A Ringer's Year May 2018

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There are no special trips abroad to report from this month as all the activity has been close to home. Late April and May is when most birds (especially resident species) breed; forget about the random Robin or Blackbird that tries to breed much earlier in the year. Yes, some of them do try but most just build a nest and then give it up, or maybe lay some eggs and then fail to incubate them.

Pulli Dippers

I will start with Dippers that in a good year have a brood in April and another one in May. I do an annual survey of traditional nesting sites in Hulne Park (*The Duke's enclosed Medieval Deer Park at Alnwick*) and this year I found six active nests (some I can only see with Binoculars; others I can physically check and ring the pulli). Six nests sounds good except that this year these are all basically second broods because the first broods never happened. I was able to ring a brood of 5 on the 3/5/18 at a site where I have more usually ringed a brood around two weeks earlier (see pic) and another at a site on the 10/5/18. At an entirely different site under a bridge near Powburn we usually get a trainee or two wet while I show them how to safely extract a brood of Dippers from a nest, ring and safely return them to the nest. However, this year (due to my other commitments) the brood of three fledged successfully without getting their 'bracelets' so I had to employ Plan B. This required the placing of a net across the river a week or so later and after some patience the adult pair and two juvenile Dippers were captured and ringed (number three has I fear fallen victim to the perils of nature); while adult are very sleek soft brown birds the fledged juveniles have a pale 'scaly' appearance (see pic). While ringing the dippers we also caught a Common Sandpiper, which proved to be the male of a pair that is nesting in some gravel close to the river. This particular nest is out of the way of dogs and humans that seem to blunder around close to water in May. Personally I would like to ban people from this insensitive activity until at least the middle of June to give wildlife a chance to breed in peace.

'Scaly' young Dipper

I monitor a number of Nest Box locations every year, including some on a Farm, others around a Caravan Site and near the former National Park centre at Ingram. All these sites are running approximately two weeks late, although, interestingly, Blue Tits are developing faster than Great Tits. The first nest ringed was on the 26th when 4 pulli Robins were ringed at the Breamish Caravan Site (incidentally the adult female had been ringed on the 20th when the young were too small to ring); we then went on to ring several Blue Tit

Willow Tit

nests of 8, 5, 2 & 8 respectively. We had to go to Ingram to find some Great Tits, including two nests of 7 each. There will be some more of both species to *ring* in a week although I can already tell its going to be poor year in terms of productivity. The most fascinating find from this month was a Willow Tit nesting not in a hole or a box it has had to partly excavate (which is its usual habit) but in an ordinary sort of wooden nest-box. Those who recognise this species will be tempted to say – *it must be its close relative "a Marsh Tit"*. However, having now shown the female birds photo to several people (*photo attached for you all to see*) everyone seems agreed that it is a Willow Tit. Clearly this bird has 'not been reading the books'!

Tawny Owls nest in April and May and several of my regular birds who are used to my annual visits tend to just glare at me when I look into their box. One female at Craster is at least seven years old and positively refuses to come out of her box until her owlets are quite close to clambering out of their nest up into the trees (branching). However, one of my trainees did manage to ring the 2 owlets on the 16th (see pic.).

Tawny Owlet

At the end of the month I and my collaborators have started to check on the state of Barn Owls nesting. So far it's very unlike last year when we were actually ringing young Barn Owls in May! To date we have found three nests with a hatching (and incidentally twittering) egg but most are just eggs or even just a pair of owls thinking about breeding. Productivity will be down on last year (when it was exceptionally high) but it's too early to tell if it will turn out to be an average year or actually poor.

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