A Ringer's Year January 2018

Phil Hanmer Ringer & Trainer

Natural History Society of Northumbria Ringing Group

(Hancock Museum)

Ringing near home on the 5th January captured 43 birds for my trainees to ring and process; I say process because most of them (32 in fact) were already ringed and the only really notable (*not to say painful on the fingers*) entirely new bird was a female Great Spotted Woodpecker. This proved to be a juvenile from 2017, probably hatched locally to Lemmington Hall. Of the retrapped birds that we processed many were tits and were only visiting (or should I say re-visiting) the gardens to use the birdfeeders. There were also 10 Goldfinches that have been touring the local area, with some possibly going further afield, but had now returned for the free Niger seed. Goldfinch can travel quite long distances but mostly stay in the British Isles, unlike their regular travelling companions the Siskins which frequently go abroad to the continent and often Scandinavia. We recaptured four Siskins all last seen at the end of the summer, with three having been hatched locally; the fourth was probably one of the parent birds because it had been ringed by me back in 2015. We don't know exactly where any of these Siskins have been feeding for the last three or four months but it's probably been further south. Ringing on the 6th produced more even numbers with 16 new and 18 retraps. The only new species were a couple of Tree Sparrows hatched locally earlier in 2017.

Only 17 birds were captured on the 12th but these did include a beautiful male Redpoll (see pic.) which proved to be 'control' having previously been ringed by another ringer back in January 2015 in the Ordiequish Forest near Fochabers in Scotland. Looking on a map I can see this is north of Speyside almost on the coast east of Inverness, 255 km to the north of Lemmington Hall. Ringing on the 13th netted 21 birds of which only 6 were new. However, I spotted a new female Redpoll feeding in an 'open' trap on the 17th and it was so intent on eating Niger seed that I was able to pick it up and ring it before releasing it back to continue feeding in the snow. Redpolls are an interesting species which are in decline in the south and east but on the increase in the north and west. Most of the birds I get this time of year appear to be on their way back to Scotland.

Male Redpoll

Ringing on the 19th Jan. generated 11 new birds and 19 retraps, including the controlled male Redpoll first seen on the 12th. Finally on the 20th 7 new birds were captured along with 14 retraps, including one of those confusing Robins that I have mentioned before; they look like juveniles with golden thorn marks on their Greater Coverts, but as it had been ringed before in February 2017 it must in fact be an older adult!

A chance sighting, just after Xmas, of what I took to be several 'Willow Tits' feeding on a friend's bird table near Longhorsley took some trainees and myself to a new ringing site on the 26th : I know these rare birds occur on Longhorsley Common and I presumed these winter feeding birds may have originated there. However, setting up some nets produced some surprises. We started with a couple of Blue Tits but then captured two interesting looking tits. After studying the books and taking biometric measurements, we realised that we had a Willow Tit and its almost-as-rare cousin a Marsh Tit! *I have attached a photo of both birds – see if you can tell the difference? The Willow Tit is in the foreground and the Marsh in the background.* We captured a total of 26 birds in a short morning session including 3 Marsh Tits and 3 Willow Tits. They are very difficult to tell apart when seen flying; it's slightly easier in the hand. If they sing or call then that helps, but of course they rarely do this to order! Loss of woodland habitat is the probable reason for the decline in both species. The Marsh requires a complex understory of plants but some tall trees as well, while the Willow needs some damp woodland as it excavates nesting holes in rotten wood. Both hate over-manicured woods whether this is caused by man or too many grazing animals such as deer. I have also, with the help of a volunteer, put up a couple of new and replacement Barn Owl boxes this month, although I got a shock when buying the wood as it has jumped in price; who says inflation is low! Anyone interesting in ringing is invited to get in touch.

Phil Hanmer E-mail: tytoalbas@btinternet.com