



# Ringer's Roundup

## A Ringer's Year - April 2024

Some media readers will no doubt have already heard of Tawny Owls nesting in February but it's actually April when North Northumberland Tawny Owls really get into breeding. We initially located 12 nesting Tawny Owls, 11 with eggs and one with three small young. We can describe at least four of these females as old friends, carrying rings we put on in previous years, and its very likely there are two more in this category but they have not cooperated in letting us check them yet! One nesting near Longhorsley is of particular note, carrying ring [GR03102] she is *at least* 15 years old. Another bird [GY34777] ringed only last year when she raised two young near Longframlington, was found to have three small young already hatched.

Monitoring to date has found that one newly nesting owl has given up, while another seems to have come off worse in an argument with a Grey Squirrel (*surprising as squirrels can be predated by Tawny Owls*). However, another three have hatched young and we have been able to ring two (out of three) from the first found. So far it does not look like it will be a particularly good year for nesting tawny owls; perhaps a sort of average year.



I think this may be due to the poor spring weather and not particularly correlated with any shortage of food, as we have come across the remains of prey items in several boxes and in one spectacular find there were six Voles and three mice stored in a box.

Regular readers of this article will recall that near Powburn the owl's nest alongside our still unusual Goldeneye duck colony. So far, we have found 10 nests with up to 14 eggs in several boxes. We have also retrapped several females from earlier years, including [FH79907] from 2022; [FH92090] from 2021 and 2023; [FH92085] from 2021 & 2022; and [FH79907] from 2022 .





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We had also hoped to find evidence of Mandarin ducks extending their range into this part of Northumberland, and indeed my colleague Hilary captured one nesting in a box near Wingates.

We had all assumed that if a Mandarin decided to use this box it would be the same female that used it last year (*our single nesters in 2023*), but surprisingly it proved to be an entirely new bird!

On one of the rare calm weather mornings of recent weeks (18/4/24) I decided to set up a single net and open up three garden traps. I have been tracking the migration of Siskins travelling generally north into

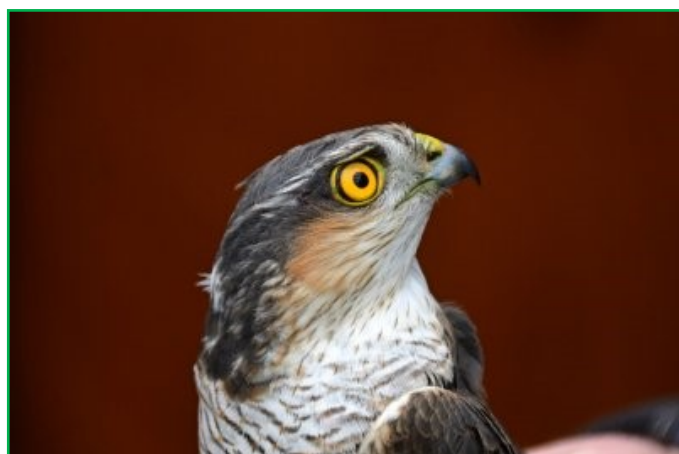


Scotland and also hoping that some would stop moving and nest locally (as they used to do several years ago), and indeed I did catch some Siskins with several showing female Brood Patches (*were they loose feathers so that they can better incubate eggs next to their skin?*). However, the first surprise of the day was a new Willow Warbler; obviously just arrived back from Africa after wintering in the Ivory Coast or Ghana. It was a particular surprise because while we had been hearing several of their close relatives, Chiffchaffs singing near home, we had not heard any Willow Warblers.



Next, I caught a male Blackcap, just back from North Africa; things then settled down to a slow trickle of Siskins for an hour before I caught sight of a minor disturbance down the garden. Rushing out I found that a male Sparrowhawk had killed a Robin but on trying to make his escape from the garden, with his prey, had flown into my mist net. Subsequently I confirmed that not only was it a relatively small male but also a *last year's* sparrowhawk. Before finishing the ringing session of little over two hours I did catch a female Blackcap and a Chiffchaff, plus two squabbling Robins (both I think male).

Meanwhile another colleague Allan, ringing at Selkirk, got news of an interesting movement of male Siskin [BJD0370] that he ringed on the 29/3/24. It was controlled by another ringer, north of Castle Douglas in Galloway, on the 9/4/24 nearly 100 km away.





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Ringling with Hilary and Caroline at another regular site near Longhorsley, before it rained again on the 26<sup>th</sup> we caught 29 new birds and 5 retraps. These included returning migrants: Chiffchaff 9, Willow Warblers 1 and Blackcaps 3. There was also an assortment of local 'residents': Tree Sparrows, Dunnocks and Chaffinch.

Now quite scarce it was good to catch 5 Greenfinch and one each of our special little rarities, the Willow Tit and Marsh Tit. From the presence of well-developed Brood Patches, we could see that the species that had started to nest already were the Tree Sparrows and the Dunnocks.

Most small passerines - especially those that use nest boxes and natural cavities to make their nests in - start breeding in May, and we will be checking locations from approximately the 10<sup>th</sup> of the month.



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