

Bird Ringing in Mayo

This page mainly supplies information about the ringing activities of the *resident* ringers in Mayo and may not necessarily contain details of activities by visiting ringers, NGO's or state bodies as this information can, for various reasons, be difficult to access. It is therefore by no means comprehensive, but is instead intended to give the reader a general impression of the ringing projects taking place in the county. Updates will be added at regular intervals to this page which will contain more details of these studies with regards to numbers, recoveries, results etc.

As with all scientific studies, bird ringing is best done with a regular study, or studies of targeted species (Twite or gulls for example) or sites (rural garden, farmland, woodland etc) so that accurate and consistent samples can be taken for analysis. **Every** bird ringed, and indeed every biometric measurement recorded on that bird, is sent to the BTO (British Trust for Ornithology) and stored on that organisation's database from which many different national, international or individual species studies are carried out at any one time. Ireland does not have enough ringers to justify its own separate scheme, so our ringed birds are incorporated into the 'British and Irish' Ringing Scheme which is run by the BTO.

Local Ringing projects/Ringing

In 2006 a three year project was started by Eoin McGreal (and supported by the NPWS) to study the breeding success of adult, and survival rates and dispersal of juvenile Black-headed and Common gulls on Lough Mask by means of colour ringing the pulli (nestlings) of these two species. To date, 1098 Black-headed and 260 Common Gulls have been ringed, each with a unique, black four-letter coded yellow darvic ring on the left leg and a standard BTO metal ring on the right leg. The use of darvic colour rings has revolutionised the recovery and reporting of ringed birds, this study being no different. To date, there have been about 150 sightings of Black-headed and 80 sightings of Common gulls with our rings on. Black-headed gulls disperse westwards and southwards as first year birds, as far south as Iberia (Spain/Portugal) from where we have already had sightings of six different individuals in winter months. And, one of these individuals has since been recorded back in Ireland.

Common Gulls by contrast appear to stay much closer to home with all re-sightings so far coming from within Ireland, but again with a south/westerly bias from re-sightings.



Colour ringed Black-headed Gull ©Mícheál Caséy

These two species are said to breed in their third year of life and this has been proven by the fact that several birds ringed in 2006 were noted back in their natal colonies in the breeding season of 2008. The longevity record for these species from ringing records currently stands at nearly 28 years, that is to say the date from an individual bird's first capture to its recapture or death. So, with any luck, we'll be hearing from some of these birds for many years to come!

A much more urgent study taking place, mainly in Mayo, is the one involving Twite, run by Derek McLoughlin. A species on the very edge of its breeding range, there are now probably less than 100 breeding pairs left in Ireland and so it might only take a 'small' - not to the birds! - catastrophe for this charismatic little bird to disappear from the Irish landscape forever. Although Mayo might be regarded as the species 'stronghold' in Ireland, there are still only 20 – 30 proven breeding pairs in the county. Just over 430 birds have been caught and (mostly) individually colour-ringed to date in Mayo, with a further 70 birds in Donegal. One of the Donegal birds was later re-sighted and photographed on the west coast of Scotland, showing us that, in fact, at least some of 'our' wintering birds are not actually from the small resident population.



Colour-ringed Twite

One aspect of ringing birds often overlooked, but perhaps the most important and rewarding of all, is the ringing of pulli (nestlings) in the nest. This requires a skill that was once 'natural' to most young boys when I was growing up, with a lot of youngsters, myself included, having egg collections of their own. With these once inherent skills lost – and of course egg collecting is illegal - it is now necessary for ringers that want to do this type of ringing to have to train for a special endorsement to their license. This is one of my favourite ringing activities and every year I usually spend as much time as possible between the months of April – July out 'nesting' around Mayo looking for everything from the fairly easy to find nests such as Blackbird, to the more difficult like Meadow Pipit and on to the incredibly difficult ones like Grasshopper Warbler. Apart from ringing the chicks, a nest record card (NRC) is filled in which allows all visits to the nest to be recorded and all details of eggs, nestlings, adult behaviour etc to be logged. These NRC's are then again sent to the BTO for analysis, thus increasing the value of this study. The increased value of ringing birds as nestlings is of course the fact that you can pinpoint when and where a particular individual was born (hatched). We can age full grown birds of most species reasonably easy enough, for example juveniles in autumn, but catching a young bird does not necessarily mean that the place it was caught is close to its place of hatching. Ringing has shown us that some young birds can move as much as 500 kilometres before they complete their post-juvenile moult or migrate.



A snug brood of Grasshopper Warblers....

....and a cosy brood of Willow warblers!



Winter is a time when ringers can ring large numbers of birds, with a feeding station set up in a garden being a prime candidate for such activity. We ring at several such sites each winter, but the best by far is Wendy Stringer's garden just outside Westport, where several hundred birds can often be seen at any one time, both in winter and summer. Commonest amongst these are the finches, especially Chaffinch, and in the last two years alone we have ringed over 650 Chaffinch from a grand total of 2050 birds that have been newly caught there. Indeed finches account for more than half of all the birds caught, with a combined total of 1350 of six species, those being Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Siskin, Lesser Redpoll and Bullfinch. Even with this number of birds ringed at this one spot, it's still surprising to turn up and see so many un-ringed birds, showing that the actual number of birds attracted to such a site on a daily basis can be enormous. Incidentally, we also use this site for educational purposes, holding occasional public ringing demonstrations for both BWI members and the general public. (The next one is scheduled for January 2009; see elsewhere on this site for details).

Migration hot spots have always had a special attraction for ringers, this one being no exception! Although I take part in other ringing projects there, the Mullet peninsula around Erris Head is possibly my favourite ringing site due to a combination of the friendliness of the people, stunning scenery, the remoteness and, of course, the birds. We ring both summer and winter there, with good numbers of Twite and perhaps surprisingly, Thrushes, ringed during the winter period. Last winter alone 102 Song Thrushes, 32 Redwing and 32 Blackbirds were caught in a roost located in an old overgrown garden no bigger than an average sized one. Not surprisingly the odd scarce or unusual bird gets ringed and these have included Tree Pipit, Redstart, along with Garden, Reed and Yellow-browed warblers, Firecrest and Pied Flycatcher. These are very much the 'bonus' birds though, and more important is the arrival dates, numbers and condition of commoner migrant birds passing through on their way further north to breed, or south to winter. Special amongst these are the trans-Saharan migrant warblers which are usually dominated by Blackcap, Chiff-chaff and Willow warbler.



Male Firecrest

So for the resident ringers of Mayo, any time of the year is a busy one and you too can play your part by checking any corpses you come across, be it killed by cat, flown into window, road casualty, shot etc for rings. If you do so, please write down the number, place and date of finding and cause of death if known. You can report it to me (details below) or through this website and you will get a report detailing original details from the BTO. *Every* ringing recovery is vital for us to build up an accurate picture of Mayo's birds and thus enable us to better understand and protect them. Oh, and don't forget to record any colour ringed birds you might come across on your travels and record them in the same way.

You can get more details online from the BTO website at: www.bto.org/ringing

Finally, a question....

What do the average Irish Common Gull parents feed their chicks on?



Answer: A jumbo breakfast roll of course!

Most seabirds have a defence mechanism whereby they regurgitate their stomach contents over predators. The above photograph shows the stomach contents of a Common Gull chick which it kindly shared with the ringer in June 2007. Another bird did the same in 2008! Obviously tastes much better than earthworms!

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