

***BIRD RINGING AT SWADDYWELL PIT NATURE
RESERVE***

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Cover photo: Male Reed Bunting taken by Steve Dudley at Farcet Fen, Cambs

INTRODUCTION

This is the first report on bird ringing at Swaddywell Pit Nature Reserve, Cambs and includes data on birds ringed in February 2005 and February 2006.

Birds are caught using mist nets set vertically between poles to catch birds in flight. They are then ringed, aged, sexed, measured and weighed before being released unharmed. The light metal rings do not interfere in any way with the birds' normal behaviour and are the equivalent of a human being wearing a wrist watch. Handling birds for ringing provides an ideal opportunity to gather data and all the information is held on computer at the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) office in Thetford, Norfolk. Much has been discovered about birds by watching and counting them but such methods rarely allow birds to be identified as individuals. This is essential if we are to learn about how long they live and when and where they move, questions that are vital for bird conservation. Ringing provides a harmless and reliable method of identifying birds as individuals.

All ringers are required to be licensed under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and undergo extensive training over several years to achieve the exacting standards laid down by the BTO. The British ringing scheme demands the highest standards of any scheme in the world.

At this site, the principal ringer is Chris Hughes who is a BTO trainer and assessor of ringing standards. The other main ringer is Daniel Piec who has a conditional licence at present which indicates that he has reached a sufficient level of competence to allow him to ring unsupervised whilst still under the overall control of his trainer. Katie Fuller, who ringed here in 2005 as a trainee ringer has decided to concentrate on digital photography instead! Ringing is not for everyone – the early mornings can be very demanding – but the rewards are enormous, not only in the sheer joy of being able to examine these wonderful creatures at close quarters but also in the satisfaction in knowing that all the data helps to build a picture of the status of our wild birds.

Way back in January 2005, Katie phoned me to say that the Peterborough Bird Club monthly newsletter was indicating good numbers of buntings and Tree Sparrows at Swaddywell so contact was duly made with Richard Astle and

2005

5 February 2005

An exploratory session was held with two nets (2 x 60') set amongst the brambles to the left of the gate and close to the adjacent field. A single 30' net was also set next to the feeding station. The two 60' nets were set in an 'L' shape and caught most of the buntings and Tree Sparrows that morning. The net by the feeder caught the vast majority of the tits. Details of birds caught are as follows:-

Species	Number ringed
Dunnock	3
Blackbird	2
Song Thrush	1
Blue Tit	33
Great Tit	12
Tree Sparrow	7
Chaffinch	4
Greenfinch	1
Goldfinch	1
Yellowhammer	18
Reed Bunting	67
Total	149

The catch of 67 Reed Buntings in one session was, by any standards, exceptional and to put this in some sort of context, for the years 2003- 2005 at nearby Bainton Gravel Pits, I ringed a total of 91 birds *over three years*. Clearly this species plus the Yellowhammers had benefited from the game cover in the adjacent field as did the Blue and Great Tits from the feeding station. Two of the Blue Tits were caught again by other ringers at Ailsworth Heath, just south of Swaddywell. One was recaptured in September 2005, the other's full details are still awaited but it does indicate some movement between sites and some possible overwintering at Swaddywell due to the provision of a reliable food source.

Unfortunately, due to work commitments, no further ringing sessions were possible over this period.

2006

Having gained permission to ring once more at the site, three sessions were held in February, the intention being to ring regularly up to the end of March to try and establish if the large flocks of buntings were faithful to the site or birds taking short term advantage of the food supplies. Richard Astle and I made a site visit in late January to establish the potential positions for any nets. The best site was once more around the brambles near the entrance to the reserve and this was fenced off temporarily to deny access to the sheep and cattle. At this preliminary visit it was noted that maize set as game cover was still in the adjacent field and large flocks of buntings and sparrows were seen wheeling around the site.

4 February 2006

This first session was mainly to set up the net rides once again and ensure everything was in order for a session the following day. I arranged to collect keys to the site and, after a modest amount of 'gardening' I set up a 60' net. This was left in place whilst I

moved round the corner to clear the site for a 40' net. Despite me being very close to the net, within a few minutes I'd caught around a dozen birds so I decided to leave the 60' in place and ring for a couple of hours. The results are shown below:-

Species	Number ringed
Dunnock	4
Tree Sparrow	10
Yellowhammer	7
Reed Bunting	47
Total	68

Once again, Reed Buntings were the predominant species caught and during this short session, only one of the birds caught earlier in the day was caught again (known as a 'same day retrap'). The maize in the adjacent field had been cut down since the preliminary visit but was still lying on the ground.

5 February 2006

The day dawned foggy and cool and two nets, a 60' and 40' were set up in an L shape around the bramble. Both nets were in place by 0700. Daniel Piec joined me for this session as did students from Leicester University who were visiting the site to study the variety of habitats and management strategies employed. One of the earliest birds caught was a marauding male Sparrowhawk who obviously has this particular area on his radar. This bird, a second year male was duly ringed and released. As before, we were catching good numbers of Reed Buntings with Yellowhammers and Tree Sparrows sprinkled in too but the adult female Green Woodpecker was a surprise. One had been heard yaffling earlier on but none had been seen anywhere near the nets. Later in the morning, a smart adult male Kestrel was also caught and ringed – and gave Daniel a rough time into the bargain!

Birds caught that morning were:-

Species	Number ringed
Sparrowhawk	1
Kestrel	1
Green Woodpecker	1
Dunnock	2
Tree Sparrow	21
Greenfinch	1
Goldfinch	1
Yellowhammer	18
Reed Bunting	75 + 1 retrap = 76
Total	121 + 1 retrap = 122

Reed Buntings once again dominated proceedings. There were two same day retraps of Reed Buntings together with a bird originally ringed at Bainton, Cambs as an adult

male on 13 May 2004. Examination of the bird at that time established that it was breeding at or close by Bainton and when it was recaptured at Swaddywell, it would have been at least 3 years old. Birds normally caught away from the site where they were originally ringed are referred to as 'Controls', unless the original site is less than 5km away, which Bainton is. It is therefore classed as a 'Retrap'. There were only two same day retraps and both were Reed Buntings. It was also very encouraging to ring 21 Tree Sparrows on the day and this, together with the 10 ringed the day before, represents a strong local presence – at least in winter. These birds are generally understood to be sedentary although recent ringing recoveries of birds moving over 100km between sites might indicate a change of behaviour. The provision of nest boxes on the reserve will hopefully prove to be beneficial.

10 February 2006

The 60/40' L shape nets were set up again and later in the morning, a single 30' was set up near the feeders. What became apparent very quickly was that the flocks of sparrow and buntings had disappeared, the reason being presumably that the food source had gone as the maize had been ploughed in since the last visit on the 5th. The lack of birds was reflected in the total catch which was:-

Species	Number ringed
Dunnock	1
Blue Tit	1
Reed Bunting	2
Total	4

A walk round the site established that most of the buntings had moved on. The previous week, as well as catching good numbers of these species, there were clearly many more feeding in the damp scrub in the quarry. This area was devoid of buntings on the 10th and, apart from a small party of around 10 Tree Sparrows seen near the feeding station, lots of these birds had moved on too. Clearly the game cover is a major factor in attracting birds to the area over the winter period and as soon as this had been ploughed in, the birds left.

RECOVERIES

Two birds ringed at Swaddywell have been recovered so far and one bird ringed elsewhere has been caught here. As explained above, birds recaptured by ringers more than 5km from their original ringing site are referred to as 'Controls'. Birds caught again at the same site where they were ringed or less than 5km from the original site are referred to as 'Retraps'. Because all three of the birds above had moved less than 5km, they are all classed as retraps. Despite this, the local movements are interesting nonetheless. The Blue Tits were caught again by a team of RSPB researchers who are ringing at Ailsworth Heath and Castor Hanglands. The bird retrapped in September 2005 may well have been a breeding bird from that area that overwintered or passed through Swaddywell the previous February. It is quite possible that the Blue Tits were moving around in a winter flock and two of the 'Ailsworth' birds were trapped on 5 February 2005.

The Reed Bunting is also interesting, if not surprising, as I had expected to catch Bainton ringed birds at Swaddywell. A link, albeit tenuous at present, has been made between the two sites.

CUMULATIVE TOTALS

The table below records the cumulative totals of birds ringed at Swaddywell to date:-

Species	Number ringed
Sparrowhawk	1
Kestrel	1
Green Woodpecker	1
Dunnock	10
Blackbird	2
Song Thrush	1
Blue Tit	34
Great Tit	12
Tree Sparrow	38
Chaffinch	4
Greenfinch	2
Goldfinch	2
Yellowhammer	45
Reed Bunting	191
Total	344

FUTURE PLANS

I had originally intended to ring regularly throughout the winter period to try to identify whether the sparrows and buntings were remaining faithful to the site or were of a transient population. On reflection, I left it too late and the removal of the game cover, which clearly is a major source of food and shelter, meant that the vast majority of these birds left the site in early February. My proposal for the winter of 2006/07 is to commence ringing as soon as the birds' populations start to build up and to try and ring regularly until the game cover is removed again in 2007. It would be particularly interesting to ring during the shooting season to gauge the impact of the 'disturbance'. My unscientific view at present is that the benefits of the game cover etc and the feeding/shelter opportunities that provides far outweighs any disturbance that may occur from time to time. Some useful data has already been gained from the ringing so far and the number of Tree Sparrows, Yellowhammers and Reed Buntings ringed is significant. In fact, most ornithological acquaintances of mine are truly astonished at the numbers of birds on the site and the numbers of Reed Buntings in particular. To contextualise the figures, in 2004 (the latest year for which national ringing totals are available), 3369 Tree Sparrows, 3752 Yellowhammers and 11181 Reed Buntings were ringed. These were free flying adult/juvenile birds and exclude those ringed as nestlings. Although the figures are not comparable in any way, had a complete ringing programme been undertaken, the mind boggles at how many of

these three species would have been ringed. Perhaps we'll get a better idea next winter.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am extremely grateful to the Langdyke Countryside Trust for permission to trap and ring birds on this site and wish to express my sincere thanks, particularly to Richard Astle for all his help and support.

I am hopeful that this is the start of a long term winter ringing project and that some useful information can be provided, not only for Trust records but also to add to our understanding nationally of some of our more threatened birds.

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27 February 2006