A Ringer's Year July 2018

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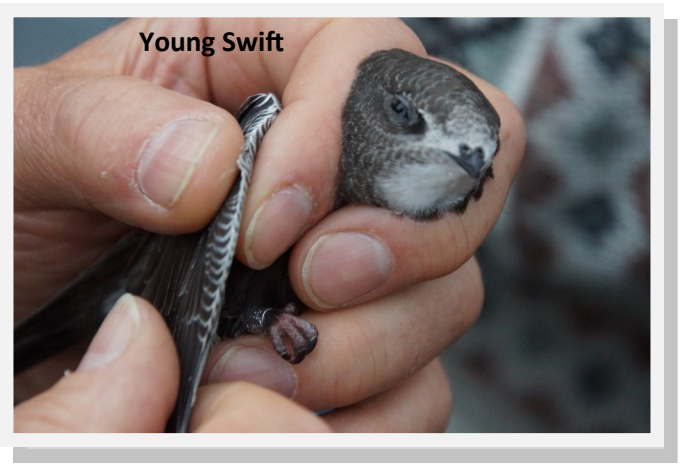
Natural History Society of Northumbria Ringing Group

(Hancock Museum)

July 2018: Before I get around to reporting on the opening up of the Howick Ringing station this month I wanted to briefly relate the story of an unusual evening spent on a housing estate in Morpeth. My original ringing trainer contacted me to join him and a small group of others to inspect some Swift nest boxes; Because we would be wandering around houses in the dusk with long-ladders (*and potentially attracting the attention of the local Neighbourhood Watch*) the group had to be small but as it turned out we only had to visit a few houses in the same street to locate quite a lot of swifts. A local enthusiast (*who I can put anyone seriously interested in some tips about Swift nest-boxes - in touch with*) has placed Swift boxes (some of concrete and others of wood) high up on his own house, but also on houses of other folks around Morpeth. Having got them to breed satisfactorily he is now interested in them being recorded, ringed and tracked so we can all learn more about these unusual and threatened birds. Folks often think they are related to swallows and martins but they are not; in-fact they are in a very distinct group that have very weak legs, such that they cannot come to the ground or perch on wires. They feed on the wing and sleep on the wing and only settle in high natural nest holes, in house roofs and in boxes. Arriving back from Africa (Zaire, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Mozambique) in April they don't nest until May or June. Incubation takes 20 plus days and fledging another 40 odd, hence the young are not flying until August; by that time some adults are back in Africa. In the hand they have beautiful plumage and very sharp little clawed feet (see pic.).



Young Swift

Ringing near home has been limited to catching only a small number of Siskins this month, usually consisting of an adult bird with one or two of its offspring, coming to feed on Niger seeds. One of the adults was a retrapped female that had been ringed herself 12 months ago as a juvenile in the same place.

Ringing at Howick for the first time this year on the 13th, we netted 34 new birds and 3 retraps. The first bird was a retrapped Robin ringed at Howick back on the 18/11/14 as a juvenile but now a breeding female. Of the new birds the noisiest was a young Jay (*we rarely catch Jays because the adults are just too clever*); it was also good to see (and explain to trainees how to distinguish between) juvenile Willow Warblers and Chiffchaffs. There was the usual assortment of tits, finches and other small resident passerines, and just one adult Swallow.

Ringing on the 14th proved just too hot and bright for the birds and the birders so we finished early. We did catch 15 new birds and 4 retraps; one of these was a male Great Tit in a full Main Moult (replacing its flight feathers and tail) that had been ringed as an adult back on 17/10/15. On the 20th we managed 11 new birds and 3 retraps. Two of the new birds were Swallows, both adults. We did much better on the 21st catching

28 new birds and 8 retraps. The new birds included our first juvenile Swallow along with 3 adults; all the adults were females that appeared to have finished breeding. It's not looking like a very good year for swallow productivity.

Blackcaps

Young Nuthatches

Despite the threat of rain we setup on the 27th and immediately started catching lots of birds including two juvenile Nuthatch (see pic.) together with an adult male a little later (probably one of the parents). There were a number of juvenile birds, including Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps, giving us the task of trying to work out which would turn out to be male (black crowns) and female (brown crowns) which is not always straightforward in a young bird (see pic.). The Blackcaps come into the Arboretum to find berries while the other warblers are mostly looking for small insects. We also captured a whole family of juvenile Bullfinch (see pic.), a tiny young Goldcrest and a Treecreeper. Treecreepers are always fascinating in the hand because they cannot perch upright like most small birds; as they have evolved to grip bark and travel mouse-like in trees looking for insects (see pic.). Proceedings were terminated quickly by a thunderstorm at 11:30 but not before we had captured 57 new birds and 9 retraps.

Young Bullfinches

Young Treecreeper

Anyone interesting in ringing is invited to get in touch. Regular ringing continues this month at Howick Arboretum, on most Friday and Saturday mornings, and continues into the Autumn (you can just come to watch).

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