

Eco Club

In March we set off to look for signs of spring. We looked very hard and found some buds that were green and some leaves that had unfurled but flowers were not to be found.

However in April, a sunny warm day, we found spring flowers and buds bursting on the trees. On reaching the lake we viewed the holes belonging to the water voles and also saw vegetation that had been chewed by them. As we were all standing looking for vole activity a red damselfly was seen. When we examined the two mink rafts water vole droppings were seen and in the second one, their footprints in the clay.

After refreshments we walked down to the bottom of the tank tracks to the seat, being careful of banging heads on the Heligoland trap and falling down the steps!! Sue read to the children about the first boat journey given to mole by Ratty – actually a water vole.

We climbed back up to the road and headed for the mini-beast log pile where the children discovered centipedes and millipedes, snails and woodlice and a few things that remained unidentified! And finally we found a huge earthworm.

Thank you to everyone who came and to everyone who helped.

Elizabeth Dickinson



Bird Song Breakfast – 1st May

There was another exceptional turnout for the Birdsong Breakfast this year at Foxglove. I was one of nearly fifty people, which included my seven year-old son Joseph, who turned out at four o'clock to witness the symphony of birdsong at this special reserve. The orchestra of sound from the birds is well worth the early rise.

Upon our arrival at the field centre we were greeted with the sound of numerous quavering hoots, hoo hoo-hoooo hoo-ho ho from several Tawny Owls and the ecstatic, rich, bubbling trill of Curlew on the wetlands.

Everyone received a warm welcome from Tony, who gave a brief itinerary of the morning's activities in the field centre. Tony, Tom, John and myself then split everyone up into smaller groups, which were then lead around the reserve.

In total 39 species were recorded on the reserve, which included residents such as Wren, Blackbird, Robin, Thrush, Great Tit, Chaffinch, Bullfinch and Goldcrest. The wetlands had several Greylag Geese, a single Bar Headed Goose, Tufted Ducks, Snipe and Lapwing showing. A single Cuckoo was heard calling in the distance and several Great Spotted Woodpeckers were heard beating their loud, fast, very short drum. Migrants also played a role; Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff and Blackcap all joined in the crescendo of sound.

Tony then led a group to an area on the military training ranges to witness a Black Grouse Lek. There, a further 10 species were recorded, which included Black Grouse, Wheatear, Skylark and Meadow Pipit. A single Swift was also sighted this being the first that I have seen this year.

At 07.30 everyone met at Wathgill barracks for what was a most enjoyable breakfast.

For anybody interested in the natural world, knowledge of bird songs and calls is one of the great joys of life. Not only does it provide access to a hitherto secret world, which adds immensely to the pleasure gained from being outdoors. It's also a great alert mechanism to the presence of birds, particularly those shy, secretive species that rarely show themselves, and is an invaluable guide when trying to separate species that look very much the same. A good tip for the beginner is to start with the birds most often seen such as garden birds. Try not to learn to many at once and also try to learn the call as well as the song.

May I personally take this opportunity to thank everyone who supported this event and I hope that you will join us next year.

Paul Welsh



John, Jean and Chris enjoying a hearty breakfast.



On the moors above Foxglove watching the Grouse lek.



Undergrowth

Issue No 23 Spring 2010

The Newsletter of Foxglove Covert Local Nature Reserve

Welcome to the Spring edition of 'Undergrowth'. In the last issue, we reported that Prince Charles had paid a visit to the Reserve. This time we can report that Poul Christensen, the Chairman of Natural England, has paid a visit. A 100 Club draw took place recently, and the lucky winner was Sue Reed.

If you wish to keep up-to-date with events at Foxglove Covert, you can do this by looking at the 'blog'. Just type Foxglove Covert in to Google, and click in the appropriate places.

In this issue we have a variety of articles, mainly about birds. I must draw your attention to the article by Dick Temple. Last Summer, Dick very kindly took me with him when he went on one of his expeditions. He showed me his work, and I was impressed with his thorough scientific approach. We seemed to yomp for miles over some very bleak terrain, but it was worth it, and I'd like to thank him for taking me and for agreeing to write about his work.

Ray Harper

Visit by the Chairman of Natural England

Poul Christensen, the Chairman of Natural England, was a visitor on 8 April. He came along with Peter Nottage, the Regional Director, and other members of the local Natural England team who had been involved in drawing up the HLS agreement. He was given a presentation on the reserve by Tony, and Rebecca Clarkson our local Natural England representative described the capital projects that had been agreed.

He was taken on a tour of the reserve by Marion with Volunteers, Ringers, Friends and members of the Management Group in attendance and able to brief him on various different aspects along the route.

He returned to the Field Centre to have lunch and was joined by Commander DTE North and the Garrison Commander. After congratulating everyone present on the quality of the reserve, the Field Centre and the facilities and opportunities it provided, he signed the visitors' book as he left. He later wrote a letter endorsing the Natural England commitment to the reserve and expressed his appreciation for the hospitality he had received from all concerned.

Tony Crease



Poul Christensen (second from the right), and other members of his team, being taken on a tour of Foxglove Covert

Life After Work – Retire to Ring.

Before I retired I was asked frequently what I was going to do when I stopped work to which I replied 'everything I don't have time for now'.

I had always been a keen bird-watcher and after two courses at Flatford Mill on Bird Migration and Bird Ringing, I knew that ringing was for me; it was such a privilege to get up 'close and personal' with birds.

First task was to find a trainer. A friend told me about the work at Foxglove Covert and the ringing programme there. Two visits to the superb facilities combined with the welcome and friendly atmosphere were enough to convince me to train there.

Second task was to apply for a trainee's permit and then start to process birds.

Third task is to get used to early mornings; nets are put up at first light; this is VERY early in the summer.

There are lots of birds to process; sometimes the supply is so great we forget to eat. Everyone gets a chance to handle the rarer birds, Lots are drawn for those people who have not handled the 'rarities' before.

It's not just ringing; we also have to learn how to put up and take down nets and to extract birds from the nets safely. The welfare and safety of the bird is the most important factor to consider and all our activities are governed by this. (There is a notice in the ringing room stating this.)

We ring on a Sunday and sometimes visitors to the reserve drop in; this is a good opportunity to demonstrate what we do and to show them the birds we are handling. One visitor a few weeks ago saw his first Jay. The time flies by with plenty of ringing and some friendly banter and leg-pulling which are all part of the enjoyment.

The training and supervision is just right, you can work at your own pace and there is always good feed-back on what you have done. It appears to be more than that which is required by the British Trust for Ornithology who run the ringing programme and issue the permits. Come and see us one Sunday, you can be sure of a warm welcome and you may even get hooked on ringing, as I did.

Elizabeth Duggan

Merlins in the South Durham Pennines



Merlin chick

For what is beginning to seem like most of my life I have been searching moorland for breeding Merlins. This obsession began in 1974 in Northumberland and pursued me here when I moved to Yorkshire in 1980.

Since 1987 I have tried to find all of the nesting Merlins in a block of moorland managed for grouse-shooting in south-west Durham. The maximum dimensions of the study area are about 12km west to east and 10km north to south, however much of this area comprises 'white ground' - sheep run and cattle pasture - and roads, villages and in-by fields. The heather-clad area suitable for nesting Merlins is about 45km² - less than half of the total.

Merlins, in England, achieve their highest densities on managed grouse moors, where they hunt small passerines, such as pipits and larks, and nest on the ground in deep heather. They benefit from the control of ground-predators and crows and are not, themselves, the subject of significant persecution.

In this article I want to examine the effect of weather conditions on breeding success.

Not surprisingly, given the open and exposed terrain in which they nest, breeding success is sensitively dependent on spring and early summer weather conditions and especially on rainfall. Two recent seasons demonstrated this well.

In 2005 the weather during the breeding season was generally good and, certainly from mid-May onwards it was warm, dry and, even on the Pennines, not very windy. Clutch sizes were higher than average - the majority were fives - and breeding success was strong. I located 13 nests of which 12 were successful. I ring the young birds as near to fledging as possible so that I can be reasonably sure that my ringing totals reflect genuine success rate. In 2005 I ringed 48 birds: a fledging rate of 4 per successful nest.

2007, you may recall, was different! April was unseasonably warm and the early take-up of territories looked promising. May was quite cold and wet but by the start of June it seemed that the better weather was returning. By June 10th I had found 9 nests and was anticipating a repeat of the previous two years' breeding successes. Many of the young were just hatching at this time.

Then came the monsoon! The rain began in earnest on June 11th and did not stop until June 16th. For the young Merlins this was a disaster. The adults could not hunt in these

conditions. The brooding birds - mostly females at this stage - receiving no food from their mates, would be forced to abandon their young to try to find food for themselves. Small young, thus exposed, would quickly chill and perish. In the few days' lull before the rain started again I revisited as many nests as possible. Brood after brood had failed. From 20th to 28th June it rained again - more or less continuously. Some broods survived to about 15 days before they succumbed. Some of these birds were found plucked and partially eaten.

Usually I find these remains in and around the nest-scape. However on one occasion in 2007 the young had been carried about 100 metres from the nest to the plucking post. This was a line of peat-hags where the adult birds habitually brought their prey to pluck. It seems that these adults had eaten their own dead young and thereby secured their own survival. This behaviour has been recorded before in other birds of prey - e.g. Sparrowhawk - but this is the first recorded incidence with Merlin.

It was interesting, though, that at one site, the adult birds screamed over me, aggressively defending their nest, despite the fact that all of the young were dead. The instinct to defend the young is clearly powerful and there must be a tension between this and the strategy of cannibalism. Incredibly 3 broods managed a partial success and 10 young finally fledged.

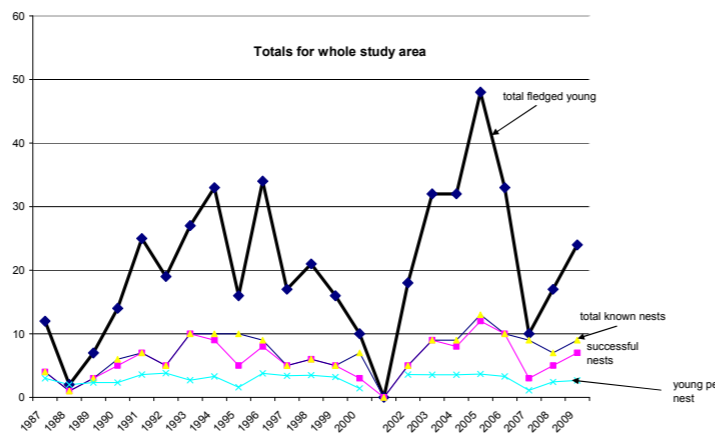
1995 and 1997 were both years with high June rainfall in the Pennines and the effects on the Merlin breeding success can be seen from the graph.

The apparent increase between 1989 and 1994 was probably more to do with me getting better at the job than a real increase in the population!

The apparent crash in 2001 is actually simply a lack of data; this was the dreadful year of 'Foot and Mouth Disease' when field-workers were not allowed access to the hills.

As climate change brings more frequent 'extreme events' it is worrying to speculate on the future for Merlins and other upland species.

Dick Temple



Recent Ringing Recoveries

Two recent ringing recoveries may be of interest to our readers; they demonstrate the unpredictability of bird movements, aspects of longevity, and the value of bird ringing as a contributory factor to our increasing knowledge of avian ecology.

We have recently been advised that a Fulmar found breeding by Chris Meller on Eilean Cluimhrig (30 Jun 09) during the Cape Wrath trip last year had been ringed as a nestling on Sule Skerry (an island 61km north of northern Scotland) on 27 July 1984. This bird, although not the oldest Fulmar recorded was 25 years old with 9104 days between captures. The longest lived Fulmar to date is actually 41 years old.

Additionally, a Blackbird ringed at Foxglove by Sam Hackett as an adult on 4 Dec 2005 was found dead on 10 Jan 10 having flown into a window at Hagtors, Varmland, Sweden, some 1119 km from where it was originally trapped 1498 days - over 4 years - earlier. The oldest known Blackbird is 14 years.

Tony Crease

We need your help - please!

Background

At the request of the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), the bird ringers have started colour ringing Bullfinches and Blackbirds caught at Foxglove. Over the last 25 years there has been a significant reduction in the UK population of a number of common breeding species but the timing and cause of this decline is not clear. In 1998 the British Trust for Ornithology (which operates the bird-ringing scheme in the UK) started a nation wide study to establish the year-by-year survival rates for adult birds. The aim of our study is to spot changes in population numbers at the time the change occurs and so research can be directed immediately to determine the cause(s) of the change.

What are we doing?

Every time we capture a Bullfinch (or Blackbird) during our normal ringing activities we are adding 3 coloured plastic rings as well as the normal BTO metal ring.

Two plastic rings are being added to the right leg of the birds and a single colour ring is being added to the left leg above the metal BTO ring.

In our study we are using nine different coloured plastic rings; red, green, blue, black, white, yellow, pink, orange and brown. The associated pictures illustrate colour-ringed birds.

What can you do to help this project?

Using your binoculars, observe all the Blackbirds and Bullfinch that you can see on the Reserve and check their legs. If you see a bird with colour rings carefully record which colours are on which leg and on the leg with two colours we need to know which colour is on top (nearest the body) and which colour is below (nearest the ground). Once you are sure of the colours and sequence, record your sighting on the attached form. Fill in the first five columns and leave the last one for the bird ringers to complete when they process your records.

Paperwork for recording your sightings is available in the Field Centre, near the Beehive, or you can speak to one of the Reserve Managers.

If you want to know more; talk to the bird ringers, watch the Blog on our Website or look in future editions of Undergrowth for an update on the progress of our scheme.

Sophie Benaiges and Tom Dewdney

Bird Ringing in 2009

Overall, 2009 was an excellent year for the bird ringers. We handled a record number of 12,229 birds, which included a record number of 8983 new birds ringed during the year. In total we handled another record of 102 different species, which included Rock Dove, a species new for the group.

At Foxglove, we centred our activities on the Constant Effort Scheme (CES) between May and September. Tony commented on the 2009 CES Season in the Autumn issue of Undergrowth, but it is worth adding that whilst there are other groups who have been running for longer than our 17 years, our scheme currently handles more birds than any other in the UK and it was the importance of this contribution that was recognised when Natural England chose to accept our application onto the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme.

Analysis of the occupation and breeding success achieved by birds using the nest boxes on site, showed that although the level of occupation was poor following two previous poor breeding seasons, the size of clutches and broods this year was good and the number of chicks which fledged was higher than normal. This improvement in productivity was recognised in our CES returns. We also added two new breeding species to the Reserve list when we found and ringed Lapwing and Redshank pulli.

Highlights from the general ringing in Foxglove included:

- A successful 10th and final ringing course took place in early August, over 50 students and trainers handled a total of 2205 birds of 61 different species.
- Adding Tufted Duck and Hawfinch to the ringing list.
- Catching record numbers of Chiffchaff (114), Chaffinch (566), Lesser Redpoll (268) and Bullfinch (217)
- A small sample of the 'recoveries' which we received via the BTO during 2009 for birds handled at Foxglove illustrate the speed and distance of movements and also the longevity of some individual birds:
- A Redstart ringed as a pullus at Lartington, Durham 29 May 2009 was recaptured on 25 July 2009 at Foxglove, a movement of 26 km.
- A Kingfisher ringed on 03 August 2008 at Kiplin Hall, was caught again at Foxglove, on 30 May 2009, a distance of 10 km.
- A Blackcap ringed on 02 August 2008 at Foxglove, was caught again at Icklesham, Sussex, on 21 September the same year, a distance of 418 km.
- A Blackbird ringed on 14 January 2001 at Foxglove, was caught on 15 November making the bird more than 8 years old.
- A Siskin ringed at Drumla, Strathclyde on 12 July 2007 was caught at Foxglove on the 16 September 2007, a movement of 247 km in 66 days.
- A Siskin ringed at Foxglove on 10 August 2008 was found dead in Littlebrough, Greater Manchester, on the 20 April 2009, a distance of 86 km.
- A Greenfinch ringed at Foxglove on 29 July 2007 was found dead at Appleby-in-Westmoreland, Cumbria, on the 01 December 2008, a distance of 59 km.
- A Chaffinch ringed at Foxglove on 12 November 2006 was caught found dead in Sedgfield, Co. Durham on 04 June 2009, a distance of 37 km.
- A Chaffinch ringed at Foxglove on 30 April 2006 was found dead on 10 December 2009 in North Tawton, Devon, a distance of 423 km.
- A Brambling ringed at Bellflask on 04 January 2009 was caught again on 29 March 2009 at Foxglove, a distance of 24 km.
- A Lesser Redpoll ringed at Foxglove on 14 September 2008 was caught by ringers on 07 August 2009 in Greystone Forest, Cumbria, a distance of 86 km.

Our ringing is a monitoring tool, and variation in the numbers of birds caught reflects the fortunes of many species that we are fortunate enough to handle. Our data is analysed locally and also added to the national database. These results could not have been achieved without the commitment of a hard core of ringers and helpers. The support of a whole range of people from the reserve managers who have filled the bird feeders, to the volunteers who have helped manage the habitat, and the visitors who have seen what we are doing and lent their support, contributes to the collective outcome and is very much appreciated.

Tom Dewdney



Tom and Stuart colour ringing

Colour rings on a Bullfinch