

A Ringer's Year September 2017

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Ringing at the Howick Ringing Station has progressed well this month with 95 birds captured on the 1st (including 17 retraps). One of the retraps was a Treecreeper first ringed in August 2015 as a juvenile; now an adult, it had 2 young in tow. A large number of Blackcaps (24) were ringed, all feeding on the great supply of berries in the arboretum; there was also a Garden Warbler, 3 Willow Warblers and 2 Chiffchaffs. Eight Bullfinches, a species which frequents Howick all year round, were also feeding on the berries. The 2nd September produced a crop of 35 new birds and 6 retraps and the unusual catch (in a mist net) of a Carrion Crow! We cut the session a little short on the 8th as we went, for the second attempt, to try and ring the Howick Swans. However we captured 28 new birds and 8 retraps; including 6 juvenile Swallows, 7 Blackcaps and 6 Chiffchaffs. All these birds will soon be travelling to Africa, although the Blackcaps will probably not cross the Sahara unlike the other two species. Rain cut short the session on the 9th after little more than an hour with only 15 birds, although it is interesting that 5 were Chiffchaffs. On the 15th 45 birds were captured with 20 being retraps mostly of 'residents' and notably there were no Blackcaps. I tentatively conclude that most of the local Blackcaps had migrated south by this date. The 16th was again affected by rain with only 18 birds captured, although we recaptured an adult Goldcrest ringed last year as a juvenile. The session on the 22nd netted 31 birds including 5 retraps; interestingly these included 3 Blackcaps carrying excess Fat suggesting they were just passing through on migration. Finally on the 30th 50 birds were captured including 8 retraps. There seemed to have been an influx not just of Blackcap, Chiffchaff and Goldcrest but also Blackbirds (with several looking distinctly 'Continental' in origin, the males with less yellow on their beaks and the females with plumage of multiple colour shades).

So this brings us to the subject of the Howick Swans which were proving difficult to catch due to the very suspicious nature of the adult male who is an *expert* at telling his brood to stay on the water if he thinks anything 'funny' is going on! However, the offer of grain on the 8th finally attracted him and four of his cygnets up onto the bank to be captured and ringed (as well as being weighed and measured). During these proceedings the adult female came up out of the water to see what was going on. It took two people to capture her but this was done successfully. The adults already had metal rings but now, like their young, they have had easy to read 'darvik' rings fitted; so White Letters on a Red Ring ZJP is the male (all 13 kgs of him) and ZJX is the female (at 10.5 kgs). The cygnets are ZJT, ZJS, ZJU and ZJZ. A fifth cygnet (ZLA) was ringed on the 16th but to this date the other two remain unringed. Howick has had its most successful year for breeding Swans since 2012 (when it was a completely different pair). Please look out for these ringed swans, particularly as we progress into 2018; it would be really good to know where the cygnets go to – and if the same pair stay on the pool at Howick (see pic).

I did promise an update on Barn Owls because I thought we might have one or two second broods/late broods. In fact this year has proved exceptionally good with an amazing eleven broods discovered to date with nine of these ringed already (a total of 31 owlets). Eight of these are definitely second broods, produced by pairs of birds that had successfully nested earlier in the same locations. All these late/second brood owls (except one) are to be found in the coastal strip between Warkworth and Newton-by-the-Sea and my explanation of the situation is based very much on the weather and climate. Back early in the year we had an exceptionally good spring after a mild winter and the owls (particularly along the coast) came into breeding

condition early and hence many owlets were ringed before the end of May (when it's usually June or July). With broods fledging earlier than usual, some owls have been able to fit in a second brood although, as we know, the weather is now deteriorating, so the survival of these later fledged young owls is much less certain.

The most amazing second brood was at a box which my son and I went to on the 11th September where we found 7 well-grown owlets, at least one of which showed the beautiful genetic traits of a dark- or buff-coloured owl from the eastern side of Europe (see picture of the owl, and another with one of its siblings). The full scientific name of 'our' owl is *Tyto alba alba*; a buff-coloured eastern owl is '*Tyto alba guttata*'. There are two possible origins of this *guttata* genetic heritage as a parent or grandparent of our owl; one is the natural arrival of bird that has flown across the North Sea (as has been proved possible by the presence of a breeding Dutch-ringed *guttata* bird in East Anglia in 2008): Alternatively a *guttata* bird has been released (illegally) from captivity and has survived successfully in the wild.

None of this includes another replacement brood discovered in the north of the county (after a June brood failed). As usual, anyone interesting in ringing is invited to get in touch.

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