



A Ringer's Year - May 2024

Well it's always a busy month for birds nesting but monitoring them has been a bit difficult with all the rain and wind. From the point of view of Tawny Owls there has been no shortage of food (small mammals) so any failures to 'catch prey' by the birds has to be down to the weather. It looks like we have had three failed nesters that laid eggs and then did not incubate them; in one case a Grey Squirrel seems to have been involved and another is a complete mystery with the nest near Howick appeared completely clean and with no sign of the eggs on a second visit. However, we have had nine successful nests broods ranging from one – three young (normal in this part of Northumberland where we rarely get large broods). One was ringed with an audience of Students from the USA on an Ornithology course organised at St Cloud University, Alnwick (picture of Young Tawny Owl). There is still one Tawny nest outstanding with a fifteen-year-old female owl apparently still incubating past the time we think she should have hatched her eggs. We also had a Mandarin duck nest in a box in a wood near Wingates that is more correctly the haunt of Tawny Owls!



The Howick Swans continue to entertain with the male approaching visitors asking for food while his mate incubates her eggs and occasionally leaves these to feed. So, while he is putting weight on, she is losing it. They did not start nesting until after the 25/4/24 so at the time of writing have not hatched any eggs.

While helping with the Longhorsley Swift Box Project on the 4/5/24 I was entertained by a flock of Redpoll using bird feeders in the front garden on a housing estate which I thought was rather unusual. It's hoped that swifts will inspect these boxes and start using them next year.

Starting to check small nest boxes on

the 10th we found Blue Tits and Great Tits nesting near the Breamish (with some American students in tow) but very few Tree Sparrows. A Treecreeper in a box was a surprise at Ingram in a very old and battered 'treecreeper box' that has never been used before (apart from by some Great Tits)! We also found a Marsh Tit near Longhorsley and a Redstart near Longframlington (with some new trainees observing).

Productivity figures have to be provisional at the moment but it seems we have about 33% occupancy: Great Tits are ahead of Blue Tits, and Tree Sparrows are not doing very well. It was notable that there were many tree sparrow eggs at a farm near Longhorsley at the start of the month but after two days of rainy/cold weather they seem to have become abandoned.

Also, we have found very few at other locations near the Breamish. On the Farm there may also be another factor: the presence of a regularly hunting Sparrowhawk (picture of Tit nestlings; Adult Marsh Tit).





Ringer's Roundup



In the Breamish Valley some of our Tawny Owls nest alongside our unusual Goldeneye duck colony. It looks like 15 females are nesting this year (similar to last year) and so far, we have retrapped 8 females and ringed 4 new birds. One retrap was unfortunately of a dead bird which seems to have died in a fight with a predatory stoat. The winter storms nearly destroyed two nest sites with one box being laid almost horizontal as its tree collapsed but still a determined duck is nesting in it!

At another location the box was completely on the floor and we decided to replace it on the 10th (ready for next year). However, spotting some downy feathers caught on the lip of the box Alison and I decided to check it out on the 27th and amazingly found 10 eggs and a new female duck in residence, who we ringed. She seemed very indignant about this whole procedure but quickly settled down on being returned to her box! Two broods have been seen out on the water to date.

Finally, we started to check on nesting Barn Owls on the 29th (they always nest later than Tawny Owls) and to date have recorded: Jackdaws = 6; Empty = 2; Stock Doves = 5 and Barn Owls = 5. The owls include our female from Suffolk (hatched herself in 2022).



Four of our nesting Barn Owls have very small young (very recently hatched) but one surprised us by having three pulli big enough to ring. Being Barn Owls they will still be in their nest box for another 6 weeks as they never leave home quickly (again unlike Tawny Owls that can't wait to leave home). All the boxes had evidence of prey brought in by the male birds, waiting for the parents to feed to the young (note the size of the two mice in the picture).

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