

# **Results of the Third ringing expedition to the Nesseby ringing site in the Varanger Region of northern Norway 2014**

## **Introduction**

The scale and scope of this second visit was again limited by the availability of accommodation, but resources did allow for two visiting groups to enable us to explore the potential for studying migration between the middle and end of September. 5 British ringers and a scribe formed TEAM A which visited from August 20<sup>th</sup> to September 3<sup>th</sup>, while 5 British ringers and a helper covered 9<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> September.

TEAM A :- Colin McShane (A), Dave Clifton (A), Colin Hewitt (A), Stu Brown (A), Charlie Sargent (C), Sara Brown (Scribe/Helper)

TEAM B :- Fergus Henderson (A), John Hodson (A), Tim Dixon (C), Simon Roberts (C),

Cloe Loo (T), Andy Warr (Helper/Redpoll Project Co-ordinator).

## **Methodology**

Significant steps in securing the infrastructure needed for the project had been made during the year, most notably in buying nets to cover most of the ringing operations, for land birds at least. This has included some specially made 3-shelf nets for use in the 'Marsh' area. In addition, although many of the original metal poles were still serviceable, we felt it important to begin to build a store of more robust, durable poles, and a good number of fibreglass sectional poles was bought to supplement the metal ones. The new nets and poles proved very successful.

Overall, the net sites used were almost identical to those used previously, and will probably remain so in the near future, allowing some comparisons to be made; however, in the species accounts we explore some of the apparent differences.

The weather during the Team A visit was very good for ringing and we only lost the first half day and one other half day to rain. However, Team B lost 3 days due to very strong winds—making their overall totals even more impressive

Again sound systems were deployed extensively and undoubtedly helped especially with such species as Repoll and Meadow Pipit.

No attempts were made for Storm or Leach's Petrels this year.

## Results

**Table 1:- 2014 totals for each team and combined for newly ringed birds – species marked \* were new species for the project.**

	2014	2014	TOTAL
	21 Aug to 2 Sept	10 Sept to 19 Sept	
	TEAM A	TEAM B	
Merlin	2	0	2
Ringed Plover	21	3	24
Dunlin	92	12	104
Curlew Sandpiper	16	0	16
Little Stint	21	0	21
Three-toed W'pecker*	0	1	1
Meadow Pipit	1066	1216	2282
Red Throated Pipit	6	0	6
White Wagtail	6	1	7
Dunnock	30	110	140
Bluethroat	286	30	316
Redstart	10	2	12
Wheatear	7	0	7
Song Thrush	0	1	1
Redwing	85	57	142
Fieldfare	26	8	34
Barred Warbler *	1	0	1
Garden Warbler	1	2	3
Sedge Warbler	18	0	18
Willow Warbler	280	42	322
Chiffchaff	4	4	8
Pied Flycatcher	2	0	2
Great Tit	31	32	63
Blue Tit *	1	0	1
Willow Tit	2	3	5
Siberian Tit *	4	0	4
Great Grey Shrike	0	1	1
House Sparrow	38	9	47
Brambling	72	26	78
Common Redpoll	583	885	1468
Artic Redpoll	5	19	24
Redpoll Sp	0	2	2
Greenfinch	55	36	91
Bullfinch *	1	0	1
Reed Bunting	539	695	1234
Little Bunting	2	0	2
Lapland Bunting	56	0	56
<b>37 species</b>	<b>3369</b>	<b>3197</b>	<b>6566</b>

**Table 2:- Annual and comparative and combined totals for the project.**

	2012	2013	2014		2012, 2013, 2014
	10 Aug to 27Aug	22 Aug to 3 Sept	Combined		Grand Total
Merlin	3	1	2		6
Ringed Plover	76	13	24		113
Sanderling	1	0	0		1
Turnstone	2	0	0		2
Dunlin	359	82	104		545
Curlew Sandpiper	3	4	16		23
Temminck's Stint	1	0	0		1
Little Stint	19	9	21		49
Jack Snipe	1	0	0		1
Ruff	0	1	0		1
Three-toed W'pecker	0	0	1		1
Meadow Pipit	335	1161	2282		3778
Red Throated Pipit	48	12	6		66
White Wagtail	23	21	7		51
Yellow Wagtail	6	2	0		8
Waxwing	0	2	0		2
Dunnock	6	65	140		211
Thrush Nightingale	0	1	0		1
Bluethroat	194	135	316		645
Redstart	8	4	12		24
Wheatear	3	1	7		11
Song Thrush	0	1	1		2
Redwing	29	25	142		196
Fieldfare	21	19	34		74

Barred Warbler	0	0	1		1
Garden Warbler	0	3	3		6
Sedge Warbler	2	4	18		24
Willow Warbler	481	324	322		1127
Chiffchaff	0	3	8		11
Spotted Flycatcher	0	1	0		1
Pied Flycatcher	4	0	2		6
Great Tit	16	31	63		110
Blue Tit	0	0	1		1
Willow Tit	1	11	5		17
Siberian Tit	0	0	4		4
Willow/ Siberian Tit Hybrid	1	0	0		1
Great Grey Shrike	1	0	1		2
Magpie	0	1	0		1
House Sparrow	2	12	47		61
Brambling	125	237	98		460
Common Redpoll	415	596	1468		2479
Arctic Redpoll	9	188	24		221
Redpoll Sp	0	0	2		2
Greenfinch	130	18	91		239
Bullfinch	0	0	1		1
Reed Bunting	100	506	1234		1840
Little Bunting	2	1	2		5
Lapland Bunting	53	35	56		144
Rustic bunting	0	1	0		1
48 species	2480	3531	6566		12577

## Discussion

The first conclusion to draw from these data, is that the decision to continue with the scheme, and the decision to explore dates through September have both been entirely vindicated. There are some clear patterns emerging from this year's data, when comparing Team A and Team B results-even taking into consideration the difference in the number of ringing days available to each team.

### Comparing Teams A and B

1. Unsurprisingly the number of species available as September unfolds reduces considerably. Team A ringed 33 sp, while Team B only 24. However, we are convinced that the potential for Siberian rarities increases as time moves on. Perhaps this is wishful thinking at this stage, but given the appearance of such species much further west, there must be a high probability that they move through Varanger.
2. The sheer numbers of birds moving through the trapping area increases as we move through September. Species such as Meadow Pipit, Reed Bunting, Redpoll spp, and surprisingly ( for British ringers anyway) Dunnock, all show much increased numbers passing through as the need to quit high latitudes becomes more of an imperative.
3. Waders are still around during September, although the range of species and their numbers are much lower.

### Family and Species accounts

- 1) Waders:- observers in the area suggested that waders had a much better breeding season than recently; and in the weeks prior to our visit large numbers were seen in the bay. Numbers had reduced for our trip but we still had a good catch, especially of Curlew Sandpiper. Perhaps in future we need to try earlier dates also, to exploit potentially large numbers of waders.
- 2) Pipits:- It appears that earlier dates(see 2012) coincide with more Red Throated Pipits caught, suggesting that these are some of the first species to migrate. Meadow Pipits again showed massive movements through Varanger. The momentum builds from late August and seems to peak in mid September. Given that we can only ever hope to sample a proportion of the birds moving through, we can only speculate as to how many thousand individuals of this species pass through. Evidence of their eventual winter destination is emerging, but it is intriguing to consider where they come from. The large amount of biometric data collected should prove useful in comparisons with populations in know breeding areas.
- 3) Bluethroat:- the numbers of this bird continue to delight and surprise, being caught in even bigger numbers than in previous years. They had clearly had a successful, and protracted breeding season in 2014, with some birds in plumages suggesting having recently fledged in late August. We have now ringed 645 Bluethroats at Nesseby suggesting that not only is the surrounding area a very important breeding site for this species, but that it is also a 'collecting ground' for pre-migration fattening.
- 4) Willow Warbler:- another species enjoying good breeding success, but the puzzle remains about why only a couple of individuals of this species ringed showed the grey, cold tones of the subspecies 'acredula' which is supposed to be the dominant form in northern Scandinavia. Almost all the Willow Warblers ringed were indistinguishable from those ringed well to the south of Nesseby. In addition, it is surprising that 42 Willow Warblers were ringed by Team B at a date when it would be unusual to catch this species much further south in their range.

- 5) Brambling:- there were significantly fewer Brambling around this year compared to the previous two years; it's difficult to give a rationale for this.
- 6) Redpoll/Arctic Redpoll:- a couple of patterns have emerged: first there were much fewer Arctic Redpoll around this year—even taking into account possible identification difficulties. However, there were many more Common Redpoll around and their numbers (and those of Arctic) really build up during the later days of Team B's visit. We have taken comprehensive biometric, photographic and feather samples for DNA analysis to examine the genetic relationship between these two purported species. The results will, we hope, form a separate paper.
- 7) Buntings:- Impressive numbers of Reed Buntings were apparent on most days both in the nets and migrating over the site, and even without sound lures big numbers were caught. Table 2 shows that the pattern of migration mirrors that of Meadow Pipit. Their origin remains a mystery until and unless we have some feedback from their breeding areas. The number of Lapland Buntings ringed was disappointing but was not entirely reflective of the numbers in the area. On many days birds were migrating over, and many were flushed from the trapping area without finding their way into the nets, as was reported in 2013. Their period of migration appears to stop rather abruptly in early September since none of this species was ringed by Team B.
- 8) Other species from Table 1:- for ringers from Britain the notion of Dunnock as a migrant is a novelty, but the numbers clearly show this species was on the move—as were the calls of birds flying over the site. Furthermore, the extension of our visits this year demonstrated that their migration picks up as September goes by, with Team B catching a significant number of this species.
- 9) Waxwings , which were so prominent during 2013, were very scarce this year. Whether this reflected a poor breeding season—or an early movement away from the area is debateable—although the lack of berries on the trees in Nesseby was notable.
- 10) The appearance of 4 Siberian Tits in the nets suggests something of a range expansion since none were caught on previous trips. How sustained this is will become apparent over the coming years no doubt. Quite where the Blue Tit came from is up for debate, but the large increase in the number of Great Tits ringed points to a good breeding season.
- 11) Rarities:- Little Buntings seem to be becoming almost expected and it seems they must breed in the vicinity. Although Three-toed Woodpecker was a new species to the list, and a new species for most of the team members, they are relatively common in the area—although not in the coastal strip. The single female Bullfinch was probably one of the small local breeding population which we have very occasionally seen in the area—but by far the most unusual species was the Barred Warbler. This species has never before been recorded in Finnmark, and this record yet again demonstrates how ringing can uncover unusual species in an area. This again proves how potentially exciting places like Varanger /Nesseby can be if birders are prepared to put in the effort.

## **In Conclusion:**

This year's visits have continued to build on those of previous years—both in terms of birds ringed, data collected, and community involvement.

In excess of 12,000 birds ringed is a considerable achievement given the time we have been able to devote to ringing over 3 years. In addition we have unearthed new species for the region, moved a step towards resolving the genetic relationship between Redpoll species, and formulated further question yet to be tackled. The origins of species such as Reed Bunting and Meadow Pipit have been mentioned already, as has the issue of 'acredula' race Willow Warblers. A new issue emerged during the first few days of Team A's visit this year around the number of apparently juvenile Willow Warblers which were in the middle of primary moult.

Community engagement was a key original aim and we have built on our school connections and actually spent time inside a couple of schools as well as hosting 4 school groups at the ringing site. We think we could do more to reach out to the adult communities of Varangerbotn, Nesseby and Vestre Jacobselv, and we will try to build some events into future visits.

We are extremely grateful for the financial support provided by a range of agencies. We sincerely hope that these reports highlight the positive outcomes we feel we have achieved to show that the support has been good value for money.

None of this could have been possible without the support, energy and vision of our friends in Norway. Tormod Amundsen and Elin Taranger have worked with us to provide the wherewithal to continue. Kate Utsi has been heroic in allowing us to use her house as a base. Alf Tore Mjos has been very supportive in providing rings (planned and in emergencies!), and the permits to ring birds. And last but not least the environmental agency, who provide us with the permission to carry out the project in the Nesseby area. Thanks to you all.

The Nesseby Observatory Project has taken another significant step forward. The aims of the project continue to be met and developed, and much of the groundwork has been established. Further developments will now take the project onto a new level—assuming we can secure the key requirement of a physical base which can be used as the Observatory. All efforts can now be directed at this major step.

Colin McShane on behalf of both teams –October 2014