A Ringer's Year April 2018

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(Hancock Museum)

Well, this month's surprise came in the form of a rare British Bird — the Hawfinch – that up to perhaps 10 years ago used to be resident in Hulne Pk, Alnwick; '*twitchers*' used to visit specifically to try and see one. However, until very recently, Hawfinch had been considered extinct in the Alnwick area. Indeed they were considered extinct in Northumberland and are in steep decline throughout the UK. However, they are prone to irruptive movements from other parts of Europe and it is known that the entire Russian population deserts its breeding range in the winter! This winter there has been an unusual influx with odd birds being seen near Morpeth and Alnwick. However, I never expected a trainee to come back to our ringing base near Lemmington Hall, from checking the mist-nets, to give me a bag with a Hawfinch in it! This proved to be a female (hatched last year) with a brood patch starting to develop (indicating she was starting to breed); see attached photograph. They breed in mature forest or parkland including oak, hornbeam, and other berry/seed bearing shrubs and trees. They are also very secretive and unobtrusive for what is basically quite a large bird, with a formidable beak which is supposed to be able to crack cherry stones (and I can confirm it certainly has a painful peck). We really need to know a lot more about this species if we are to address the problem of its decline.

Female Hawfinch

Nuthatches

We have finally had a small influx of Siskin and Redpoll (many migrating north) near Lemmington Hall; also two Chiffchaffs on their way back from Africa (both controlled with rings on; so it will be interesting to see where they were ringed before) and a female Blackcap. One of the Siskins that I ringed in February 2017 was unfortunately recovered dead having hit a window 870 km away in Denmark in February 2018.

Finally a pair of resident birds; a male and female Nuthatch were captured by my trainees. They are photographed to show the 'russet' under-tail coverts and rump of the male (top) and the paler feathers of the female (bottom) in the attached picture.

The fall-out from our unusually snowy winter continues to be revealed in ring returns from the BTO this month. Male Barn Owl GK41043 was found dead on Alnmouth Golf Course only a short distance south from Foxton were it was ringed as an adult back in March 2016 (so entering his fourth year); Juvenile GV55825

was found dead near Netherwitton again not far from where it was ringed as an owlet in May 2017; also Juvenile GV55817 from Burgham, ringed as an owlet, was found dead near Newton-on-the Moor; and Stuart S. picked up GR03123 near Howick, an adult female owl, ringed by my son back in June 2010 (when it was nesting). This

Phil with a Hooded Vulture in Gambia

owl was likely 10 years old, a very good age for a Barn Owl.

Checking for the onset of breeding by Tawny Owls and Goldeneye ducks indicates that it might not be a good year for these owls that always nest early; several regular sites are still empty. However, Goldeneye are nesting with five definite nests located so far, and one new bird ringed and fitted with a geo-logger.

Returning to my recent stint at the Kartong Bird Observatory in The Gambia I promised to tell you something about Hooded Vultures. In some parts of the world vultures are in major decline due to poisoning and other little -understood causes, hence it's important to study them: This requires that they are ringed, that biometric information is collected, and that they are then tracked. Kartong Observatory has just received permission from The Gambian government to start doing this and I filmed the cannon-net catching of some of these birds. I was then trained in attaching a ring, a darvik (Coloured ring) and a bright yellow Wing Tag (see attached picture) which will enable birders and local people to report on the movements of these important scavenging birds. I remember a Gambian birdwatching guide telling me 15 years ago that they were "*sanitary inspectors*".

Anyone interesting in ringing is invited to get in touch **Phil Hanmer E-mail:** tytoalbas@btinternet.com