

## A RINGERS YEAR

**JULY 2021:** Having rather less to do monitoring Barn Owls this year (fuller update next-month) and most small 'nest-box using' birds having finished we took an opportunity to have a short holiday away visiting my son in East Anglia. This inevitably involved some ringing with Hugh and BTO colleagues. One evening we were taken to some mostly coniferous woodland near Thetford and told about a research project being organised at this site and others to ring, nest record and take mouth swabs from Nightjar (*nothing to do with Coronavirus*)! The swabs provide DNA and permit University collaborators to analyse the parentage of the Nightjars. It seems that there are often complex relationships between these birds. To enable all this to happen first you have to find your nightjar nest by regular walking up and down the open clearings in the wood (we were shown how to do this, and we did find a new nest). At another nest site the young had been ringed already; (see the photo of the juvenile cryptically camouflaged on the ground.)



Just before dusk we erected an 'L shape' of mist nets close to the nest. Very quickly, not just the expected female bird appeared and was captured, but also two more nightjars (one a male with distinctive white tips to the outer tail feathers). These birds quickly showed their characteristic behaviour of opening their mouths wide in a threat display; which facilitates the quick collection of some DNA!

I also had the privilege of ringing some young Reed Warblers at the Cranwich Private Nature Reserve and while waiting to do this Alison spotted an unusual butterfly in some long grass. This proved to be a beautiful male Purple Hairstreak Butterfly (**photo**) nearly emergent from its pupa.



We were very lucky to see this beautiful insect because the pupa develops on the ground but on emergence the adults quickly move up to spend their short lives in the canopy of Oak trees. We also did some touristy things and visited some local Nature Reserves; seeing a flying Crane at RSPB Lakenheath and nesting Black-winged Stilt at NWT Hickling Broad. Also, at Hickling Broad we encountered another flying marvel of nature – the rare Swallowtail Butterfly (subspecies *britannicus*) which is endemic to the Norfolk Broads (**see photo**).



Opening up the Howick Ringing Station on the 16/7/21 we ringed 19 new birds and also captured 3 retraps. The retraps were a Dunnock first ringed in 2020; a Chaffinch from 2019 and a Goldcrest from 2018. Included in the new birds were both some local 'residents' and some migrants. The residents were Chaffinch, Bullfinch, Tree Sparrow, Robin, Great Tit, Coal Tit, Blue Tit and a juvenile Great Spotted Woodpecker (always a distinctive bird with its red tonsure). There were also two noisy and troublesome young Jackdaws; not everyone's favourite bird I know but seen close-up their plumage is quite beautiful. The migrants were Chiffchaff (warblers); one adult and a juvenile together with several Blackcaps (also warblers). The Blackcaps were an obvious pair that had been breeding recently and three juveniles. None of these warblers were showing signs of migrating yet (they were not storing fat or putting on weight) but will of course do so towards the end of August. Ringing again the next day produced only 8 new birds and 5 retraps including a very unremarkable looking female Chaffinch. However, on checking my BTO database I discovered (from its ringing record) that this bird was 8 years old! Although the age record is actually 13 years its still a very good age for a chaffinch.

Ringling again on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Howick produced 15 new birds and 3 retraps. Nearly all the new birds were juveniles showing distinct juvenile plumage including Chiffchaff and several Blackcaps. The surprise bird was a very young Redstart; which begged the question were had it been hatched? **(Photo)**



I am certainly not aware of any Redstarts breeding around Howick but would be interested to know if anyone could suggest a possible origin. This bird will fatten up before starting to migrate south to the scrub-savanna belt lying immediately south of the Sahara, possibly to The Gambia, Senegal or even the eastern Congo or Uganda. On the 24<sup>th</sup> we captured 11 new birds and 4 retraps; and again we had some Blackcaps and Chiffchaffs along with the resident tits and finches. Finally we also ringed on the 30<sup>th</sup> and caught 15 new birds and 3 retraps. There were the usual resident Chaffinch, Bluetit, Dunnock, two very young Bullfinch, and an adult male Woodpigeon. Ringers generally hope not to catch woodpigeons in their mist nets because they are incredible strong and tend to damage the nets! Personally, I always think they are the wrong shape and weight to fly; this one was the usual 'round ball' weighing 515grams. The migrants included two adult and two juvenile Blackcaps. It was still possible to age one of the adults to having been hatched only last year because growth-bars were still evident on its wings and tail. These are formed when a very young bird suffers a temporary shortage of food but survives the experience; when this adult completes its Main Molt (just starting) in a few weeks time it will replace its wings and tail and these bars will no longer be present. The best bird we caught was a Garden Warbler; that despite having the unfortunate scientific name of 'Sylvia borin' is actually a very attractive bird with a wonderful song. They also migrate great distances to West Africa including Kenya. On the other hand, their close cousin, the Blackcap rarely cross the Sahara preferring to winter around the Mediterranean.

Finally, I have to mention the Mute Swans at Howick again that can generally be recognised by their coloured darvick rings. The formerly resident male (Ring: XJP) has evicted his old mate (female ZJX) and taken up with yet another new female. This new bird does carry a BTO metal ring that can probably be read if one can get close enough (if she is on the bank) but she does not unfortunately have an easy to read plastic ring (yet); there is a challenge to local birders... The whereabouts of the original female is unknown but if you see a Swan with a ZJX colour mark please let me know; she was last seen moving down the Howick Burn towards the sea.

If you would like to see the ringing at Howick Hall Arboretum just come along to the Car Park picnic benches on a Friday or Saturday morning but we wont be there if its particularly windy or raining.

Best Regards

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