to the BTO; their computer produced the answer a couple of days later – telling us that the owl was in fact just coming into its fifth year having been hatched (and ringed) at its nest up the Breamish Valley well past Ingram in July 2016. This sort of West to East (inland to coastal) movement tends to occur in bad weather.

I usually get keen to do some ringing at home when I start to see Siskin's on my Niger feeders but for the past 18 months, I have had very few of these lovely little finches travelling through our garden. This is in marked contrast to earlier years when I have always had a few around (including breeding birds in the spring) and sometimes hundreds in the winter. However, I decided to have a go on the 17th and captured 42 birds in two hours (31 new and 11 re-traps). There were no Siskins but two Blackbirds (a pair) which had squeezed their way into a 'Mason' trap through little entrances which I thought were too small for them were captured; also, a pair of Robins (which seemed to be feeding and travelling around the garden together) Coal Tits, Great Tits, Tree Sparrows and Long Tailed Tits (about which more later) and a lot of Blue Tits. As noted at the study site near Longhorsley (in last months article) there was a higher-than-normal proportion of adult birds (relative to juveniles).

I always have a few traps around the garden but unless I am purposefully ringing, they are not 'set' to catch anything. In this open state they do tend to enable small birds to feed without having to put up with competition from for example Jackdaws and Wood Pigeons. Recently I discovered that we have a growing flock of Long Tailed Tits, that are quite happy to go into the traps to feed-on Fatballs. The flock is up to about 16 individuals to date and their keenness to go into traps means that so far I have ringed 10 of them; over time I hope to re-trap some of them and see how long they live.

Still pursuing the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) winter ringing initiative near Longhorsley we caught 20 odd birds in the New Year including a rare Willow Tit first ringed at the same site in December 2018. Another session on the 12th captured 33 birds (28 new and 15 re-traps) including Blue Tits from January and February 2018, respectively. There was also a nice (and unusually well-behaved) Great Spotted Woodpecker. This was an adult female that even refrained from pummeling my trainee's fingers while it was being photographed (see attached picture).



Two Robins which did seem to be tolerating each other's presence (so may well have been a true pair) also gave me an opportunity to illustrate how we recognise a juvenile (hatched in 2020) from an adult of at least two years old. In the attached photograph the Robin in the fore ground is the juvenile and has at least three golden yellow 'thorn like' tips to its Greater Covert feathers; while the bird in the background is the adult with no such well-marked feathers. The reason for this is that the juvenile bird has retained some of its juvenile feathers (that it was hatched with) and will do so until it does a full moult in the early Autumn of this year. The adult on the other hand has already done a full moult and has no *juvenile hatching* feathers left.



Ringling again on the 23rd produced 52 birds (24 new and 28 re-traps). The new birds included 6 Dunnocks (of which all had dull 'muddy-coloured' eyes indicating they were juveniles) while there was an additional re-trap Dunnock with a brighter reddish eye (indicating it was an adult). Interesting that this preponderance of juveniles was against the general trend of ringling this season; so at least juvenile Dunnocks survived the summer quite well. (*Just to remind you - a Dunnock is a member of the Accentor family of birds and should never be confused with any sort of sparrow!*) There were less Blue Tits around this session, indicating I am afraid that some have simply died in the cold weather but there were Tree Sparrows, Great Tits; and Coal Tits (who can cache food for the winter). The re-traps turned up an adult Willow Tit (another bird that caches food), an adult Treecreeper and a juvenile Nuthatch. There was also two Long Tailed Tits that are always frustrating because they cannot be aged by looking at their plumage; this is because the juveniles (like the adults) do a complete moult in the autumn.

Incidentally, we are continuing to undertake a limited amount of ringling under the provisions of the pandemic regulations that permit 'voluntary or charitable services to continue' these include Biodiversity Monitoring but its not sensible *to take on any new trainees at present but hopefully things will change as 2021 progresses.*

Finally, I wanted to update you on the possibly incestuous pair of Mute Swans at Howick Pool. However, there is little to report because the presence of ice on the water has prompted 'all' the swans to fly off to the sea. If things warm-up then no-doubt 'a pair' will return and reading of their darvick rings will tells us exactly which swans they are! If you do come across any swans in your walks please do look out for any ring numbers (and colours) you can read – and do pass them on to me.

Best Regards

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