

Bedfordshire Bird Club - Bird Ringing Report 2018

During 2018, 5133 birds of 70 species were ringed in Bedfordshire. This is an 18.4% drop from the average over the previous three years but, without more detailed data, it is difficult to be certain of the reasons for this decline. Nationally, the number of birds ringed fell by 4.5% over the same period, so it is unlikely that the county decrease represents a significant drop in the number of birds present. Also, the percentage of ringed birds that were juveniles remained constant at around 55%, suggesting that the decrease was not attributable to a particularly poor breeding season. The most likely explanation is a reduction in the amount of ringing undertaken accounting for a major part of the decline.

Table 1 shows a summary of all the birds ringed in the county during 2018.

Table 1: Bedfordshire Ringing Totals 2018

Species	Total	Species	Total
Greylag Goose <i>Anser anser</i>	1	Willow Warbler <i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	19
Mute Swan <i>Cygnus olor</i>	13	Chiffchaff <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	100
Gadwall <i>Mareca strepera</i>	22	Sedge Warbler <i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>	2
Wigeon <i>Mareca penelope</i>	40	Reed Warbler <i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	68
Mallard <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	59	Blackcap <i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	313
Teal <i>Anas crecca</i>	9	Garden Warbler <i>Sylvia borin</i>	39
Red-crested Pochard <i>Netta rufina</i>	1	Lesser Whitethroat <i>Sylvia curruca</i>	26
Pochard <i>Aythya farina</i>	3	Whitethroat <i>Sylvia communis</i>	61
Tufted Duck <i>Aythya fuligula</i>	352	Goldcrest <i>Regulus regulus</i>	47
Sparrowhawk <i>Accipiter nisus</i>	3	Wren <i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	117
Moorhen <i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	7	Nuthatch <i>Sitta europaea</i>	6
Coot <i>Fulica atra</i>	62	Treecreeper <i>Certhia familiaris</i>	16
Stock Dove <i>Columba oenas</i>	2	Starling <i>Sternus vulgaris</i>	1023
Woodpigeon <i>Columba palumbus</i>	7	Blackbird <i>Turdus merula</i>	149
Turtle Dove <i>Streptopelia turtur</i>	1	Redwing <i>Turdus iliacus</i>	15
Collared Dove <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	13	Song Thrush <i>Turdus philomelos</i>	36
Barn Owl <i>Tyto alba</i>	42	Mistle Thrush <i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	2
Tawny Owl <i>Strix aluco</i>	2	Robin <i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	156
Kingfisher <i>Alcedo atthis</i>	3	House Sparrow <i>Passer domesticus</i>	143
G S Woodpecker <i>Dendrocopos major</i>	7	Dunnock <i>Prunella modularis</i>	143
Green Woodpecker <i>Picus viridis</i>	4	Yellow Wagtail <i>Motacilla flava</i>	11
Kestrel <i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	7	Grey Wagtail <i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	7
Peregrine <i>Falco peregrinus</i>	4	Pied Wagtail <i>Motacilla alba</i>	44
Jay <i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	5	Meadow Pipit <i>Anthus pratensis</i>	4
Magpie <i>Pica pica</i>	8	Chaffinch <i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	60
Jackdaw <i>Coloeus monedula</i>	21	Brambling <i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	2
Coal Tit <i>Periparus ater</i>	42	Bullfinch <i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	24
Marsh Tit <i>Poecile palustris</i>	3	Greenfinch <i>Chloris chloris</i>	59
Blue Tit <i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	882	Common Redpoll <i>Acanthis flammea</i>	1
Great Tit <i>Parus major</i>	444	Lesser Redpoll <i>Acanthis cabaret</i>	6
Swallow <i>Hirundo rustica</i>	51	Goldfinch <i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	118
House Martin <i>Delichon urbicum</i>	20	Siskin <i>Spinus spinus</i>	21
Cetti's Warbler <i>Cettia cetti</i>	4	Yellowhammer <i>Emberiza citronella</i>	2
Long-tailed Tit <i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	139	Reed Bunting <i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	10
		Grand Total	5133

The top ten most numerous species ringed remained fairly stable, being, in order: Starling (2); Blue Tit (1); Great Tit (3); Tufted Duck (5); Blackcap (4); Robin (10); Blackbird (7); Dunnock (6); House Sparrow (12); and Long-tailed Tit (8). The figures in parentheses represent the average position over the previous five years. House Sparrow was the only species creeping into the top ten, usurping Chiffchaff.

Looking at the data in a little more detail shows some interesting trends but also raises a number of questions.

Figure 1: Numbers of Robins, Wrens and Dunnocks ringed from 2011 to 2018

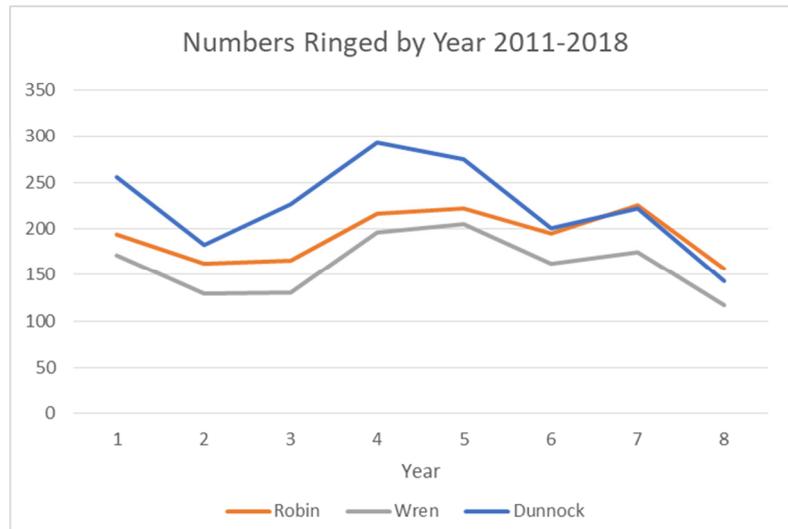
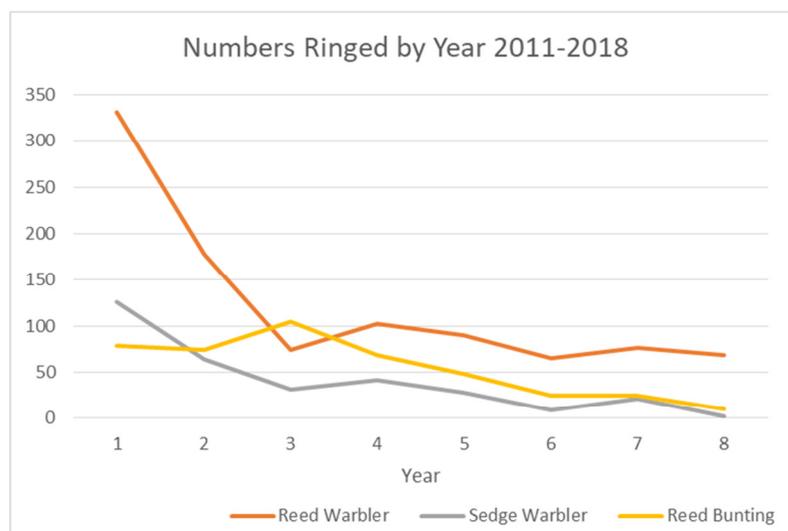


Figure 1 shows how the number of three common garden/woodland species ringed has changed over the last eight years. Notwithstanding a decline in all three in 2018, the overall trend is fairly flat, with all three showing similar movements year on year.

Figure 2: Numbers of Reed Warblers, Sedge Warblers and Reed Buntings ringed from 2011 to 2018



However, when we do the same comparison for three reedbed species (Figure 2), the picture is very different. Reed and Sedge Warblers show a dramatic reduction from 2011 to 2013 followed by a slower, continuing downward trend. From 2011 to 2018, their numbers fell by 80% and 98% respectively. Apart from an upturn in 2013,

Reed Buntings exhibited a similar trend, with an overall fall of 87% over the eight year period.

At the time of writing I do not have access to the national data for years prior to 2015 so it is difficult to compare these county figures with the national picture. One possible explanation

for these results is that the ringing effort within Bedfordshire might have become more biased towards garden and woodland sites at the expense of wetland/reedbeds. If any readers of this report can offer any insight into these changes, I would be pleased to hear from them.

No Bedfordshire Ringing Report would be complete without a mention of the wildfowl ringing in the county, most of which appears to be undertaken at Blunham Lake. The numbers of Tufted Duck (352) and Gadwall (22) ringed represent 69% and 47% of the national totals for these species, making Bedfordshire one of the most important counties in Britain for wildfowl monitoring.

Ringing generates valuable information on the survival, productivity and movements of birds, helping us to understand why populations are changing. However, for many of us, the most fascinating results relate to where birds go and how long they live. The BTO make available detailed data on recoveries (repeat encounters with ringed birds) through their website, so I will just illustrate some of the more interesting ones here.

In November 2011 two first-year Coots (metal ring numbers GR51151 and GR51152) were colour-ringed at Blunham and almost six years later were recorded, together, at Pennington Flash, Greater Manchester, 210km away. I find it intriguing that two young birds should have travelled such a distance together and remained together throughout that period. Also ringed in Blunham, two Wigeon ringed in 2016 (one in January, one in November) were shot by hunters; the first in Denmark (746km), the other in the Russian Federation, an amazing 3887km away. Waterfowl are known for their longevity so it is perhaps not surprising that a Tufted Duck ringed in Blunham in 2004 and a Mute Swan ringed in Bedford in 2002 should be reported still alive in 2018. The longevity records for these species are just over twenty-four and twenty-nine years respectively.

In March 2018, many birders probably saw the colour-ringed Oystercatcher on The Pillinge at Marston Vale Millennium Park, where it stayed for a few weeks. This bird had been ringed at Dawlish Warren in Devon the month before and was recorded back there at the beginning of July. We can but speculate on the reasons behind its 516km round-trip.

Another species that is often colour-ringed and is known to make long journeys is the Black-headed Gull. Two were found in Bedfordshire during 2018, both of them dead. The first had been ringed as a nestling in Denmark in June 2011 while the other, also ringed as a nestling in 2017, originated from the Czech Republic, a distance of 1036km away.

While many of the smaller passerines are migratory to a greater or lesser extent, some of our more familiar garden birds tend to be very sedentary. We rarely find Blue Tits or Long-tailed Tits travelling any great distances but they are often caught at the place where they had been ringed several years earlier. Two reasonably notable ones in 2018 were a Blue Tit ringed at Priory Country Park in September 2011 and recaptured there in June 2018 (6 years 8 months 2 days) and a Long-tailed Tit ringed at Bromham Mill in October 2011 and recaptured at the same site in October 2018 (7 years 5 days). Although these birds had survived for much longer than most of their species, they were still some way short of the longevity records of 9 years 8 days and 8 years 11 months respectively. The same is true of a

Starling that was ringed in Biggleswade in November 2010 and was recorded there again in December 2018. Although it was 8 years and 23 days between records, the longevity record for this species is in excess of 17 years!

One of the passerines noted for its winter migrations is the Siskin, with many birds moving down from Scotland and Scandinavia for the colder months. Unfortunately, we do not usually seem to be blessed with particularly large numbers of Siskins in Bedfordshire, but one caught at Southill in March 2018 had been ringed the previous May in Argyll and Bute.

While most of the recovery information comes from ringers catching previously ringed birds, a significant amount of data on the larger birds comes from birders (or not) recording details of colour-ringed birds that they see. Such sightings provide valuable information and I would encourage anyone who encounters a colour-ringed bird to record the details (colour of ring plus any markings, which leg it is on and whether above or below the “knee”) and submit them to the BTO. In fact, with digital photography, it is often possible to decipher the numbers on the metal rings on much smaller birds. Such records are also of great value.

Acknowledgement:

Thanks go to all of Bedfordshire’s ringers and to anyone who has reported a ringed bird during 2018.

Alan Garner

An A-permit holder, Alan moved to Bedfordshire in 2017, having trained with the Merseyside Ringing Group. These days, most of his ringing involves helping out at ringing sites at Marston Vale, Bromham Mill, Stagsden and Beeston, plus Paxton Pits (in Cambridgeshire). He also rings in his garden and is a keen nest recorder and pullus ringer.