A RINGERS YEAR

MAY 2022: It's been an amazingly busy month for birds, with the rather variable weather having miscellaneous effects on their nesting behaviour. Tawny Owls have done well after the disaster of last year - when we only monitored one nest. That one female did nest again this year near Powburn, in a wood that had been devastated by Storm Arwen! She managed to find one of the few upright trees – which had one (*of an original three*) tawny-duck boxes still on it. The female has nested in this same wood every year since 2017. We have found 14 nesting Tawnies this year and 10 have so far raised young successfully; with another two pending. At least two have nested in Barn Owl boxes, in very unsuitable places for tawnies (who really like to be in a darkish shady place in trees). This may suggest a shortage of suitable nest sites after the winter storms. One of these has definitely failed. However, we have seen a return of Tawnies to nesting alongside the Goldeneye ducks in the Breamish Valley with four being successful, raising respectively 2, 2, 2 & 3 owlets and the surprise discovery near Stanton of a 13-year-old Tawny female [GR03102] that I thought had perished back in the winter of 2019/20. She had bred successfully from at least 2010 until 2019. Then, in 2020 she went missing, only to turn up again this year complete with two owlets which we ringed on the 8/5/22. We have also had the unusual occurrence this year of two tawny nests on the same farm, occurring within a few hundred metres of each other. Tawny owls are usually so territorially aggressive that they don't tolerate this close proximity! See photo of young Tawnies just ringed.

We also check on nesting birds that use small nest boxes from around the 10th of May (and find a few open-nesters as we go around). One wood near Doxford has been so devastated by the winter storms that a third of the boxes have vanished but I still managed to find four Blue Tit nests with 11, 11, 6 & 11 young, a Great Tit with 9, and a Coal Tit with 10 young (an unusually large number for a Coal Tit in my experience)

At another site monitored by one of my C Ringers near Stobswood, she found some Marsh Tits had used a box and raised 9 young birds.

Near Longhorsley I monitor several bits of remnant ancient woodland and here, along with the tits and Tree Sparrows, we have had two nests of beautiful summer migrant Redstarts. The adults are particularly clever at avoiding capture themselves and not scared of waiting just a short distance away, with food in beak, to feed their young while ringers inspect their nest, or ring their offspring! In the same wood I also encountered a Treecreeper exiting a small cleft in some tree-bark and so discovered a nest. The view of the tree and a close-up into the nest is shown in two photos.

We can't ring these as it would be necessary to break the wood, which we would not do.

The big job of this month, which will continue into June, is the checking of 100 or so Barn Owl boxes. So far it does not look like it will be a brilliant year for Barn Owls but it will certainly be better than 2021. To date we have found some small young owls (which we will return to ring in a few weeks time) and birds incubating eggs. One of the boxes with four small owlets was in a farm box we only put up (in a quiet Cattle Shed) in February. It also contained a small larder of assorted small dead furry animals! We have also found half a dozen boxes occupied by owls who have not (yet?) laid any eggs. So, we will have to return to these to see if they nest late. My colleague Hilary also had a surprise at one tumble-down hemmel at the edge of a golf course, where we had found owls back in March. She discovered nesting Kestrels!

Kestrels are in effect a day-time owl, eating very much the same food and liking the same nesting places. In this case there were five feisty youngsters. I also had a return from the BTO telling me that a Barn Owl we ringed as a nestling back in 2017, on Longhorsley Moor, was now breeding himself near Causey Park

It would be really helpful to receive reports of owl sightings around buildings and trees were they just might be nesting, especially if they are carrying food, perhaps in the early evening. After the winter storms some natural and artificial sites have been lost so some will be in new sites.

Best Regards

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