

## Mid Ulster Bird Ringing Project

### Background to Bird Ringing

Bird ringing is essential to the development of both bird science and bird conservation. The rings carry a unique number turning anonymous birds into recognisable individuals, identifiable for the rest of their lives. In addition to being the mainstay of migration studies worldwide, ring-recoveries are used to estimate annual survival rates of birds. Moreover, the biometrics collected when birds are handled provide valuable insight into other aspects of bird biology, such as breeding and moult, body weights, age and sex ratios, and even the incidence of disease.

Ringling data have shown their value in recent decades, when many bird populations declined and some species have also changed their migration patterns. If we are to detect and understand these changes, and take effective conservation measures, we need appropriate data. The most recent British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) studies combine data from ringing, nest records and counting schemes to produce demographic models of bird populations that give unprecedented detail on large-scale population dynamics. Understanding what is happening to our bird species will help direct efforts in bird conservation.



### Mid Ulster Bird Ringing Project

One of the objectives of the Mid Ulster Biodiversity Action Plan is to engage local people in action for our local biodiversity. One aspect of this is to encourage the observation and recording of our local species. Previous training projects have been well supported with local people now taking part and gathering vital information through a range of surveys for bats, butterflies, moths, etc.



Bird ringing provides vital information that cannot be obtained from bird observations alone. However, bird ringing is highly regulated and can only be carried out by skilled licensed ringers with the utmost consideration for the birds' welfare. Learning as an 'apprentice' under the close supervision of experienced ringers, progress is assessed by an independent ringer so the Ringing Scheme maintains very high standards of bird welfare and scientific data. A British Trust for Ornithology ringing permit is a legal requirement for anyone ringing birds. It has to be renewed annually.

Within Northern Ireland there are a few licensed bird ringers, however, few operate 'West of the Bann'. Consequently, there is a lack of data on bird species in the Mid Ulster area that could be obtained through ringing. This information would be particularly beneficial in shaping future conservation work both through and outside the Mid Ulster Biodiversity Action Plan.

To address this situation the “Mid Ulster Bird Ringing Project” is being developed in partnership with trained licensed bird ringers. The objective of the project is to bring together people interested in becoming a licensed ringer, and to provide training opportunities to enable them to do so. Through this, vital data will be obtained on a range of bird species frequenting the Mid Ulster area.

The outcome of the project will be to have a number of trained bird ringers operating in the Mid Ulster area, gathering vital information that will be of use at local, national and even international levels.

#### Traad – Constant Effort Site

During 2015 and 2016 a number of ringing training days were held throughout the Mid Ulster area. Following an assessment of this, it became apparent that one of the best ringing sites in the area (and on a par with any in Northern Ireland) is at Traad. It was decided to undertake a concerted effort during 2017, and to run the site as a trial Constant Effort Site (CES). The CES is a national standardized ringing program where ringers operate the same mist nets in the same locations within the same site over the same time period at each session over the breeding season. There are 12 sessions undertaken, one within each of the 10 day windows specified by the BTO. There are currently over 140 CES sites throughout Britain and Ireland, but only 1 other CES site in Northern Ireland. Traad is now registered as the second.



Between the beginning of May and the end of August 2017, all 12 sessions within the CES windows were completed at Traad. These sessions resulted in 357 new birds ringed and 75 retraps (birds already with a ring). Some of the highlights from this are that a sedge warbler originally ringed in France in 2015, which had been caught at Traad in 2016, was retrapped again in 2017. Sedge warblers migrate, spending the winter in western and southern Africa. This bird has been to Africa (twice), returning to Lough Neagh, and was caught in 2017 within 10 metres of where it had been caught in 2016. Another sedge warbler ringed in Spain on 11<sup>th</sup> April 2017, turned up at Traad on May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2017, having travelled at least 1,968km in 21 days. Several birds ringed at Traad have been caught in France and southern England.



While recoveries of birds in or from other countries creates excitement, the value of the information obtained from Traad's own birds is important in understanding local population dynamics. The numbers of sedge warblers and particularly reed warblers being ringed at the site is significant on a Northern Ireland scale. Ringing records for Northern Ireland for sedge warblers show: 32 ringed in 2014; 9 in 2015; 57 in 2016 (17 of which were from Traad), and 144 ringed at Traad in 2017. The importance of the site for information on reed warblers is even more significant with no reed warblers ringed in Northern Ireland in either

2014 or 2015, and only 17 ringed in 2016 (16 of which were from Traad). In 2017, 29 reed warblers were ringed at Traad. (Totals for NI for 2017 are not available yet).

### Traad – The Future

In addition to the vital data on birds being obtained through the Mid Ulster Bird Ringing Project, the training opportunities being provided have been recognised. As well as local people becoming involved and starting the training process, trainees from over Northern Ireland (Belfast, Ballymena, Ballynahinch, Warrenpoint, Portadown, etc.) have attended ringing sessions to ‘experience Traad’.



As bird ringing is highly regulated and can only be undertaken with trained licenced ringers present, the project has been relying on the good will of licenced ringers volunteering their time and effort to ensure each ringing session can be undertaken.

Realizing the importance of the site for the data collected, it is hoped that licenced ringers, trainees, and volunteers can be talked in to helping out again to ensure 2018 is another successful year.

### Traad 2018 - quick update

The first two CES sessions of 2018 were undertaken on 12<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> May.

The ‘celebrity’ French ringed sedge warbler has turned up again (at both sessions).

Another sedge warbler with one of our own rings, first ringed in July 2015 at Traad (as an adult) is also back for another year.

Both these birds have made it to Senegal and back 3 times for the ‘French’ bird and at least 4 for our own adult from 2015, and turned up in the exact same place.

One of our own reed warblers ringed as an adult in 2016 has also made it back for 2018, again having migrated to Africa and back at least 3 times.