**A RINGERS YEAR**

**JULY 2022:** While small birds that use boxes or natural cavities have now finished breeding, those that make nests in thick vegetation, including hedges, may still be nesting – and so it is with immense frustration that I see many hedges being cut-back so early in the year. *In gardens, is it really necessary to start in mid-July?* In Farmers Fields its actually illegal – but the excuse is used that it can be carried out to improve the view for traffic at dangerous road junctions. This is currently being used to an extreme degree to justify some long lengths of hedge cutting which are quite out of all proportion to the need!

Anyway, returning to the small bird box projects that we monitor year-on-year I can report that a wood at Doxford (very severely damaged by Storm Arwen) had only 27% occupancy of its boxes as compared to 50% last year. At Ingram 22% were occupied compared with 14% last year. At the Breamish Valley Caravan Site 37% of boxes were used and most were successful (producing lots of young Blue Tits and Great Tits). In 2021 53% of boxes were used BUT there was actually a big loss of chicks in poor weather and only 33% were actually successful. Back at home, after a week away we returned to find a Spotted Flycatcher nesting in a climbing *Hydrangea petiolaris* right by our Front Door. It had hatching eggs by the 25/6/22 and by the 4/7/22 one of C Ringers was able to ring two fat healthy chicks while the adult pair watched proceedings from close by. Unfortunately, we also found that two other chicks had perished in some appalling cold rain. The two successful pulli were seen leaving the nest on the 9/7/22.

Returning to Barn Owl sites north of Longhorsley on the 7th that we knew had started nesting in April/May we found four had been successful while another four had failed, although in one of the failed nests the pair had laid a replacement clutch of 6 eggs. We will return to check on these in August. One of the successful nests had a very 'punk' looking young female (*note the spots*) owl that was just shedding its baby '*down*' to reveal its adult feathers.

Subsequently we have found another three late nests that will also be visited in a month's time.

Turning to ringing at Howick we are looking out for the signs of dispersal and migration starting but that's not what we are seeing at the moment. On the 16th we captured 39 birds (36 new and 3 retraps). Only five were adult birds while 29 were most definitely very juvenile, including a loud young Magpie (all probably hatched at Howick). Those quick at maths might ask, ''well what about the other five''? These were a couple of Tree Sparrows and Long Tailed Tits that are in fact very difficult (if not impossible) to 'age'. This is because these juvenile birds moult all their Primary Flight feathers in their first year, just like their adults, rendering them of indeterminate age. Ringing again on the 22nd we had a large catch of 69 birds (51 new and 18 retraps). The retraps included two Long Tailed Tits from October 2020 that looked rather like young birds, which they were not. A Dunnock from Aug 2020 did look its age and a female Blue Tit from July 2020 was showing its age by being in something of a catastrophic Main Moult. The new birds included rather a lot of very young and low weight Chiffchaffs, Blackcaps and Goldcrests, as well as Robins and Tits. The few adult birds included a female Swallow, one of very few seen around and a remarkably well behaved male Great Spotted Woodpecker. They usually do their best to injure the ringer with their strong beak. There was also a pair of adult Song Thrush.

Ringing on the 23/7/22 was much quieter with only 26 birds captured (19 new and 7 retraps). It was remarkable that every single new bird was a juvenile. The list started with a Bullfinch which was not immediately identified because it was so young.

There were Blackcap, Dunnock, Wren, Chaffinch, Goldcrest, Chiffchaff, Great Tit, Robin and a young Treecreeper. Treecreepers are beautiful with their chequerboard patterns of brown feathers but remarkable difficult to photograph successfully as their natural stance means they can't sit up straight in the hand.

On the 29/7/22 we captured another 52 birds (35 new and 17 retraps). Included in the retraps were a Dunnock and a Blue Tit both first ringed in 2019. The new birds included a Goldfinch with no red and gold on its head, because it was a juvenile, and an adult Blackbird which if you saw it in your garden, you might think was sick. However, it was just moulting.

There were also some juvenile Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps both not ready to migrate south just yet.

*We are continuing to be at the Howick Ringing Station, weather permitting, most Friday and Saturday mornings until the end of October. If you're interested in seeing what we are doing just call in at the picnic-benches at Howick.*

Best Regards

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