

RINGINGnews

The newsletter of the BTO Ringing Scheme



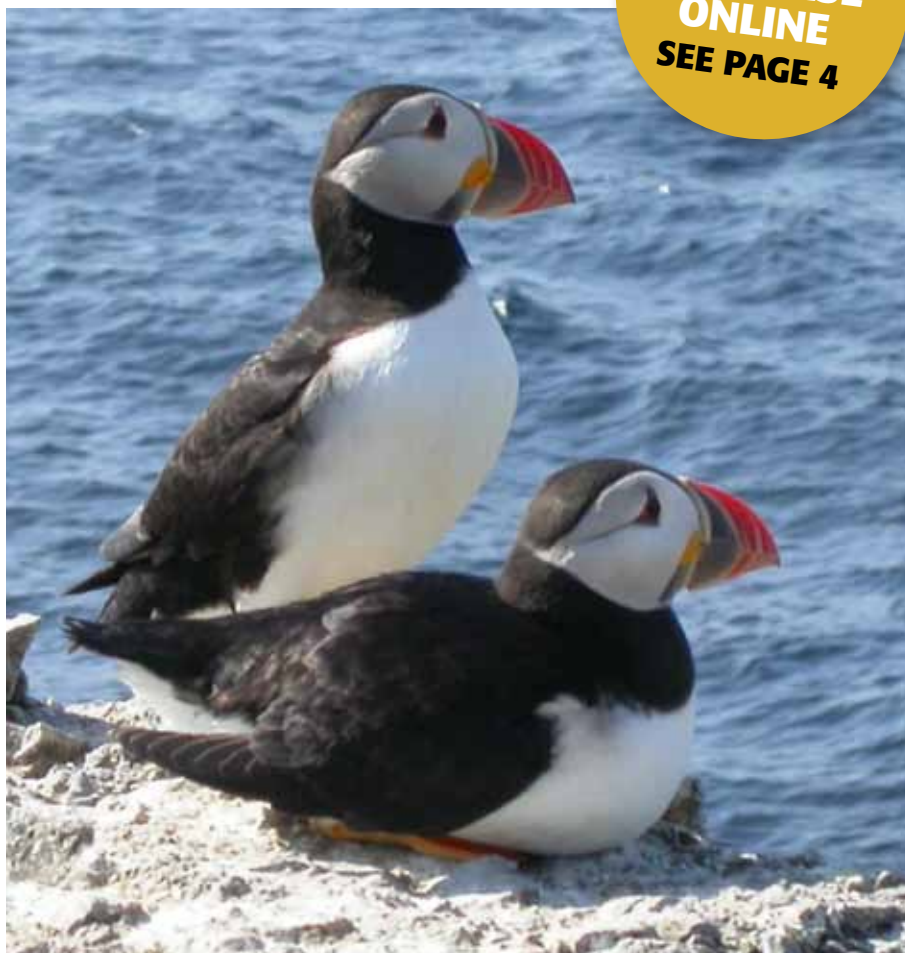
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NRG 50th Anniversary article page 7



A great visionary

We have come a long way since the first rumblings of the computer age at the BTO. The late Chris Mead predicted a digital future for ringing data back in 1982:

“Eventually, if good numbers of ringers can agree on the same system, it might even be possible for the BTO to accept schedules from ringers as floppy discs which could then be printed at Beech Grove using a quality printer.....perhaps we may just store the ringing data on our

own computer, calculate national and regional totals lists from it, and look up the ringing information for birds recovered by computer! It may never happen – but, in case it does, you have been warned.”

(Ringers' Bulletin, Vol 6, No 1).

Well, it might have taken some time, but we are now where Chris envisaged all those years ago – and even a bit further on! To find out more, have a look at the article on computerisation on pages 4–6.

FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome...

...to exciting times! As Facebook hits its 10th birthday (if you don't know what it is, ask the kids!), it's great to be forging ahead with what will be the biggest changes to how we manage ringing data for almost 30 years. The move to an online system of managing and storing records has been a long and rocky road, but the end product will hopefully revolutionise how we interact with our own data. However, few of us will have been out collecting much data yet this year, with wave after wave of low-pressure storms and rain seeing everyone holed up warm and dry inside. This perhaps merely continues the trend though, after yet another depressing summer in 2013, as reported by our combined demographic monitoring projects – see the enclosed newsletter. But this is what monitoring is all about and what we do best, so thanks yet again to everyone who's helped in some way to generate these results.

"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place"
(George Bernard Shaw)

Communication is increasingly key to so much of what we do, both between ourselves and outwards to others. We hope that those of you as yet uninitiated into demographic monitoring (through CES, RAS or NRS) will enjoy reading about the results of these schemes in the enclosed newsletters and will see the benefits of getting involved. There is also the exciting prospect of a new post within the Team, freeing up staff time for improved communications (see News from the Ringing Committee on page 10). We hope that you'll embrace and support us through these changes.

Mark Grantham & Jacquie Clark



RINGING NEWS

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The British Trust for Ornithology is a charity dedicated to researching birds. For membership details please contact Chris Morley at membership@bto.org

Cover photo: Puffins, Stuart Newson; Helgoland trap, Northumbria RG



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Fantastic phalarope flight

Fascinating news came out of the Northern Isles in January, as a collaborative project between RSPB, Shetland Ringing Group and the Swiss Ornithological Institute released the first results of tracking of Red-necked Phalaropes from Fetlar. Ten birds were fitted with geolocators in 2012 and the recapture of one of these birds showed it had undertaken an extraordinary 25,000-km migration. Even more surprising was the route it had taken, heading west across the Atlantic before turning south along the eastern seaboard of the USA and into the Caribbean. It then continued past Mexico and, remarkably, wintered in the Pacific off the coast of Peru. In spring it then followed a similar route back to Fetlar. It had always been assumed that Scottish birds would act as Scandinavian birds do, wintering in the Arabian Sea, but this bird showed a behaviour more akin to those of North American origin.



ADAM ROWLANDS

The BTO Ringing Scheme is funded by a partnership of the British Trust for Ornithology, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (on behalf of: Natural England, Natural Resources Wales and Scottish Natural Heritage and the Department of the Environment Northern Ireland), The National Parks and Wildlife Service (Ireland) and the ringers themselves.

More on separating Marsh and Willow Tits

There are several differences between these two species which ringers can use to separate them, as described in *Ringers' Manual* (Appendix 4, p 257) and by Richard Broughton *Ringers' Bulletin* (Vol 12, No 7, p 106). However, none of these methods is, on its own, absolutely reliable. There is individual variation in birds and feather abrasion can make some difficult to use. The purpose of this note is to describe another plumage feature which we believe to be of use in separating the species. However, we have only observed it in birds in Treswell Wood, Nottinghamshire, and it needs wider validation.

In the early 1980s we observed one Willow Tit which had exceptionally obvious chocolate-brown nasal hairs. We considered it, at the time, to be an aberrant individual and decided to look at all other Willow Tits to see if they shared this feature. Naturally, they all did and it seemed to be a feature of Willow Tits that had previously gone unnoticed, simply because we were concentrating on all the traditional features used to separate the species. After a year or so we abandoned recording the cryptic note 'choc' on our field sheets. What about Marsh Tits? Of course, at the time our population was still extinct following the bad winter of 1978/79.

Move the clock forward 25 years. Our Willow Tits are now extinct but Marsh Tits are caught frequently. For some reason we were reminded of the long-forgotten 'choc' on Willow Tits and started looking at the Marsh Tits. All examined so far have black nasal hairs. The one Willow Tit we did catch pleasingly had chocolate nasal hairs, contrasting strongly with the colour of the crown. This feature is also

Right: Marsh Tit and
below: Willow Tit



illustrated very clearly in Fig 1 of Richard Broughton's *Ringers' Bulletin* article.

To check whether the feature is peculiar to birds in this

part of the country or applicable nationally, we visited the skin collection in BM(NH) Tring. Alas, age and the skinning process seem to damage the nasal hair colour so much that it is not safely identifiable, so more information is needed on birds in the field.

Ringers are asked to look at the nasal hairs of any birds they catch, of either species, and record whether the nasal hairs are black or chocolate brown and email us the results. On most individuals this should be possible, but beware of birds with very abraded plumage or where nasal hairs have become clogged with food or other material. We aim to gather enough information to add to (or not to add to) current identification material.

Chris du Feu & John Clark

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Ringers catching good numbers of Willow Tit are also asked to take note of a further feature currently being investigated by Richard Broughton.

There appears to be a different pattern on the greater coverts of Marsh and Willow Tit, which seems to be quite a good feature, but is subtle and hard

to describe. This may be useful as it seems to work for all ages and sexes, and is not subject to wear or moult etc. It could prove helpful for those young

juveniles in summer. As you can see in the photos, Willow Tits (left) appear to have distinctly darker shafts on the greater coverts, giving a darker centre to the feather and more of a contrast with the margin and tip. On Marsh Tits (far left), they seem more uniform, with less contrast (except for usually a distinctly paler tip). At the moment it's not clear how we might score or record this distinction, but if any ringers catching enough Willow Tits can gather high-resolution photos of open wings then please get in touch.

Richard Broughton

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Out with the old, in with the new

The Ringing Scheme needs to provide rapid and accurate feedback to ringers and the public about ringed birds. This all hinges on having a modern, efficient and robust underlying database structure. Here Bridget Griffin tells us about developments of the HQ database that will pave the way for an online system for ringers.

ORACLE Ringing & Recovery Database

The BTO ORACLE database is one of the largest ringing and recovery databases in Europe, with over 17 million ringing records and 800,000 recoveries – and increasing by the day. It was the first BTO database and was designed and built back in 1995. It has grown over the years to allow storage of local recapture records (now numbering over three million), biometrics and colour-mark data as well as ringing and recovery information. When the database was first set up, electronic storage space was an issue and we lived in a very different world where we still used the Royal Mail! Technology is constantly evolving and with the advent of increased digital communication and social media, the Ringing Scheme must keep up with trends and provide rapid feedback to the public and ringers about ringed birds. This is dependant on having an efficient and robust underlying database, ensuring the integrity of data inputs but also ease of extraction of outputs such as recovery reports.

The Demography Team have therefore been working hard with key staff in the IS Team to completely restructure our database over the last three years. This has been a huge undertaking, especially as we have had to maintain current work at the same time. However, we now have a



new database along with a complex and rigorous validation system, which integrates all the current validation carried out within IPMR and by staff. The new database, with more sophisticated electronic checking of data, will improve efficiency and will hopefully allow us to cope with the ever-increasing stream of data that is sent in.

BRIEF HISTORY OF COMPUTERISATION OF RINGING DATA AT BTO

- 1982 Article in Ringers' Bulletin by Chris Mead envisaging a computerised future for ringing data.
- 1983 Working Group set up and provisional coding scheme published.
- 1986 B-RING launched¹, used to submit computer-generated paper schedules to send to BTO HQ.
- 1995 BTO moved to an ORACLE relational database to store ringing and recovery data, allowing us to accept ringing data electronically via floppy discs.
- 1999 IPMR (Integrated Population Monitoring Reporter) launched.
- 2000 The death of B-RING
- 2009 IPMR used by over 95% of ringers to submit ringing, retrap and recovery records, including biometric, moult and colour-mark information.
- 2010 Initial discussions on a major restructuring of the BTO ORACLE database.
- 2011 Work starts on the new database.
- 2012 Survey sent to all ringers to gather opinions on the most useful and functional parts of IPMR to carry over to an online system.
- 2013 Online requirements document drafted and sent to ringers who volunteered to comment on it.
- 2014 New database online and work to start on online system.

¹For younger ringers, B-RING (which worked on a BBC microcomputer) was the forerunner of IPMR.

Ringling online

The new database is expected to go live in May and you should start to see a difference as responses to data being sent in, 'ring requests' ('blue cards') etc, will be sent out daily, rather than in periodic batches. The final phase of the project will then be to move to an online system for you to submit your data. In 2012 a survey was sent out to all ringers to gather opinions on the most useful and functional parts of IPMR, which also asked what else might be helpful in light of the development of an online system. Many thanks for the 990 responses we received. The feedback was included in a requirements document being used by our web designer to develop the online system. We also consulted ringers for comments and feedback on the requirements document, which were incorporated into the final version.

How will it work?

Once you log on to the online system, you will be able to input or access data via your laptop, desktop or tablet (or smartphone!), but instead of the data being stored locally, you will be linked into the BTO HQ database. You will have access to all your data which you can query, run reports on and export if required. The online system will have built-in validation, as IPMR does, much of which will happen while you are inputting with immediate feedback if there are any possible errors or problems, such as a bird apparently being recaptured before it was ringed. Don't worry if you can't work online, there will be an offline option for those who need it.

Users, permissions & administration

An 'A' permit holder, group or partnership secretary (permit number 'owner') will be able to set up user permissions for other ringers within their team (or anyone else they want to give access to) and will be able to set different access rights for each ringer. Each permit number 'owner' will only have access to data relating to their own permit or group number, unless they are given permission by another 'A' permit holder or secretary. No-one else will be able to access data without the relevant access rights and, who has this permission is decided by the permit number 'owner'.

Permission levels

a) Data inputs

- **Input** data only (usually 'T's and 'C's)
- **Input** and **edit** data (usually 'A's and experienced 'C's)
- **Input, edit** and **flag** for submission to BTO. (In most cases the 'A' permit holder or secretary)







b) Data Outputs

- **View** ringing and recovery records
- **View** and **download** recoveries, ringing, recapture, biometric and colour-mark data
- **View** and **download place** data
- Run totals **reports** by place, species, date, observer etc
- Run ring series allocation **reports**, ring usage etc

When you log on to the system, you will need to specify the permit number for which you want to view/input/edit data. You will only get the access level specified by the permit number 'owner'. The permit number 'owner' will be able to see which user has input or edited data and whether the user has confirmed that these data are now ready to be signed off. They can then do any checks of their own before flagging the data to be accessed by BTO staff and incorporated into the final tables in the database.

To retrap or not to retrap, that is the question

The distinction between a recapture and a control was introduced in 1965 when ringers were asked to keep records of their own local recaptures and only submit them to BTO HQ if the record met one of various criteria, *eg* an interesting longevity, or returning winter visitors. In 1984, *The Ringer's Manual* stated that if local recaptures between ringers were "reported to the Ringing Office time has to be expended on looking up the details – ringing information will then be written on the BRC16 (Eds – older ringers will remember BRC16s) and a photocopy made so that both the ringer and retrapper of the bird have its full details. The receipt of such hand-written BRC16s should be taken as a warning that the two parties should get together with a view to swapping information locally". In 2004, when electronic submissions were the norm for most ringers, the Ringing Committee requested that all retrap data be submitted to BTO. These records are currently loaded on the Recapture table, and bypass the standard recovery processes.

User	Permission level
Group/partnership secretary	
'A' Permit in own name	
Any group/partnership member 'C' Permit 'T' Permit Volunteer inputters Landowner County recorder etc	Sec or 'A' ringer decides but can allow:    

Example of possible permission levels on the new online system



Input records



Edit records and flag for 'submission' to BTO



View records



Full permissions/control



The BTO team working on the new database (l-r: Andrew Joys, Bridget Griffin, Sam Marston and Dorian Moss)

With the new database structure there will no longer be any distinction between retraps and controls as all records of a bird will be stored on one 'Encounters' table. To avoid too many 'ring requests' ('blue cards') being sent out, it will be a great help if you ensure that you have submitted electronic ringing details for all birds before submitting later recaptures.

Record types and coding

In the online system, we are simplifying the terminology and will no longer differentiate between retraps and controls (above). A record of a bird will also be known as an 'encounter' and we will use only two record types (instead of R, C, O, S, E etc): N (new encounter, *ie* the original ringing record) and S (subsequent encounter). This will seem a bit strange at first, but will make life simpler. It will

be important to use the correct codes for captures (*eg* ring replaced, reared in captivity) so that the 'type' of record can be identified.

The way forward

Once ringers are *au fait* with the online system (there will be an offline facility for those without internet access), we will widen its use to members of the public. When this is launched, any recovery submitted online, where we have the ringing data on the database, will generate an instant response with the ringing details, with a further report once the data have been checked.

An online system for nest recording is also currently in development so you will be able to input nest records and ringed pulli together.

The late Chris Mead said "*It may never happen*" but, although it's been a long time coming, it has finally happened, thanks in no small part to Mark Cubitt, David Coker, Chris du Feu and others for the early groundwork and the continued striving by you to grasp new technologies and boldly go where no ringer has gone before...

SITES CHECKING

As part of the process of moving to the new database, a huge amount of data-checking has taken place behind the scenes. We'd like to thank the numerous volunteers who spent long evenings carefully checking thousands of archive sites for us. This will ensure that not only will we have a more efficient database, but it will also be a more accurate one.

Overgrown bills - advice on trimming

Ringers are occasionally faced with birds with varying degrees of overgrown bills and sometimes these can be very extreme. BTO has recently consulted the vets that have advised us previously on this issue and they recommend that **beak trimming should only be undertaken by veterinarians** as there is a significant risk of harm to the bird.

'Tidying up' through trimming pre-release is fraught with potential problems, many of which would have an adverse effect on the bird's welfare. It can be remarkable how well birds cope with these beak abnormalities, so it is important to assess the body condition (*eg* weight, fat score and pectoral muscle score) to determine whether the bird appears to be coping with the deformity. Where the bird's condition causes significant concern, it is advisable that contact be made with a local veterinary surgery to discuss treatment or whether euthanasia would be in the best interest of the bird.



Ringers can further aid our understanding of this and other health issues in birds by contributing to the Garden Wildlife Health project (www.gardenwildlifehealth.org). The website allows people to report sightings (or captures) of sick¹ as well as dead² birds, along with posting photos. This will ensure that all reported incidents are logged and checked by a vet.

¹Sick birds should not be ringed – see *Ringling News* Vol 13, No 1, p 16.

²Note that all dead ringed birds must be reported to BTO using IPMR as usual.

Northumbria RG hits the half-century

Ian Kerr reflects on the first 50 years of NRG



Eric Meek and Mike Nattrass with juvenile Goosanders

Fifty years ago, two youthful ringers wandered into a small wood behind Low Hauxley, at the northern end of Druridge Bay in Northumberland, and found it 'carpeted with Blackbirds'; newly-arrived migrants that had dropped into the woodland and adjoining allotments. Brian Little and Bryan Galloway were looking for a suitable site for a coastal ringing station and this oasis in the open farmland around the village was a big attraction to migrants. This attraction was increased in the 1970s when the surrounding area was left as a moonscape of opencast mining, although after the coal reserves were exhausted in the 1980s, the area was landscaped to create a caravan park, nature reserve and mixed farmland and woodland. The wood was owned by Captain Francis Widdrington and when approached he gave enthusiastic permission for them to start ringing and later gave the wood to the ringers. The Captain apparently had a sweet tooth and a delightful custom arose of annually providing him with a pot of Hexhamshire heather honey from the hives of one of their friends.



More juvenile Goosanders caught on the River North Tyne in July 1972



Setting out to catch Swallows near Hexham with bat fowling nets in the late 1970s

The wood quickly became home to the fledgling Northumbria Ringing Group and one of their first tasks was to construct a Heligoland trap, using spars and netting from the abandoned Monks House trap from nearby Seahouses, ferried to Low Hauxley on the roofs of an Austin A35 and a Morris Minivan. The ringing base was initially the village hall but shortly afterwards a small hut was erected in the wood. Then another, donated by the opencast contractor, was equipped with bunks so the keenest of young ringers could stay overnight and operate from first light.

However, members didn't confine their activities to Low Hauxley and birds were ringed right across Northumberland. One target species was Merlin, now the group's longest-running study. Work in Northumberland and, more recently, on the north Durham moors, has resulted in more than 3,600 pulli being ringed and the project has provided much of the present knowledge about the species. Group members have had to develop tree- and rock-climbing skills to reach nests, been soaked in rivers catching Goosanders and even swum in the sea attempting to net moulting Red-breasted Mergansers at Lindisfarne!

Other long-running projects include the ringing of nestling Peregrines, Kestrels, Goshawks, Tawny Owls and Barn Owls and the group is also responsible for ringing Roseate Terns at England's only breeding site on Coquet Island. More recently, the group has undertaken monitoring of some of the region's newest colonists, including Avocet, Marsh Harrier, Osprey and Red Kite. Best of all, throughout its 50-year history, the group has remained a predominantly amateur set-up with members ringing during evenings, weekends and holidays. A few have gone on to careers in conservation, something they freely admit would never have happened but for the membership of this still-thriving organisation.

In fact, in the 50 years since that fateful day, the group has ringed 323,000 birds (of 209 species) 77,000 of them at Low Hauxley. The breadth of the group's work is reflected in our 2012 ringing totals, by no means the best of years, with the poor weather causing high failure rates among many breeding species. Nevertheless 13,000 birds of 91 species were ringed, including 3,700 Swallow, 1,600 Blue Tit, 1,200 Great Tit, 500 Chiffchaff, 200 Tawny Owl, 79 Roseate Tern, 76 Merlin and 43 Barn Owl.

Brian and Bryan, both now in their seventies, are still very actively involved; Brian, awarded an MBE in 1996 for services to ornithology and the Bernard Tucker Medal in 1997, is the group Chairman and Bryan the Secretary.

Ringling in northeast Turkey

Oliver Slessor

I spent spring 2013 working as 'ringer-in-charge' in northeast Turkey, arguably one of the most unusual and exciting European ringing destinations for bird migration and with some really special European restricted-range species. I was working for the Turkish NGO 'KuzeyDoga Society' who protect birds throughout Turkey.

Ringling took place at two ringing stations, Aras and Lake Kuyucuk, both prime bird-watching sites in Turkey which are important for both migrant and breeding birds. Each site has recorded over 225 bird species and together they have recorded over 300 species (60% of the total number recorded in Turkey). Over 52,000 birds of 181 species have been ringed at the stations. Whilst there I saw 200 species and ringed almost 100.

Aras Ringling Station is in a wetland surrounded by reeds and willows alongside the Aras River. Notable species occurring here include Semi-collared Flycatcher, which are regularly ringed on passage each year. Other exciting species ringed included Siberian Stonechat (of the *armenicus* race), Pied Wheatear, Paddyfield Warbler, Ménéttries's Warbler and Rufous Bush Robin, all with limited ranges in Europe. Caucasian Chiffchaffs regularly pass through Aras on migration and are a real Turkish speciality. I enjoyed the challenge of identifying these, using wing formula to separate them from Common Chiffchaff.

Visible migration at both stations was quite incredible, with a huge diversity of species. At Aras, the raptor migration was very impressive and, as well as seeing large numbers of raptors migrating, we caught and ringed a

variety of species. Using large-mesh mist nets we were able to catch Pallid and Montagu's Harriers, Steppe Buzzards and Levant Sparrowhawks, another speciality for the area.

Lake Kuyucuk is eastern Turkey's first RAMSAR site, attracting large numbers of wildfowl, waders and terns on migration. Ringling commenced over a month later than at Aras, due to a very cold winter, with the lake remaining frozen for longer than usual. It is one of the world's most important stopover sites for Ruddy Shelduck and an important breeding and migration site for White-winged Terns. Quite a number of these Terns were caught and ringed along with several species of wader, the highlight being a Great Snipe.

I certainly enjoyed my ringling in northeast Turkey and also working for KuzeyDoga, where I could pass on my knowledge and expertise to others. It was also enjoyable to work with young people from across Europe, all with a similar passion and interest in birds. I'd highly recommend visiting the area and I doubt there are many other ringling stations in Europe with such high species diversity.



Above, Caucasian Chiffchaff; top right, White-winged Tern; bottom right, Ménéttries's Warbler.

PHOTOS: ALL OLIVER SLESSOR

In 2014, ringling will run at Aras station from 1 March to 15 June and, depending on weather conditions, at Lake Kuyucuk from mid-April to early June. Minimum participation is 15 days, ideally one month or more, and facilities are basic but comfortable. Accommodation is in a guesthouse with five beds, hot shower, kitchen and internet access. Volunteers prepare their own meals with supplies provided by KuzeyDoga. The Society will cover local expenses (food,

accommodation and local transport) for ringers, but non-ringing helpers will need to pay for these. Any ringers coming for the full season will have their return airfare paid for.

Email: lale@kuzeydoga.org
 Websites: www.kuzeydoga.org and www.savearas.org
 Application: www.kuzeydoga.org/index.php/en/volunteership/volunteer-application-form

Unravelling rusticola riddles?

Owen Williams

I am not taken to excessive blasphemy, but confess that there are occasions when I lose control, cursing as yet another Woodcock jumps just as I'm about to net it. There are some dark nights on my ringing site here in Wales where between the hoots of owls and the occasional bark of a distant collie come the muttered curses of a frustrated Woodcock ringer. Things become even more exasperating when I can see that the bird I have just missed had a ring on.

I have caught over 600 Woodcock in the past five years on my main study site; the concentrated ringing effort surprisingly revealing a significant level of winter site fidelity. For example, last winter of 81 adult Woodcock caught 33 were recaptures from the previous winter.

Now that more ringers are concentrating on Woodcock, it is hoped that we can establish whether more areas exhibit such high levels of site fidelity. If this is so, it has implications regarding excessive shooting and its impact on local wintering populations. If the science suggests a change in shooting practice, it is important to adapt accordingly. This is a message that I am keen to pass on to shooters through the talks I give and articles I have written in the shooting press to encourage sustainability into the future. In my experience most shooters are keen to embrace sustainability, reflected in the fact that Woodcock research has benefitted to the tune of £275,000 from shooters' pockets over the past five years.

The high level of site fidelity has opened up the possibility of fitting geolocators to birds on my site, as the chances of recovery are relatively high. Working closely with Andrew Hoodless of the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) the Woodcock Network has purchased a number of geolocators to add to those provided by GWCT,



EX28930 (above) when retrapped in January 2012, showing the back-mounted geolocator.



and over the past couple of years 34 have been fitted to birds on my site.

On 7 January 2012 it was a poor night for catching, with wet ground underfoot making my approach sound like a herd of water buffalo, and I had only managed to catch three out of 25 birds seen. As I headed back to my car at midnight, I decided to have a last look over a field that I had walked earlier in the night. I flashed the lamp over the field and there in the distance came the bright reflection of a pair of Woodcock eyes, so I set off with lamp and net at the ready. As I approached the Woodcock hunkered down and tensed. Holding my breath against a beating heart (yes after catching over 1,100 Woodcock it still gets me excited), I made the last few cautious steps and placed the net over the bird.

With the lamp now off and by the dim light of my head torch, I removed the bird from the net and on doing so felt a peculiar bump on its back and on closer inspection realised that I had managed to retrieve my first geolocator. After allowing myself a stifled 'YES!', I removed the device, processed the bird and thanked it for carrying this tracker all the way to its breeding grounds and back to within yards of where I had fitted it.

Later analysis of the data showed that EX28930 left west Wales on 29 March, next stop Berlin where it rested for a week. It then headed north through Denmark where after another short stop it continued to its breeding grounds near Bjournrud, Sweden. On 25 October, it left on its autumn migration, passing through southwest Norway and briefly pausing near to Alnwick Estate, Northumberland. Coincidentally, this is where the first Woodcock ringing project was initiated in 1891, by the 7th Duke of Northumberland. After leaving Northumberland on 11 November, by midday the next day EX28930 was back on site in Wales. Such rewards as this make all the effort of ringing Woodcock on dark, wet and often cold nights so worthwhile.

Anyone interested in the work of the Woodcock Network, or learning how to catch Woodcock is welcome to get in touch.

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News from the Ringing Committee

Ken Smith

The Ringing Committee (RIN) met on 5 October 2013 at Thetford. The minutes of the meeting are on the ringers' only pages of the BTO website so you can read about the full range of things discussed and decisions made. In this note I will cover a few key items.

The most significant item was the discussion on communications with ringers. A group of us (Barnaby Briggs, Dave Leech, Paul Standcliffe and I) presented a paper to the Committee covering the full range of communications with ringers. To sum up what was quite a complicated story we were concerned that the positive messages about ringing and the contributions of ringers were often lost amongst the necessary communications about rules and regulations. Some ringers feel that the BTO don't value them and equally the BTO are not able to promote some of the amazing stories associated with ringing. The paper contained ideas on how to improve the situation and generated a good discussion amongst members of RIN. BTO management has recognised the problem and will be devoting extra resources to ringing. We are taking advantage of an internal staff move to restructure the team and to give a clear remit and extra resources for communications. As a first step Allison Kew has been appointed to a new post taking a lead on aspects of licensing and regulation work. This will allow other members of staff more time to run the scheme and to improve communications.

The same group have been asked to look at training for the next RIN in April. Although we normally think that training just concerns the technicalities of ringing safely and to a high standard, the whole area of why we ring and how we get the best scientific value from our ringing is something that has received less attention. I am most happy to receive any comments you have on our current training arrangements to feed into the RIN discussions at the end of April.

Some of you will have been aware of issues of ring size with Yellowhammer, Dunnock and Great Tit – should they be 'A' or 'B'? RIN discussed the results of an excellent piece of work by Allison Kew looking at the closed dimensions of A rings with a range of ringing pliers. It turned out to be quite a complicated story (see opposite), but we concluded that the ring size recommendations for Yellowhammer and Dunnock should be changed to 'B' with discretion on Great Tit and Nightingale.

I was very pleased that RIN agreed that we should invite 'T' and 'C' permit holders to be represented on the Committee (see page 16). I am looking forward to their contributions to the work of the committee.

Every year RIN receives a report from the Special Methods Technical Panel (SMTP) and the report for

2012 was discussed. The main conclusion was that the demand for the use of special methods (*eg* satellite tags and geolocators) has increased massively over the last few years and, because the technology is advancing so fast, is likely to grow at an even greater rate in the future. It is essential that we make full use of these technologies, but do so in a safe way. We all owe a debt of gratitude to the members of the SMTP (Rhys Green, Brian Cresswell, Chris Perrins, Andrew Routh, Sean Walls and Rory Wilson) for their hard work on our behalf. Chris Perrins will be standing down at the end of 2013, to be replaced by Tim Guilford, and a big thanks is due to Chris for his inputs to the Panel from its inception in the 1980s. To ease the workload, the Panel have also appointed a number of expert advisors (Mark Bolton, Malcolm Burgess, Chris Hewson and Duncan Orr-Ewing).

In my last article I asked for your views on structured garden ringing. Thank you for the many positive (and no negative) responses I received. We will be exploring this further over the next few months.



At the BTO annual conference in Swanwick in December 2013, we were pleased to see two long-standing ringers receiving Tucker Medals, awarded for 'outstanding service to the Trust'.

The first was awarded to Anne Brenchley (far left, presented by outgoing BTO President Barbara Young), who has participated in a whole range of BTO surveys, serving as the

Regional Rep for East Clwyd from 2000. She has also served on BTO Council and the Regional Network Committee.

The second was awarded to Ron Summers (near left, with Bruce Lynch of Tay RG), one of the founder members of Tay Ringing Group and an active ringer with Highland Ringing Group. Much of this work has been published in collaboration with amateur ringers and fieldworkers and it is this that makes Ron stand out amongst his peers.



Do your 'A' rings wobble?

Allison Kew explains why wobbling rings are good

In the last *Ringling News*, we told you about some major changes to the ring-size list and that we were looking at species that take 'B' rings as pulli. These new changes, for Yellowhammer and Dunnock and for Great Tit, Nightingale and Reed Bunting pulli, are documented on page 14 and an updated ring-size list can be printed from www.bto.org/ring-sizes. This article explains the background to these changes.

Over the last five years, we have received seven reports of birds with a dead foot and a further 20 describing varying degrees of leg damage. Some of these reports refer to 'several' birds or 'frequently'. The reported cause is an overly tight-fitting 'A' ring, often with reports of an accumulation of mud, dead skin or other detritus inside the ring. Yellowhammer has been the primary species of concern, but there were also problems reported with Great Tit, Dunnock, Nightingale and Reed Bunting. Reports were patchy, however, with many ringers having no concerns. Most notably, four of these five species are ones where the ring size for pulli is 'B', indicating that they have a relatively thick tarsus. These issues were worrying, as the frequency of reporting was going up, so we decided to investigate further.

Tarsus measurements (Fig 1) show that most Great Tits and Dunnocks

would take an 'A' ring (2.3 mm internal diameter). However, 10% of Great Tits and 33% of Dunnocks measured should have had a 'B' ring fitted and should have measurements reported to BTO HQ with the ringing details.

Ring shape may be important

We also experimented with a range of pliers and ring sizes and two distinct types of 'second squeeze' to close rings to see what shape they produced. In summary, we found that while no 'A' ring closed as a perfect, 2.3 mm diameter cylinder, a very hard second squeeze, combined with certain sets of pliers, resulted in distinctly elliptical rings: at the extreme, one ring had a minimum diameter of 2.03 mm. Most significant was the strength of the second squeeze though a 'standard' squeeze did not always fully butt the ring.

Ringers' Manual says that: "Ideally, a ring should fit closely to a bird's leg, such that it can move freely up and down (not necessarily over the whole length



DEREK BELSEY

of the tarsus), and be rotated slightly from side to side." This is the 'wobble factor'. It may be that this wobble factor is important in helping to shift soil, shed skin and other detritus that gets inside the ring. As a ring becomes more elliptical, particularly on a fatter tarsus, it wobbles less and therefore detritus may be more likely to build up and cause the ring to further tighten, which may in turn inflame the leg and cause the reported problems. This is likely to be worse in particularly 'sticky' soils and in birds that adopt a 'shuffling' feeding technique. This would, in part, explain the patchy nature of the problems reported.

Ringling Committee considered these results and concluded that it was likely that a combination of factors was causing the reported problems and action was needed. They were also concerned to ensure that a hard enough second squeeze was used to ensure the rings butted fully without making the ring too elliptical.

The ring-size changes have therefore been made. You might also want to experiment with your 'A' ring closing technique with the aim of getting the ring as round as possible without leaving a gap. You don't need to check the internal diameter, as external diameter measurements will give a feel for how round it is.

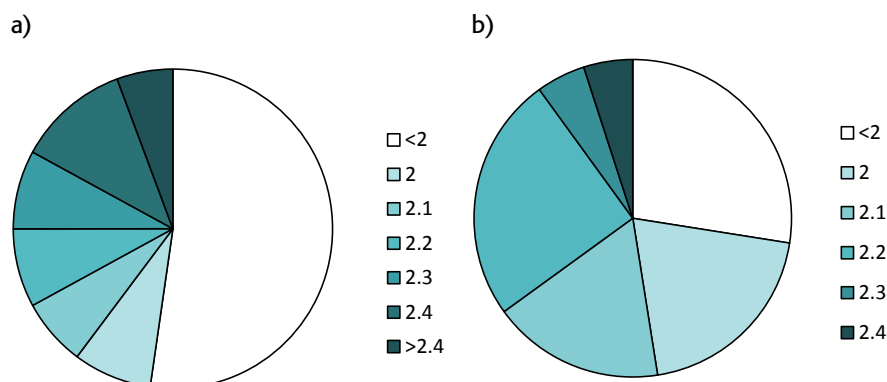


Figure 1: Proportion of maximum tarsus size in a) Great Tit (sample size 40) and b) Dunnock (sample size 54).

Demographic targeting

Rob Robinson

A couple of years ago, we launched our 'demographic targeting' strategy (*Ringing News* Vol 12, No 10, p 3). Its aim is to provide guidance on how best to collect data to help understand how our bird populations are changing. The full strategy document is available on the BTO website, but the key aim is to be able to generate trends on productivity and survival to highlight conservation issues. Part of the thinking behind this is that

it is better to have 10 ringers (or nest-recorders) across the country working on one species than to have those 10 individuals or groups working on different species. With several studies on the same species we are much more likely to be able to draw useful conclusions. Target species were selected to reflect the range of habitats occurring in Britain & Ireland. We expect that consistent patterns of productivity or survival in species occupying similar habitats will

help identify wider environmental change. For example, the way that changes in the timing of egg-laying from nest record data were one of the first demonstrations of the biological impacts of climate change, or how analysis of farmland bird data helped identify the role of winter food supplies in their declines.

The question then is 'how are we doing?', and this was discussed at the last meeting of Ringing Committee (RIN). Having initiated the strategy,

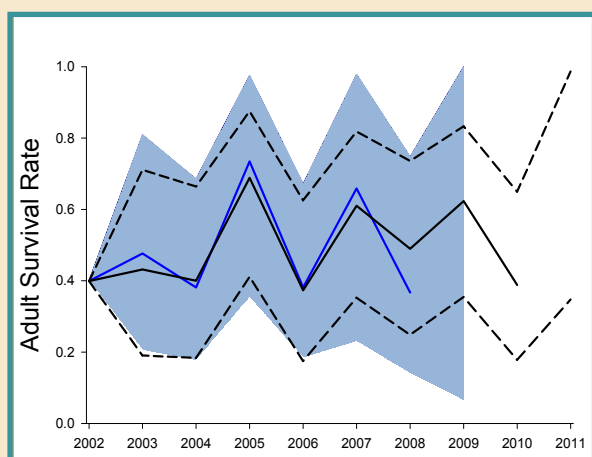


Figure 1. Adult survival rates for Dipper estimated in 2010 (blue) and in 2012 (black). The inclusion of more sites in 2012 produced better estimates, as the new confidence limits (dashed lines) are closer together than the old limits (blue shading). Note that survival is from the year indicated to the next year.

Figure 2. Precision of the annual estimate of productivity for Blackcap. As the number of nest records has increased so has our confidence in the annual estimate of Blackcap productivity. The red dots represent the last five years.

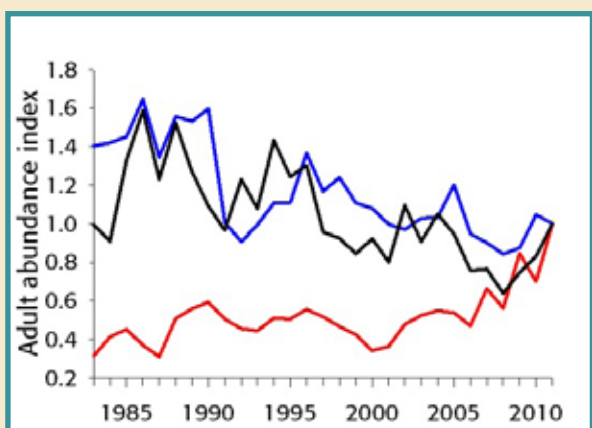
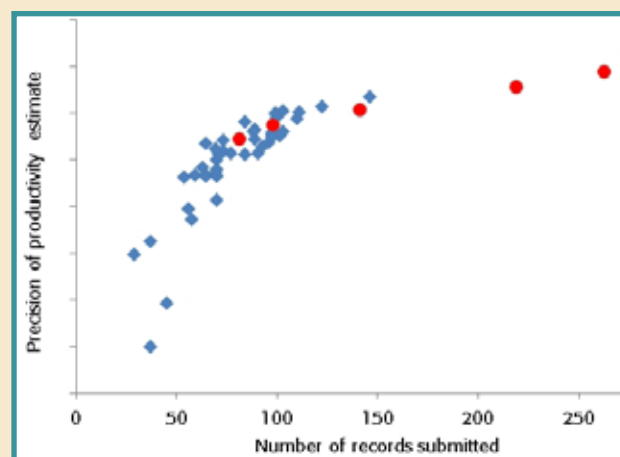


Figure 3. Regional CES trends in Bullfinch abundance. Populations in the north of Britain (red) are increasing while those in the southeast (blue) and southwest (black) are declining.

RIN are keen that we keep an eye on progress, and that we improve our monitoring and hence the results we are able to deliver. The Retrapping Adults for Survival project (RAS) is a key element of the strategy, with focused studies enabling us to monitor a much wider range of species. Thanks to the efforts of many ringers and ringing groups, the number of high-quality RAS studies continues to increase, as the number of new survival trends reported on in *RAS News* each year shows. And with more studies on each species we can get a better estimate of these trends (see the Dipper example in Fig 1).

Similarly, the number of Nest Record submissions has increased markedly in recent years, with the result that productivity can be measured more effectively (Fig 2). Numbers of Constant Effort Sites, though, have not increased so much, which means that we still cannot monitor species such as Yellowhammer and Kingfisher – with just a few more CE Sites we should be able to include them in the annual trends.

But more sites and effort is not just about more precise analyses, though this is clearly important. Increasingly, we are recognising that bird populations in some parts of Britain

& Ireland are faring much better than others, as the recent Atlas has shown. For example, many bird populations are increasing in Scotland, but many are undergoing sharp declines in the south and east of Britain. Is this a result of changes in climate or land-use, or a combination of the two? By comparing populations in each of these areas we can start to untangle some of these effects (Fig 3). Not only will this result in better information to guide conservation policies, but it will also help demonstrate the value of ringing and nest-recording.

Young Bird Observatories Volunteer Fund

In spring 2013 the BTO was proud to launch the Young Bird Observatories Volunteer Fund, helped by the very generous support of Jack and Sylvia Aspinall and other supporters. YBOVF aims to help upcoming ornithologists spend some time at one of the British or Irish Bird Observatories.

That year, 17 applications were received and a committee (comprising Nick Moran, Jez Blackburn, Steve Stansfield, Mike Archer and Dave Fletcher) reviewed these before awarding 16 grants of between £75 and £155 (totalling £1,650); the size of the grant being dependent on the length

of stay and distance travelled. The worthy recipients spent time volunteering at Bardsey, Gibraltar Point, Portland, Skokholm and Spurn Bird Observatories. There they were able to join the wardens in a range of day-to-day Obs activities, from ringing and 'vis-mig' counts to sea-watching and more mundane domestic tasks.

YBOVF will operate again in 2014 and the committee are open to applications. This is a great opportunity for more

young people to benefit from this valuable experience and hopefully inspire them to become long-term supporters of the valuable work of Bird Observatories.

For details of how to apply, visit www.bto.org/young-fund



PORTLAND BIRD OBSERVATORY, CALF OF MAN BO & BARDSEY BO: BIRD OBSERVATORIES COUNCIL



REMINDERS AND UPDATES

Ring size changes

Ring-size changes since the updated list in *Ringling News* Vol 13, No 2, pp 10–12):

	Ad	Pulli
Dunnoek	B	
Great Tit	A~B..... B	
Nightingale	A~B..... B	
Reed Bunting	A..... B	
Yellowhammer	B	

Ring-size corrections

Two species had typographical errors in the latest published list (*Ringling News* Vol 13, No 2, pp10–12) – apologies. Ring sizes should have been:

	Ad	Pulli
Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler	A	
Ruff	$D_2=D$ ♂	$D_2=D$
	$C=C_2$ ♀	

Other 'A' ring issues

Following the change of ring size documented above, we've received suggestions for a couple of other species that would also merit reassessment, which we will be doing. As ring-size changes are only brought in based on good evidence, we are interested in hearing from anyone who thinks that sizes for any other species should change. We are particularly interested in other species that take a B ring as pulli but an A ring as adult (eg Blackcap, Bullfinch and Woodlark), or where a significant number of a larger race are known to occur (eg 'Greenland' Wheatear). Any such suggestions should be accompanied by a set of tarsus measurements; ideally minimum and maximum tarsus measurement, age, sex, race (if appropriate) and date. Please send measurements to Allison Kew.

Email: allison.kew@bto.org

Public liability insurance for BTO volunteers

BTO carries public liability insurance for BTO fieldwork, to cover liabilities to third parties (ie people not involved in the fieldwork) for their injury, loss or damage. To be covered under this insurance, the primary purpose of what the ringer or other BTO volunteer is doing must be BTO work. For example, catching and removing birds from a building as the owner wants them removed is not covered, even if the birds are ringed on release.

Note that the BTO's public liability insurance does not provide personal accident cover for volunteers, as this would be prohibitively expensive.

Marsh Harrier sexing

The diagram of foot-span measurement for Marsh Harrier (to determine sex of nestlings) in the last *Ringling News* (Vol 13, No 2, p 8) did not show the best method. Ringers who have perfected this technique recommend stroking the talons to get the toes to open, then slowly and carefully stretching

them until they can be held open by the claws for the measurement to be made (see photo). The technique requires two people and is best taken using callipers.

Hardey, J., Crick, H., Wernham, C., Riley, H., Etheridge, B., Thompson, D. (2009) *Raptors: a field guide to surveys and monitoring*. The Stationery Office, Edinburgh.



Using calipers to measure footspan on Marsh Harrier nestlings.



Comparison of male and female Marsh Harrier feet, showing measurement location.

Schedule 1 conditions

Schedule 1 licence holders are reminded to read and follow the conditions and notes on their licence, as these may be different for each country. It is also essential that you have the landowner's permission to ring birds (as for all ringing activities) and for Schedule 1 species this may also be required for monitoring purposes when just recording nest contents or viewing from a distance. Also please ensure that you are operating in the area specified on your licence, whether by county or one or more 10-km squares.

ANDY THOMPSON

SIMON BILLSWA

NOTICEBOARD

Potter traps for sale

Two sizes (12" and 16") are available, also Chardonneret and other traps on request. For prices please contact me.

Contact: John Mawer
Phone: 01652 628583
Email: johnrmawer@hotmail.com

RINGING OPPORTUNITIES

Ringing in southwest Spain

Ringers are required to continue the ringing programme in southwest Spain from April to October 2014 (settled weather outside these periods is too unpredictable). Experience of foreign ringing isn't necessary and all licence

holders and helpers are welcome. Please email me for further details of accommodation, transport, availability, location, charges and a full breakdown of the programme throughout the ringing period.

Contact: Richard Banham
Email: dr.r.j.banham@gmail.com

Ringing in Portugal

Experienced ringers are invited to ring during the autumn migration period with A Rocha in the Algarve, Portugal. 'A' or 'C' permit holders are welcome between 1 September and 15 November to ring mainly migrating passerines as well as resident

species. Trainees may also attend if accompanied by an 'A' permit holder. Visiting ringers are responsible for their own travel costs and are asked to pay a small charge for accommodation and full board at A Rocha Field Study Centre. The cost will depend on dates and duration of stay and whether dormitory or twin rooms are required (for more information visit our website). There is also the opportunity to join the A Rocha team ringing Storm Petrels between late May and early July.

Contact: Marcial Felgueiras
Email: portugal@arocha.org
Website: www.arocha.org/pt-en/

2014 RINGING COURSES

7–10 August – Chew Valley Ringing Course, Somerset

Contact: Mike Bailey
Email: mike.bailey2947@btinternet.com
Phone: 01761 471000

8–11 August – Teifi Ringing Course, Pembrokeshire

Contact: Kelvin Jones
Email: kelvin.jones@bto.org
Phone: 01766 513574

18–21 September – Isle of Wight Ringing Course

Contact: Anthony Roberts
Email: roberts.haseley@gmail.com
Phone: 01983 865420

17–19 October – Mist-netting waders and using traps

This weekend course will have an emphasis on mist-netting waders and catching non-passerines in a whoosh net and a variety of other traps (Potter traps, raft traps, walk-in traps and duck traps). It will be held in a new field centre on the Suffolk coast, offering full-board accommodation.

Contact: Rodney West
Email: rodwest59@btinternet.com
Web: www.stannyfarm.org

East of England Ringers' Conference

29 March 2014 – Duxford, Cambridgeshire
The programme will focus on ringing and nest recording, including talks on Corn Buntings, Tree Sparrows, Siskins and satellite-tracking gulls.

Southwest Ringers' Conference

5 April 2014 – Seaton, Devon
Talks include current work on Shelduck, godwits, Manx Shearwaters, Pied Flycatchers, Tree Sparrows and the formation of a new ringing group.

Northeast Ringers' Conference

7 March 2015 – Will be co-hosted by East Dales and the Tees Ringing Groups. Village Hall at Bishop Monkton near Ripon. Details to be confirmed.

More details and booking forms for 2014 conferences are on the BTO website.

We are delighted to have these three conferences during 2014 and 2015, but we'd like to have conferences in the southeast, the Midlands and the northwest. If there are any groups interested in getting involved or that just want some more information, please contact Diana de Palacio.
Email: ringing.conferences@bto.org

STOP PRESS

Since the start of the year (to early March), we have received details of 148 ringed Puffins in France and Spain, by far the highest number we have ever recorded over this period (average <3 per year). There are also large numbers of dead auks (including over 100 Razorbills) being reported along western coasts, and smaller numbers of dead Shags (perhaps not at elevated levels).

This dead Razorbill (M91165) is typical of the seabirds found dead following the recent storms. Ringed as a chick on Sanda Island in 1997, it was one of 40 birds found washed ashore at Watergate Bay, Cornwall, on St Valentine's Day.



NEWQUAY BEACH CARE

Ann Hardman 1931–2014

We are very sad to tell you that Ann Hardman, familiar to ringers for her work organising the Ringing & Migration conference for many years, died on 2 March 2014. An obituary will appear in the next issue of *Ringing News*.



BTO COLLECTION

'T' and 'C' representatives

Following its meeting in October 2013, Ringing Committee agreed to invite a 'T' and a 'C' permit holder to its meetings to represent the issues and views of other 'T's and 'C's. These non-voting posts will initially run for two years and a specific agenda item at each meeting will offer them a platform to voice these issues. We are therefore pleased to introduce here your two new representatives; Rosie Walton and Richard Anderton.

Rosie Walton

I was introduced to bird ringing during my Masters degree in Conservation and Biodiversity at Leeds University in 2009. Since then I have regularly mist-netted with a number of ringers in North Yorkshire, Cleveland and Durham, as well as gaining experience of seabird ringing and traps elsewhere. This has allowed me to meet a wide range of trainees.

I began ringing in my early twenties and regularly ring with 'T' and 'C' permit holders from < 18 to 50+. As well as representing trainees, I would like to represent younger ringers. After four years, I believe I have experienced many of the highs and lows of being a trainee, which will help me to represent trainees on the Committee.



Richard Anderton

I have been ringing for nearly three years and gained a 'C' permit a year ago. I ring regularly with Treswell Wood IPM Group so I am immersed in a long-standing ringing operation, actively contributing to scientific research. However, I have also sought experience of other habitats and ringing groups including cannon-netting with WWRG and assisting with CES and RAS with Lothian RG. I also led a Nightjar study with Birklands RG last year which involved tagging Nightjars with GPS/VHF radio tags and analysing the data to increase understanding of foraging and commuting movements.

I believe my enthusiasm for ringing and research will allow me to contribute to discussions at Ringing Committee from the perspective of a 'C' permit holder.



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Email: rosie-walton@hotmail.com

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Email: r.j.anderton@hotmail.co.uk