

A RINGERS YEAR

MAY 2023. I mentioned back in March that I had controlled an already ringed male Blackbird in the garden. Well details of this bird have come through and its interesting to see that it was ringed near Druridge Links back on the 14th October 2017 as a juvenile. So sorry to shatter anybody's illusions that the Blackbird you see in 'your garden' is necessarily the same Blackbird you saw last week or last year but it is nice to see that this particular individual has so far survived into its sixth year. Another bird which is six years old is a Barn Owl that's been found preparing to nest by a fellow ringer near Causey Park, just to the west of the A1. This owl has not travelled as far as the Blackbird because it was ringed (in its nest) back on the 15th June 2017 near Longhorsley.

Much time this month has been spent monitoring nesting Tawny Owls. We don't have a large number of Tawny boxes (*unlike for Barn Owls*) although some of my C Ringers are starting to put more up. This year our Tawny Owls have not done very well; with only 12 attempting to nest (compared with 14 in 2022). Out of these 12 'Nest Records' 8 were actually successful (57%), compared with 11 successful out of 14 (70%) last year. While the reason for nest failures is difficult to know precisely some owls seem to have found finding food difficult. For example, one owl was recorded as having laid 3 eggs but later had only 1; another had 2 eggs that went down to one. Later both these owls gave up incubating. I suspect that this year's *very variable Spring weather* has been at the root of these problems. Certainly, very hungry owls will eat their own eggs. One of the owls failing to hatch any eggs was ringed back in 2018 at the same site and has been successful in the past. The largest successful brood, of 4, came from a box used for the first time (put up two years ago) in a small piece of ancient woodland that's never recovered from Storm Arwen. One of longest standing box site is at Craster and it was used every year (by the same female) from 2014 to 2020 but then stood blank until this year when a brand new female took it on and raised two young. The most amazing box was one near Howick where a box has stood completely unused since 2010 and I was contemplating taking it down. However, on the 11/4/23 I discovered there was an owl in residence with 2 eggs but there was also a hole in the roof of the box! Nevertheless, the owl has now raised one young owlet and I have promised her a new box for next year. A very new box in a small wood near Longframlington also raised two young from three eggs and was seen by a small audience when my colleague ringed them. Another box specially put up for Barn owls produced two tawny owlets from four eggs.

Regular readers will be aware that Tawny owls regularly compete with the unusual nesting Goldeneye Ducks in the Breamish Valley and 'generally speaking' it's the Owls that get the boxes they want. At one reliable box, used by the same female since 2017, two owlets were raised. This is the only box left out of three in a wood that was struck by Storm Arwen. At another site we had originally discovered 7 Goldeneye eggs, then we found an adult owl and a Tawny egg! The usual scenario at this point is that the duck gives up and the owl takes over the site. However, revisiting on the 18th found at least 10 warm eggs, although no owl or duck in residence. We revisited on a few occasions, but it was not until the 29th that Alison successfully captured the female goldeneye (incubating her eggs). She proved to be my retrap [FH79908] from 2022 when she had hatched 11 eggs in another box.



Most amazingly, while we were processing the duck, I found a broken owl egg just below the box on the ground with a beak shaped 'bash' in it. It looks like the clever duck had been able to evict the tawny's egg !



At an entirely different site south of Rothbury there is a box in a wood that was used successfully last year by a Tawny Owl. This is the box that I mentioned last month appeared to have nine Mandarin duck eggs in it! Returning to this with Hilary on the 7th I was greeted not by the expected quacking sound of a duck but a distinct hissing (as if from a snake!). It did however prove to be a beautiful female Mandarin (this time incubating 12 warm eggs). Hilary was able to ring this duck with a small audience of local folks.



This month has also seen us, trainees and Farne Island Summer Wardens monitoring many small bird boxes. The last two checked, which were at the Breamish Caravan site, were interesting in that they had entirely different outcomes. One originally had 8 eggs and a female retrap Great Tit (from 2019) but by the 29th she had abandoned her nest, of now 10 eggs because it had been taken over by an expanding Wasp Nest. The other was a nest of 8 Blue Tit eggs that we recorded on the 12th when we ringed the female for the first time (only hatched herself last year). On this visit we ringed 7 healthy and well developed Blue Tits.



While Blue Tits and Great Tits are the most common species to use nest boxes there are others and Hilary was pleased to find (in a second year nest box site near Brinkburn) both a nest of Marsh Tits and Nuthatches on the 12th. Returning in the 18th these were large enough to be safely ringed as 8 Marsh Tits and 5 Nuthatches.



Marsh Tits



Nuthatch pulli

We are doing a couple of Bird Ringing Demonstrations for Newcastle University Students at Howick Arboretum in June and then starting to ring Barn Owls (and a few Kestrels) as we move into July.

Best Regards

Phil Hanmer S Ringer/Trainer; Natural History Society of Northumbria Ringing Group (Hancock Museum).

E-mail: tytoalbas@btinternet.com