



Ringer's Roundup

A Ringer's Year - October 2023

After relating our activities of ringing three families of Mute Swans last month you would think there would not be much to say about them this time. However, the value of using the large colourful darvic rings (white letters on a red background) on swans has certainly been proven by the way it has been possible to track the movements of the Howick swans. On or around the 12th October the two adult swans (Female ZKA; Male ZJP) together with one of this year's cygnets (ZKB) turned up on the River Don, in Jarrow. This seems like an unusually long first flight for the cygnet. Then on the 13th the cygnet ZKB crash-landed in a car park in North Shields. Young swans often mistake wet car parks for 'pools of water' but ZKB was happily rescued by Blyth Wildlife Rescue and released fairly quickly onto Killingworth Lake. Then another report came in on the 16th of the same cygnet crash landing outside Longbenton Cat & Dog Shelter! Again, Blyth Wildlife Rescue took charge and it was returned to Killingworth Lake. So far, no further news.

Meanwhile the two other cygnets were still living on Howick Pool but by the 14th, ZKF had departed but ZKC had decided to stay. Since then, cygnet ZKC seems to have been exploring the local area: it was seen flying around the pond at least once but otherwise it's been spotted walking down the 'Long Walk' towards the sea and then on the road from Howick to Seahouses Farm. On this second occasion it was returned to the pool for its own safety! Swans may appear to be intimidating but they can usually be persuaded back to somewhere sensible rather than letting them play in the traffic. We have fed ZKC several times recently with 'proprietary duck food' but they will also eat grain and bread.

We really would like your help in tracking any darvic ringed bird. Please, if you see a bird with a plastic ring on just make a note of the letters or numbers and their colours and tell me where you saw it.

It's this time of year when we start working on new bird boxes and other conservation initiatives like building 'Owl Sheds'. This is an initiative in the Coast Care (Northumberland Coast AONB) area to replace just a few of the small barns and hemmels that have been turned into holiday homes (or just been allowed to fall down), so depriving Barn Owls of nesting places.

Early in the month, volunteers constructed one of these small buildings near Fenham and as I write work is currently underway near Warkworth on another. It would have already been finished if not for the intervention of Storm Babet. It's hoped that Barn Owls will find these sheds as good places to roost and then go on to using them to nest in (see picture).





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Still dodging the unsettled weather (and getting even worse weather forecasts) we have continued to ring at Howick Arboretum. On the 12th October we ringed 50 birds (41 new and 9 retraps). This of course is the time of year when we expect to see regular autumn migration and also the more random movements caused by birds encountering stormy weather on their regular migration routes. We also encounter birds like Goldcrests, a nesting resident at Howick arboretum but whose numbers can be swelled by hundreds arriving from Scandinavia.



The first bird we captured on the 12th was a Goldcrest and the one indication we got that this was a migrant was the presence of a lot of fat (looking like a small pack of butter obscuring the bird's trachea).

We also captured a Blackcap, which is probably on its way south, and the first Redwing (technically a thrush) recently arrived in of the North Sea (see picture).



Ringing again on the 17th, we captured 41 birds (28 new and 13 retraps). The retraps included a resident Dunnock first ringed as a juvenile in 2020. There were also a lot of Coal Tits, again a resident that actually survives better in bad weather than its cousin the Blue Tit. This is because it caches food: storing food like Beech Mast and Sunflower seed in crevices (in trees and fences) which it can then find again when it's short of food. We again captured a single Redwing.

Things finally got much more interesting on the 23rd October when we captured 56 birds (45 new and 11 retraps). The retraps included an adult Goldcrest (capturing an adult is unusual in itself) which we first ringed almost twelve months ago; it seems likely this is a returning migrant but it's impossible to prove this. It then became evident that there were a great many Blackbirds and Redwings around and we did capture some of these. Many of the Redwings seemed rather 'thin' carrying very little fat and having poor pectoral muscle scores (as their breast bones were more prominent than is usual). This suggests they have just arrived and have had a difficult crossing of the North Sea, but landing in Howick is a good thing for them as there are lots of juicy berries for them to feed-up on. We captured 11 Blackbirds, four of which had extra long wings indicating these were probably migrants rather than



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local birds. Next, we ringed a female Brambling (the Scandinavian cousin of the Chaffinch) and of course lots of our resident tits and some Robins. There was also a rather beautiful female Blackcap carrying lots of fat and clearly a late migrant heading south (see picture).



Towards lunchtime something very special turned up: this was a beautiful male Firecrest, which in the New Forest you might think was a resident but at Howick it's the rare continental cousin of the Goldcrest.

Turning up at Howick is not part of a regular migration, which would be from central continental Europe towards the Mediterranean this time of year. It's probable that this bird was trying to leave the winter cold of somewhere like Poland and was pulled north by strong winds in some of this mad weather we have been having, and found itself at Howick.

What was especially interesting was how alert and healthy this bird appeared to be. Compared with a superficially similar sized male Goldcrest (caught at the same time) the Firecrest weighed 6.1 grams (carrying lots of fat) while the Goldcrest was only 5.3 grams. Bird books will of course tell you that these two species are 'both' the smallest found in Britain (see pictures).



After having to cancel two more ringing sessions, we did manage to get our nets up at Howick on Monday 30th and captured 63 birds (38 new and 25 retraps) on a very damp morning (it somehow did not actually rain). These included Goldcrests, some continental looking Blackbirds and lots of local tits.



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However, the most excitement was caused by the capture of a very 'cross' looking female Sparrowhawk (see picture). We mostly capture male Sparrowhawks in mist nets, and while I am always aware that these are smaller than females it was very noticeable (even before we started taking biometrics) how longer winged and heavier this female was at 270 grams (compared with the last male caught at Howick who weighed only 160 grams, back in July).



We are coming to the end of the ringing season at Howick and it remains to be seen if the weather will allow us to do any more sessions this year.

Phil Hanmer

S Ringer/Trainer, Natural History Society of Northumbria Ringing Group (Hancock Museum)

Email: tytoalbas@btinternet.com