

Belvide Ringing Report 2011

Introduction

Another great year at Belvide! At first sight, the totals give the impression of a good year, whilst not being as exceptional as 2010. However, on closer examination there are a couple of points which demonstrate that 2011 was, in its own way, a really good year. First, the number of species caught, 43 is the second highest ever. We added Kestrel and Swallow to the list of new birds ringed. Kestrel is an exceptional species to catch in mist nets as they usually hover so that they see and avoid nets. To put it in context, it's only the second free flying Kestrel that I have ringed in over 35 years. We have actually ringed Swallows in previous years at Belvide, but this was prior to the current more standard regime. The overall total of birds is also the second highest, but it is actually the highest number of fledged birds we have ringed in a year. The high overall total in 2010 included a large number of Blue and Great Tit nestlings—of which more below.

Weather conditions permitted most ringing sessions to go ahead, although quite often we had to take a risk that the BBC had got it wrong—fortunately most times they had! As a result we have carried out a standard set of ringing sessions during the post breeding season. In addition we have carried out more ringing in the reed-beds at the end of the year. Again, more on this later.

Breeding conditions appeared to us to be good. The very harsh winter hit many resident species hard—but they seem to have recovered well. Many migrants travelled well and many 'old friends' (ie previously ringed birds) returned as shown by our ringing sessions in April and May, see later. However, overall catches of common migrants—with some exceptions—was slightly disappointing. This correlates with some national data, but nevertheless it is difficult to explain given the generally warm, dry breeding period.

The regime of habitat management/hacking back the abundant growth of willows during the autumn and winter seems to work well for us in that the growth of willow is sufficient during the summer to provide good cover and feeding for foraging birds, and good cover for our nets.

The very mild winter conditions this year—in stark contrast to 2010—seems to have encouraged many local birds to stay around rather than seek warmer conditions, and as a result we have had very large numbers of Reed Buntings roosting in the reeds from mid October. These are still roosting in large numbers as I write in early January.

Hearing about recoveries and controls of birds already ringed is always exciting—but actually quite rare. There are some records discussed later, and some for which we are still awaiting information from the BTO. However, of as much, if not more importance are the birds which we have ringed at Belvide, and which we subsequently re-trap, since this gives

us indications of the value of the site, longevity of species and the total numbers around. The discussion of Reed Buntings later on in this report will, we hope, illustrate this point.

We continue to advertise most of our sessions on our website, but this year there has been a disappointing number of visitors. Perhaps we are getting to the point where most regulars have experienced what we do; but we hope to try a bit harder in 2012 to get more people interested.

Table of new birds ringed at Belvide 2011 compared to recent years

Species	Ringed 2011	Ringed 2010	Ringed 2009	Ringed 2008	Ringed 2007
Sparrowhawk	4	0	0	3	2
Kestrel*	1				
Moorhen	0	0	1	0	0
Water Rail	0	0	0	1	0
Lapwing	0	0	0	1	0
Common Tern	0	(3)	0	(5)	0
Swift	0	0	3	2	0
Kingfisher	1	2	1	7	0
Gr Spot W'peck	3	0	0	5	0
Sand Martin	45	0	0	1	0
House Martin	62	0	31	3	0
Swallow*	19				
Tree Pipit	1	3	0	0	0
Meadow Pipit	83	72	0	0	0
Pied Wagtail	0	1	0	0	0
Yellow Wagtail	1				
Stock Dove	0	0	0 + (2)	0	0
Woodpigeon	0	1	1	0	1
Tawny Owl	0	1	0	0	0
Robin	35	31	28	45	33
Redstart	1	0	0	2	0
Blackbird	15	7	25	28	32

Song Thrush	5	1	7	6	6
Redwing	16	0	0	13	1
Fieldfare	0	0	0	1	0
Pied Flycatcher	0	0	0	0	1
Spot Flycatcher	1	2	1	4	0
Dunnock	56	43	59	51	25
Wren	33	42	34	58	27
Goldcrest	8	15	0	22	9
Nuthatch	0	1	0	3	0
Treecreeper	9	10	4	4	1
Cetti's Warbler	0	0	0	0	1
Chiffchaff	278	359	211	251	189
Willow Warbler	76	136	86	143	71
G'pper Warbler	2	1	0	0	0
Reed Warbler	138	155+(7)	104	73+(2)	56
Sedge Warbler	117	101	35	23	36
Lesser Whitethroat	3	12	8	6	22
Whitethroat	41	70	13	8	14
Blackcap	111	185	83	63	48
Garden Warbler	24	40	34	23	34
Blue Tit	92	155+(161)	121+(156)	110	37
Great Tit	108	108+(61)	75+(59)	67	29
Coal Tit	1	4	6	3	0
Long Tailed Tit	47	111	25	26	35
Willow Tit	2	1	0	1	2
Marsh Tit	2	4	0	2	1
Bullfinch	19	31	11	8	15
Chaffinch	20	31	53	21	4
Greenfinch	67	27	9	17	10
Goldfinch	38	48	15	41	4
Redpoll	0	0	0	4	0

Yellowhammer	0	3	0	0	0
Reed Bunting	280	83	63	39	19
House Sparrow	0	0	0	1	0
Tree Sparrow	62	87	37	73	37
Jay	2	1	0	0	0
Starling	12	0	0	25	32
Total	1941 of 43 sp.	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 2011;*

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

Results of particular interest

It's perhaps simplest to approach these from the top of the table above:-

Hirundines: as can be seen we caught many more of these this year than ever. Apart from a very small number caught at roost one evening (including a ringed bird which from which we await details) the large number was due to a couple of sessions during late August when the temperature was especially low in the early morning. Consequently the birds were flying very low in order to catch their insect prey, and bumped into the nets quite readily. Rapid extraction and ringing took only a few moments out of their foraging and shortly after they spiralled high as the air warmed and the insects rose—a chance catch.

Meadow Pipit: from our experience last year, and using tips from other ringers at coastal migration sites, we were better prepared this year—hence the slightly higher catch. We actually think we can do better in future, as results from the visual migration watches suggest that these birds seem to use the reserve as a 'marker' as they migrate. The table below shows how concentrated the period of migration is.

Table 2: Catches of Meadow Pipits against date

Date	10 Sept	15 Sept	18 Sept	22 Sept
Number ringed	2	57	18	4

The pattern here is pretty simple to interpret; migration through Belvide starts towards the end of the first week in September, reaches a peak in the middle of the month and by the end of the month it's all over. We hope to monitor this each year, but we expect the pattern to be quite stable, with minor variations depending upon weather conditions.

Thrushes: Blackbird and Song Thrush numbers look to be on a slight recovery after a very poor 2010. We need more data on this, and clearly we hope that the pattern continues next year. Certainly the winter conditions should help the majority get to the breeding season in good shape. Redwing numbers reflect the fact that the mild winter weather has encouraged lots of northern thrushes to stay in Britain rather than move south. We also noticed good numbers roosting in a dense blackthorn bush which made catching more Redwing than normal relatively easy.

Dunnoek and Wren: two common birds which illustrate interesting points. The Dunnocks at Belvide appear to have managed over the bitter winter very well. We even re-caught an adult female which we originally ringed in July 2008—and she was a breeding adult bird back then. Their overall numbers remain high with good numbers of young birds caught throughout the summer. Wrens on the other hand suffered really badly during the winter, and we noticed a lack of this species in our early season catches. However, some must have made it, and/or others moved into the area, because as the season wore on juveniles began to appear—much later than normal. It appears that the survivors took a little while to get into breeding condition/find mates/build nests etc—but eventually they did. We expect them to be well represented next year after such a mild winter- so far!

Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler; the latter species again didn't breed at Belvide, so birds we ring are both 'genuine' migrants and birds breeding locally in their post breeding dispersal prior to full migration. Their numbers really don't tell us very much other than nothing alarming seems to have happened. We did have one classic control of a bird ringed at Steyning, West Sussex, on 30th August 2010, presumably just before it set off for Africa. Willow Warbler DEA282 was recaptured on 18th August 2011 by us at Belvide. Great news that it made it on its migration—probably a local breeder—and let's hope we re-capture it next year.

Chiffchaffs arrived at the reserve in good numbers during March and April, with many singing birds carrying rings from previous years. We caught quite a few during our early season catches (16-30 April), which showed that most of the ringed birds had been originally caught in 2010, although one had been ringed in July 2009 as a breeding adult. Although we caught almost 300 new birds this year, we were slightly disappointed given the good number which arrived in the spring. This is one of the species referred to earlier for which we have no explanation, but which mirrored a national trend of lower than expected breeding success. We ringed Chiffchaff DDV974 on 7th July 2010 as a juvenile, locally reared bird; it was controlled by some friends of ours at Cuckmere Haven in East Sussex on 1st October this year, obviously on its way south. Many of our Chiffs spend the winter in Spain and Portugal, and the timing here would be consistent with that. We caught our last 3 Chiffs at Belvide on our last seasonal visit on 28th September.

Sedge Warbler and Blackcap: we have put these species together to demonstrate differing fortunes. Sedgies arrived back in force. Our early spring catches retrapped 13 birds from

previous years, including one bird originally ringed by us as an adult in July 2007, so this was its 5th breeding season at least. Clearly this got the birds off to a good start and the low water level provided lots of good rank grasses/sedges/brambles in which they bred—resulting in the largest catch in recent years. Sedge Warblers leave us quite early, with the last 2 ringed on 2nd September. Sedgie number Y223027 was ringed as a newly fledged juvenile on 13th July, and was controlled at Titchfield Haven in Hampshire on 14th August—a classic control of a bird on its way to Africa. However, Sedgie number Y223110, ringed only ten days after the previous bird on 23rd July, again as a juvenile, must have had something wonky (technical term!) with its compass mechanism because it was controlled on 18th August at Overton in Lancashire! That's why rarities sometimes turn up in the daftest places and at the 'wrong' times. Let's hope this bird managed to latch on to some others and get back on course.

Blackcap numbers were very disappointing, and perhaps their non-appearance in spring is the answer. By early June, no Blackcaps previously ringed at Belvide had turned up, so those birds which bred were either complete newcomers or returning birds which had eluded our nets previously. Either way, they bred reasonably well but given the numbers from 2010, and the good breeding conditions, we did expect more this year.

Other warblers: nothing really major to report here. Reed Warblers did pretty well and benefitted from good weather and good reed growth. Unfortunately we did not get round to carrying out a nest survey. Lesser Whitethroat and Garden Warblers were a little disappointing, although we did recapture two Garden Warblers which we had originally ringed as juveniles back in July 2006. Whitethroats did well—what did they do that the Garden warblers didn't?

Titmice: we decided for a various reasons not to ring the nest-box chicks this year—although we did monitor all the boxes and produce a report on success. Briefly, it was the best season in recent times with high occupancy and fledging—especially for Great Tits. The free flying birds caught during the summer generally reflect this. Long Tailed Tits fared very well and showed a very similar pattern to Wrens in that they took a long while to 'show' in our catches but eventually they did breed and numbers are on the up again.

Greenfinch and Tree Sparrow. We have brought these together since we generally only ring these species at the Gazebo feeder during late August and through September. Numbers of Tree Sparrow are lower than we would expect—especially given the numbers which can be seen on the feeders. We can only conclude that they are getting better at avoiding the nets...Conversely Greenfinch numbers are much higher than normal, suggesting they had a good breeding season and also became very attracted to the easy food on offer at the feeders.

Reed Bunting: last but not least the exceptionally high numbers of this species need some explanation. We became aware of good numbers dropping into the Scott Hide reed-bed due to a chance count in late October.

Table 3: Reed Bunting catches during Winter 2011/12

	New Birds ringed	Retraps
30 th October	95	5
12 th November	68	9
23 rd November	23	7
28 th November	26	13
12 th December	27	13
22 nd December	17	5
2 nd January 2012	27	10

As we write there are still good numbers dropping in, so clearly this year the reed-beds have been a major asset for these birds to use as a safe roost. Just how many have been using the reeds is probably well over 300, but this looks like it's made up of some birds which stay on (we have lots of re-traps occurring time and again) with another population which moves through. One recovery from last year demonstrated that we pick up birds from at least as far away as Humberside, but our hunch is that they are from a wide area—let's hope some of those we ringed this year get controlled and we can find out more about the movements of this easy to overlook species.

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 provide an interesting supplement to the systematic sight records.

Colin McShane, January 2012, on behalf of Brewood Ringing Group