



Ringer's Roundup

A Ringer's Year - July 2024

Well we are still ringing young Barn Owls and expect to have five nests to return to in August. These late nests are not unprecedented but usually occur as 'second broods' from pairs of owls that have had early young in May. However, this year we have not yet found any second broods (*and we only ringed two broods in May*) but it is still looking like a relatively good year, although there have been a few disappointments where owls seem to have laid eggs but then not had the inclination (*or bodily reserves*) to incubate them. Looking back on some of these (*where we were able to weigh the*

adult birds) the females seem to have been underweight. For example, we encountered one female weighing only 310g immediately after laying her eggs when we might have expected her to have a weight of nearer 400g. This is not about a simple shortage of food (there have been lots of voles and mice about) but early in the year the very mixed weather seems to have made it difficult for owls to catch their prey. As the year has progressed later nesting owls have done relatively better, hence still expecting to



be ringing some in August. The picture shows two from a box near Lucker.



We have had (late) nesting Kestrels in owl boxes near Warkworth (see picture), another near Bamburgh and a third in a poor 'kestrel box' south of Berwick. I would argue that what is traditionally described as a 'kestrel box' should never be used! They are frequently too small with great big gaping opening at the front and no depth to the back of the box. Kestrels often have large broods and the young birds fight; this sometimes leads to birds being knocked out of the nest boxes. To mitigate against this behaviour it's better if the box is longer

with more space on the inside and a restricted opening. A traditional kestrel box is also very easy for Carrion Crows or Jackdaws to raid and steal eggs or young pulli. For all these reasons, encouraging them to utilise a larger box or a barn owl type box is a good idea. The box south of Berwick failed, we believe, because of egg predation.



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I have now returned to check every tawny-duck box that we might reasonably have expected our rare nesting Goldeneye ducks to nest in. I do this to count any remaining eggs and try to match these up with sightings of broods of ducklings - and see if both Tawny Owls and Goldeneye have left their boxes successfully. The Goldeneye ducks made 15 breeding attempts between April – June (one more than in 2023) *and there were five tawny owl nests*. However, only eight of the Goldeneye were successful (compared to 11 in 2023). One was undoubtedly lost due to a stoat attack on an incubating female (that had first bred in 2022).



Other nests were lost after 'egg-dumping' had caused the original female to give up on incubation. Damage caused by Storm Arwen was still an issue; as a plantation that at one time contained three boxes was largely cleared before the breeding season. However, with the support of the landowner we had managed to preserve two boxes on the edge of this woodland and these were both used, one by a Goldeneye (and the other by a Tawny Owl). The most recent winter storms nearly felled two other boxes at another location and amazingly one clever Goldeneye female still managed to nest successfully in a box despite its almost horizontal angle (*pictures show the tree, and the remaining two eggs inside*)! We did not find the other box on its fallen tree until the 10/5/24. We replaced it almost immediately and were gratified to find it was being used on the 27th when we ringed a new female nesting with 10 eggs! The first 'brood' of five was seen on the River Breamish on the 14/5/24. Four brand new adults were

ringed and six retrapped (one dead). Of the retraps three were from 2021; two 2022 and one from 2023.

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This is still the only regular colony of Goldeneye Ducks in England & Wales. However, an indication that the species just might be spreading comes from a sighting of a brood on Castron Lake, for the first time.

The Howick swans have lost all their cygnets to an unknown cause so there will be none to ring this September.

We are now regularly ringing at Howick Arboretum on Friday and Saturday mornings (weather permitting) and on the 19/7/24 we captured 24 birds (17 new and 7 retraps). The retraps were interesting, including two House Sparrows from 2022 and a Goldcrest from 2023. The new birds included nine Chiffchaffs (warblers) - confirming that these migrants have again nested at Howick. On the 20th we captured 30 birds (23 new and 7 retraps).



The retraps included a female Chaffinch first ringed back in 2015 - so 9 years old! Included in the new birds were an adult male Bullfinch together with a fledged juvenile (twice). There were also seven very young Chiffchaffs and a single Willow Warbler. The Willow Warbler was a bird of the year but not so young as to suggest it had necessarily hatched at Howick; it seems more likely it had started its migration further north and had just called in to Howick to feed up for its trip to Africa. Managing a short session on the 26th we caught another 18 birds (10 new and 8 retraps). The retraps included

a male Coal Tit from 2022, while the new birds included three young migrating Willow Warblers. There was also a very young Blackcap (another warbler).

Anyone interested in seeing what we are doing at the Howick Ringing Station is invited call in.