

Belvide Ringing Report 2010

Introduction

What a fantastic year at Belvide! 2010 will be remembered as a year when breeding conditions for most small insectivorous birds were almost perfect—resulting in many more young birds around than in the recent past. Good ringing conditions throughout the July to early October season were also generally good, meaning that each week saw two ringing sessions, and consequently the best ringing totals so far. There were, as ever, some downsides: Blackbirds had a poor breeding season, relatively few visitors took up the offer of taking part in the ringing sessions, and of the many re-trapped birds we caught, very few were either long-lived or particularly interesting in other ways, and we only had 2 ‘controls’ ie birds which had been ringed by other ringers and caught by us. To date we have not heard of any birds we ringed being caught elsewhere.

Results of particular interest

Although it can be argued that all the results are interesting, limits of time and space means that we will concentrate on those results which in some way generate discussion. All of the following data, relate to the table later in this report.

General:

In overall terms, as mentioned above, this was the highest number of new birds ringed at Belvide. The first ringing session in early July (with water levels lower than normal and all net rides accessible), resulted in over 150 new birds. Our expectation was that from then on the totals would drop as we would simply recapture these same birds. How wrong could we have been! Each visit brought good numbers of new birds as youngsters produced on site kept appearing, along with migrants and local breeders wandering the locality. If ever the importance of the habitat at Belvide for breeding and post breeding feeding was clear— then it was in 2010. The season ended with an experiment (playing a sound system to attract migrating Meadow Pipits), turning into an operating regularity—see later.

Several new species were also added to the ringing list, and these will be mentioned later.

Nest boxes:

The 2010 season opened in late May/early June for the second year with the ringing of the nest box chicks. Although the preceding winter had been unusually harsh, with lots of tales about resident tits being found dead, the breeding season turned out to be excellent. Take up and productivity was virtually the same as for 2009. This suggests that there is a pool of birds ready to take the place of any which don't make it over the winter. Also, it may suggest that the site is ‘saturated’, in that there are probably more boxes than nests which could be sustained. This will be tested in future years.

Last year we were surprised by the small number of ringed chicks which were subsequently re-captured, either generally or at the feeding stations. However, an almost identical set of results was found this year—with again an increase in the number of ‘new’ Blue and Great Tit youngsters being captured as the season wore on. We will continue to monitor this in future, but it seems clear that a very sensible genetic mechanism is going on here. Simply, it makes sense for local youngsters to move out of the area and be replaced by outsiders to keep the gene pool well mixed.

Thrushes:

The rest of the summer was generally warm and dry with plenty of insect food around to support breeding adults, and their chicks. The downside of this appears to be that the dry earth may have reduced the availability of worms particularly for Blackbirds. As a result, their numbers were well down, with only 7 new birds ringed against an average in the mid 20s. Song Thrushes seemed to suffer similarly.

‘Resident breeders’:

This is a convenience group, rather than a scientific one, and its members vary a lot. Tawny Owl and Jay were added to the list at the same time! The Jay was caught at first light one morning—and the Tawny obviously thought this would be an easy meal. Fortunately both birds were unharmed—although the sad follow-up to the story was that several weeks later the owl was found dead by the roadside just outside the reserve.

Long-tailed tits were amazing this year. Given the really harsh winter, it would have been easy to assume that these would have been decimated and low numbers resulted. How different the truth was! We caught about four times the number of long-tails this year, showing that they had had a very successful breeding season. The occurrence of many retraps from the last two or three years also shows that good numbers had somehow managed to survive through one of the harshest winters in living memory—but how? We will probably never know for sure, but the combination of plenty of fat balls at the feeding stations, lots of dense bramble thickets to harbour insects, and lots of thick ivy and nest boxes would have provided some relatively cosy roosting sites in the cold weather. The good weather during breeding must have allowed them to press on and produce some really big broods. Treecreepers showed a similar but less pronounced pattern. Wrens also find harsh winters a real problem—and low numbers caught in the early part of the season suggested that unlike long-tailed tits, this species really had suffered. However, those which did survive put on a rally later in the year and by the close of the season, numbers were back to normal. Perhaps they bred late—or the habitat proved very attractive to young birds from elsewhere (but where else locally was any warmer during the winter?) with few resident birds to fight with for territory.

Of the seed eaters, Bullfinch, Reed Bunting and Tree Sparrow, all enjoyed good breeding seasons, with lots of young birds around. No doubt the feeding during the winter helped

greatly. Specifically regarding Reed Buntings, the increased numbers were not due to more effort at catching them at roost. In fact less effort was put into this mainly because of the brutal frosts during November, when it would have been unfair to disturb birds at their roost. Two of the birds caught were controls but as yet we have not had feedback as to their original ringing site—we will report this via the website as soon as we know. Finally, Yellowhammer was added to the ringing list, but not, as could be expected by being attracted to the feeders in winter. The birds seemed to be loosely attached to the wandering mixed tit and warbler flocks during late summer.

Warblers:

A quick look at the table will show just how good the season was for warblers. Presumably the winter conditions here did not affect them, and reasonable numbers must have returned from southern wintering areas. Chiffchaff in particular did very well, with young birds appearing throughout. This mirrors the general increase in this species—especially as the woodland around mature and become less attractive to Willow warblers. However, these latter showed a good increase and reversed the recent falling trend of this species in the area. Certainly anyone going for a walk on Cannock Chase this summer cannot have missed the singing Willies in all types of habitat. Let's hope this trend continues.

Reed and Sedge warblers fared really well. Unfortunately we were not able to do a full nest survey of Reedies, but they clearly did well with good reed growth and warm dry weather. The low water levels meant that Sedgies had plenty of choice of nesting habitat and produced lots of young as a consequence—again let's hope the water is similar next year.

Blackcap, Whitethroat and Garden warbler produced a conundrum. At face value these are all medium sized, robust warblers needing rank overgrowth for nesting and insects and soft fruits for feeding. So why should the former do so well, while Garden warblers did about the same as always. Answers on a postcard please!

Finally-pipits! Having just returned from a ringing trip to Poland where we managed to catch a good number of Tree Pipits by call luring—we decided to try out of curiosity. We caught nothing for an hour, then 3 all at once. Unfortunately this was right at the end of the passage period for this species—so we switched the sound to Meadow pipit—and bingo! Lots of birds were attracted over several weeks into late September, with only a fraction being caught because the nets have to be out in the open. It really did bring home just how many of these birds are passing unnoticed until something like this is tried. The good thing also is that bringing them down onto the short vegetation around the pool isn't doing them any harm given the superb feeding conditions they were obviously enjoying.

We look forward to trying these techniques again next year, with an earlier start for Tree pipit. We continue to be unsuccessful at catching the many hirundines which feed over the water, especially on wet/cold days. These roost in the large fields of maize nearby—but we

think we are getting closer to being able to attract them to roost in the reedbed—watch this space next year...

Table of new birds ringed at Belvide 2010 compared to recent years

Species	Ringed 2010	Ringed 2009	Ringed 2008	Ringed 2007
Sparrowhawk	0	0	3	2
Moorhen	0	1	0	0
Water Rail	0	0	1	0
Lapwing	0	0	1	0
Common Tern	(3)	0	(5)	0
Swift	0	3	2	0
Kingfisher	2	1	7	0
Great Spotted W'pecker	0	0	5	0
Sand Martin	0	0	1	0
House Martin	0	31	3	0
Tree Pipit*	3	0	0	0
Meadow Pipit*	72	0	0	0
Pied Wagtail*	1	0	0	0
Stock Dove	0	0 + (2)	0	0
Woodpigeon	1	1	0	1
Tawny Owl*	1	0	0	0
Robin	31	28	45	33
Redstart	0	0	2	0
Blackbird	7	25	28	32
Song Thrush	1	7	6	6
Redwing	0	0	13	1
Fieldfare	0	0	1	0
Pied Flycatcher	0	0	0	1
Spotted Flycatcher	2	1	4	0
Dunnock	43	59	51	25
Wren	42	34	58	27
Goldcrest	15	0	22	9
Nuthatch	1	0	3	0
Treecreeper	10	4	4	1
Cetti's Warbler	0	0	0	1
Chiffchaff	359	211	251	189
Willow Warbler	136	86	143	71
Gr'hopper Warbler*	1	0	0	0
Reed Warbler	155+(7)	104	73+(2)	56
Sedge Warbler	101	35	23	36
Lesser	12	8	6	22

Whitethroat				
Whitethroat	70	13	8	14
Blackcap	185	83	63	48
Garden Warbler	40	34	23	34
Blue Tit	155+(161)	121+(156)	110	37
Great Tit	108+(61)	75+(59)	67	29
Coal Tit	4	6	3	0
Long Tailed Tit	111	25	26	35
Willow Tit	1	0	1	2
Marsh Tit	4	0	2	1
Bullfinch	31	11	8	15
Chaffinch	31	53	21	4
Greenfinch	27	9	17	10
Goldfinch	48	15	41	4
Redpoll	0	0	4	0
Yellowhammer*	3	0	0	0
Reed Bunting	83	63	39	19
House Sparrow	0	0	1	0
Tree Sparrow	87	37	73	37
Jay*	1	0	0	0
Starling	0	0	25	32
Total	2219 of 39 sp.	1401 of 31 sp.	1299 of 45 sp.	833 of 32 sp.

*NB species marked * were ringed for the first time in 2010;*

Numbers in brackets refer to chicks (pulli) ringed in the nest.

Conclusion:

We hope that all those connected in any way with Belvide have enjoyed both having our group operate at the site, and reading this report. We are very grateful to the management committee, especially Steve Nuttall and Rob Swift for their generous help and support in many ways. Thanks also to the West Midlands Bird Club for allowing access to ring at Belvide. We hope the results continue to be helpful in some way to the management of the reserve, and at least an interesting supplement to the systematic sight records.

Colin McShane December 2010, on behalf of Brewood Ringing Group