A RINGERS YEAR

SEPTEMBER 2021: Returns from the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) this month confirmed the age of some of this years (very few) nesting Barn Owls. One successful pair (at Netherwitton) were in their box from March and were always present on the three times we visited; successfully raising one owlet. The female was ringed near Heighley Gate, Morpeth in 2014 in her nest and so is now 7 years old; while the male was ringed in the National Park in the upper Breamish Valley in 2017 as an adult. Hence, he must be 5 years old but could be older. Another entirely new pair took over a traditional site near Wooler and raised two young. Here the male was only a year old, having been ringed near Wooler in his own nest only the year before. The female had not been encountered previously but did look to be two years old. Finally, what is probably my currently oldest known owl was encountered nesting near Boulmer in June. She had been pushed out of her usual site by some noisy Kestrels but found another box a short distance away where she raised four young. Her ring number tells us she was ringed near Lesbury in 2011; hence she is now ten years old! I will report properly on this years Barn Owl monitoring next month, when I have got all the computerised data off to the BTO.

The weather relented enough for us to be able to ring at Howick on the 3rd September and it proved to be quite a busy morning with 64 birds captured (44 new and 20 retraps). It was very much a day for Blackcaps with 17 being ringed (see picture of a young female).

Every single one was a juvenile in the process of feeding up on berries prior to their first migration south to the Mediterranean and North Africa. There was also a single adult Willow Warbler (a bit of a rarity this year) which at a glance did look very much like the five Chiffchaffs we also captured.

We were next able to ring on the 10th when we captured 39 birds (26 new and 13 retraps). Two of the retraps had originally been ringed back in 2017; a noisy adult Great Spotted Woodpecker and a Blue Tit. The new birds included two Mistle Thrush which were probably local birds rather than early incoming migrants; simply on the search for berries in the Arboretum. There were also a few Blackcaps (the others probably having migrated further south) and a Chiffchaff.

An obvious pair of adult Nuthatch were also captured (see picture).

The female had a short wing of 83mm, while the males was 88mm; and rather easier to see - the undertail coverts of the male were russet while those of the female were much paler (see second picture).

Back again on the 11th we captured 37 birds (28 new and 9 retraps) and we felt 'incoming-migration' had really started with the capture of 5 Song Thrush and 2 Mistle at the same time; all with few or no fat reserves. There were also 4 Blackcap, 3 Chiffchaff and a Whitethroat; all probably having come from further north and having paused their migrations long enough to feed up on local berries and insects. We finished early as the wind got stronger. We did an extra session on the 16th as a Ringing Demonstration for Newcastle University Biology Students and captured 52 birds (41 new and 11 retraps). Almost the first out of a net was a young Magpie (adults are usually too clever to be captured) followed by three Mistle Thrushes (probably locals). There was also a new influx of Blackcaps (8) and Chiffchaffs (3) along with the expected assortment of local tits and finches. The 17th was a quieter session with only 28 birds captured (15 new and 13 retraps). These included 3 new Blackcaps and 2 new Chiffchaffs;

The most attractive was probably the adult Long Tailed Tit (ringed in 2019) (see photo).

The 18th started damp and overcast and eventually turned humid; we captured 47 birds (23 new and 24 retraps) *and a Raven called in the mist above the Cricket-field while we were still setting-up*. There were a lot of migrating Chiffchaffs around the site, and we captured 8 of them; including two female adults both moulting and still feathering over their brood-patches from raising late broods. The 25th was another busy session with 45 birds captured (38 new and 7 retraps) and two potential trainees ringing their first birds. We captured four Blackbirds (and three Song Thrush) with no fat reserves; which were very likely in-coming migrants (three of them had very dark bills which also tends to indicate a continental origin). There were also 8 new Chaffinches, an unusually high number; so probably also in-comers. Finally, there was a rare adult Goldcrest *(unusual as most goldcrest seem to be juvenile*) and a single Chiffchaff.

There were no Blackcaps on the site but later in the afternoon Alison and I observed eight feeding on Cornus sanguinea (Dogwood) berries in a tree near the church; they were accompanied by a single (local) Robin that seemed determined to eat as many berries as possible before these interlopers scoffed the lot

Back on the 15th of the month my newest C Ringer had also done some ringing near Longhorsley and recaptured some of my favourite birds. We had seen both of these actual individuals before, in the late winter. These were an adult Willow Tit (the bottom bird in the picture attached) and an adult Marsh Tit (top in the picture). Some birders will insist they can always tell them apart at a glance – but unless you hear them sing or have them in the hand it is very difficult (see photo.).

At the same session we also captured a ‘funny-looking’ bird that defied immediate identification; this was in fact a juvenile Yellowhammer, or yellow-bunting as we should more correctly call the. (see photo.). This will undoubtedly soon join up with others of its kind to form a winter flock.

When we get to November ringing will by necessity quieten down due mostly to the vagaries of the weather but we will be making, repairing; and putting up new bird boxes for a variety of species including owls. Ideas for good sites are always welcome as are donations (have you seen the cost of wood now? – don’t believe anyone who tells you inflation is not going up!).

Best Regards

Phil Hanmer S Ringer/Trainer; Natural History Society of Northumbria Ringing Group (Hancock Museum). E-mail: tytoalbas@btinternet.com