

A RINGERS YEAR

December 2022 and the story of a well-travelled owl.

It has to be said that with some pretty horrid weather and the need to take extra health precautions because of bird flu, ringing has been fairly quiet this month. However, while heading out to check and replace a couple of bird boxes with a National Park Ranger, Hilary, my colleague, and I had a very pleasant surprise. To back-track briefly I should explain that we have had some bird boxes of a type that might attract *tawny owls* or even *ducks* on National Trust land at Low Newton for some years. They have not been especially successful probably because of a miss-timing of their erection, just before a major pruning back of the surrounding vegetation. It is only in the last year or two that they might have become attractive to owls but we realized that the boxes might be in need of repair or replacement. So as a winter job we set out to do this on 5th December. One must always be cautious when approaching a box that just might contain a tawny owl, as a tawny owl in the face can be dangerous. Putting my hand cautiously into the first box, (wearing gloves), there was no one more surprised than myself to come out with a Barn Owl. This proved to be a very beautiful female owl, showing some hint of Northern European guttata race characteristics in her orange/brown colouring on the upper breast.



Additionally, the owl was ringed which we all read, to be certain we had it correct, as GY17093. Scrutiny of the wing pattern, to look for moulted primary flight feathers, revealed a very uniform pattern, suggesting this was a young owl.



As with all 'Controls' of this type I inputted the ring number to the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) database and waited for a reply. This came quite quickly and revealed that the roosting Barn Owl was less than a year old and had been ringed as an owlet (chick) back on the 11/7/22 by a member of the Waveney Ringing Group at Red House Farm, Bacton, Suffolk, over 400 km's away. Now I don't know that area although my older son, working for the BTO and residing in Suffolk, does. This is a remarkable movement for a young bird to make, although not totally unheard of. For example, the bird found nesting at Gosforth Park, Newcastle upon Tyne, in 2020 had moved from Cambridgeshire.

I spent several days early in the month working with Coast Care to erect two new 'owl sheds' in the Coast AONB near Bamburgh and further north. If you have not heard of these (some were put up last year as well), they are an attempt to provide Barn Owls with new nesting sites now that so many of our old barns and hemmels have been lost to holiday developments, lack of maintenance and the ravages of the weather. They are a bit taller than the average garden shed and contain a standard Northumberland Barn Owl Box on a mezzanine floor. We will monitor how they are used as the months move on. For the moment I just take the opportunity to thank everyone at the AONB/Coast Care and the Coast Care Volunteers for their assistance.



Meanwhile Hilary had an interesting garden visitor, setting up a small territory like a blackbird, but this was one of its thrush relatives, a Fieldfare. Fieldfares do have a habit of flying high and not usually being very confiding of people, they are still hunted over much of continental Europe, hence they are less often caught by ringers than their smaller relatives like redwings. Of course, all these thrushes arrive in thousands into the British Isles from Scandinavia in winter, particularly from Norway in the case of Fieldfares. After several attempts, involving quite a few apples, the bird was briefly captured, ringed and identified as a Juvenile, with outer unmoulted greater coverts in the wing, and a female bird, with mostly grey crown feathers. Hopefully it will return to nest in Norway in the spring.



I am trying to contribute to the BTO's Winter Ringing Initiative by operating a short morning ringing session, with just a couple of nets, at home once per fortnight. To date I have managed this with 45 birds captured on the 14th November including a lot of Blue Tits, Great Tits and a few Tree Sparrows. One of the retrapped Blue Tits proved to be from 2019. On the 28th I captured 48 birds including four new Robins and four retrapped Robins. The 8th December saw the catch at 49 including a female Nuthatch. Finally on the 19th I captured 32 birds with two new Robins and three retraps. The purpose of this national initiative is particularly to study age specific survival rates and age ratios (see attached picture of a Blue Tit and an unusually dark Robin with distinctive feathering around the eye).

Best Regards

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