A Ringer's Year March 2018
Phil Hanmer Ringer & Trainer
Natural History Society of Northumbria Ringing Group (Hancock Museum)

At the end of last month's report I mentioned that I was going to The Gambia, in Africa, to be part of the long term ornithological studies being conducted at the Kartong Bird Observatory; I actually left home on the first day of the bad snow and it took me twice the time it would normally take to drive to Gatwick Airport *(I was actually cursing our so -called regional-hub (Newcastle) Airport for not having a service to Gatwick!*). Anyway, let's return to some local news. Three young Barn owlets I ringed in their respective nests last year have been found dead in the March snow; GV55817 (ringed in late May 2017) from near Longhorsley was found dead near Newton on the Moor; GV55806 (also ringed in May) from near Boulmer was found dead quite close to its nest site; GV65427 from a September (second brood) at Hipsburn was found dead at Howick. An adult male owl that probably nested near Foxton in 2016 and 2017 was found dead just down the coast at Alnmouth. I have also been told of several unringed birds which been found dead: Some of these were the more normal road casualties and so far this winter's casualties do not seem to have been too high. Let's hope the weather will now improve. I also received a copy of a report from *The Barn Owl Trust* in which they compile information studies up and down the country. This says, "data received from 38 monitoring schemes shows that the number of nesting pairs in the UK in 2017 was 17% above the average of all previous years (2013 -2016)". Apparently they only did poorly in West Galloway and West Cornwall. To read the full report, just Google "State of the UK Barn Owl population 2017". The only Barn Owl work I have done recently is to put up a new box in a local farm steading to try and compensate for one lost when a hemmel has been demolished to make way for an over-large holiday cottage (*the same hemmel from which a landowner moved a box in the breeding season last year*). Another box was put up in the steading to replace a worn-out box.

African Jacana

Checking on the state of 16 potential Goldeneye boxes (to effect repairs etc.), I found two Tawny Owls in residence starting to breed (*they are a bit like clockwork in their breeding habits and unlike Barn Owls don't seem to wait for the weather to warm up much*). The ducks will not be back until April.

Returning to my African escape from the snow I have attached photographs of two distinctly Afro-tropical birds: The first is an African Jacana (see opposite) with bright chestnut underparts and ridiculously long legs and 'toes' – you might well call them 'lily-trotters'. The second is a very small Beautiful Sunbird (a male in breeding plumage). Unlike our local birds we still know very little about the basic Natural History of these Afro-tropical birds; we ring them, weigh, age and try to determine their sex. We also take additional biometric measurements such as 'total head length', 'tarsus & toe' and tail length, as well as collecting feather samples for analysis.

Beautiful Sunbird– The Gambia

The third picture is of a Willow Warbler – captured on its migration north, back to Europe; it was carrying a lot a fat (scored visually on what we can see in its throat) so clearly a travelling bird. We controlled and ringed several other Palaearctic migrants including Sedge Warblers, Reed Warblers, Yellow Wagtails, Redstarts and a Bluethroat.

As well as gathering real scientific data, the Kartong Observatory trains local volunteers and Wildlife Department staff. It is a great place to go bird watching with 357 different species being recorded; and it also collects and does useful things for the local community including the school. I will tell you about catching Vultures next month!

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

Willow Warbler in The Gambia