

## A RINGER'S YEAR

**MARCH 2022:** This has been a strange month for me as usual activities were suspended due to a death in the family which took me away from home. Also, the coming-around of a holiday in the Canary Islands that had already been postponed twice due to Covid!

On the Canary Island of La Palma, we did come across some very tame 'Blue' sub-species Chaffinches that were clearly being studied by a local Ornithologist. Several birds were ringed with metal rings and colour rings. Its not generally appreciated that its not only on the Galapagos Islands that speciation in birds is observable (i.e. Darwin's Finches) because on the Canary Islands several sub-species exist (of for example Chaffinch, Goldcrest and Raven). In the case of the chaffinch a full 'new' species of chaffinch is found on Tenerife, while the La Palma version is less blue and recognised as a sub-species.



It has to be said that the local Ravens (despite being smaller than our ravens) are not remotely frightened of people and come and demand bread and cheese in Mountain Car-parks which is quite intimidating!

A late return from the Dutch ringing scheme (passed on to me by BTO) was interesting this month. It seems that female Blackbird LN65135, ringed at my house near Lemmington Hall on the 11/2/21 was controlled alive by another ringer in Holland on the 8/11/21 in Friesland, 498 km's away.

In my absence one of my C Ringers was able to undertake some of the usual pre-breeding season checks that we do on Barn Owl sites in March. This was interesting as it suggests that some of the inland birds might do better than the coastal birds in 2022 (it was a dreadful year for owls across the county in 2021). Pairs of owls were found as follows:

Near Fontburn: A 6 yr. old male with a new younger female (*his original mate probably having died in the winter*). Also, a new pair just a km away in another box; and another new pair near Wingates. North of Netherwitton a 5 yr. old 'resident male' has also lost his mate but then acquired a new female only 4 yrs. old (*who we know lost her mate last year*). West of Longhorsley a Tawny Owl has taken over a Barn Owl box and the pair of owls (the 6 yr. old resident male and a new young female) have been forced into the near-by Tawny box! Finally, there was another pair of owls in a box to the east of the A697; the male having adopted this box last year and now found a female from just to the west of the A697.

Near the coast we found a new pair near Longhoughton and another near Howick consisting of a 2019 hatched male and an unknown female. A box very near the coast had the 'resident' female from 2020 but no male and box past Warkworth had a pair (although the male saw us coming and sneaked out of our way – so we never got to read his ring number). The female obligingly stayed in the box so we could identify her as the resident female now 4 yrs old. One box on a coastal farm building that we might reasonably have expected to be occupied by Barn Owls was found to contain a Tawny Owl with one egg on the 14/3/22. This shows how Tawny Owls are nesting but Barn Owls have not really started yet. It also suggests that this Tawny Owl may have lost her traditional nest site in a tree hole (she was at least 3 yrs. old) to Storm Arwen.



At another location inland, where Goldeneye ducks and Tawny Owls usually nest, we finally managed to inspect a wood for storm damage. Three boxes had been lost to the storm.



We rapidly set-about putting up one new box (or the April arriving ducks. When we had finished we decided that we had better check the one remaining original box. To our surprise a female Tawny was already in residence and had been asleep.

When not away I have been able to help AONB/Coast Care Staff & Volunteers erect some brand new 'owl sheds' (or Hemmels to give them a local name). These small wooden buildings are replacing lost farm buildings (and those turned into Holiday Cottages) and contain a Barn Owl box that will hopefully, in coming years, be used by nesting owls. The first is near Bamburgh in an area that we feel should contain a larger owl population than it currently does. They may also be used by Swallows and other birds.



In order to monitor the success of this year Barn Owls it would be really helpful to receive reports of owl sightings around buildings and trees where they just might be nesting. They start around now (April) and continue into July (sometimes later if the weather is good). After the winter storms many natural and artificial sites have been lost.

Best Regards

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