

Garden Bird Ringing

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Many of us imagine our garden is just a place that birds just pop in to feed then move on, but by catching and ringing them a different picture emerges.

To catch them I use a simple wire mesh container with a one foot square end and about 18 ins long, which has a hinged flap one end that drops when a line is pulled attached to a peg holding it up. To extract the birds at the opposite end is a hole covered by a piece of soft material.

The downside is of course one has to be watching what goes in, and over the years it has been surprising what takes a fancy to a digestive biscuit. Unfortunately there is the occasional rat and squirrel, which easily push the flap open to escape, but the birds stay put and are quickly removed. One might imagine the birds will be so frightened by this they would never use it again but in a lot of cases this is not so. In fact the dominant robin now thinks this is part of his territory and can be seen harassing birds that go in it, as he continues to do. I joke that they wave a ringed leg at me to say, I have my pass now!

The whole idea started off trying to understand the winter feeding of robins as there seemed to be far too many using the feeders at once. Once a robin had a unique ring number it was easy to see just how many were actually taking food. In the worst winter of 2012/13 a surprising 35 were caught, some having rings from previous winters. In the winter of 2015/16 which was fairly mild just eleven were caught, showing how important feeding can be in a bad winter!

Although this did start mainly as a winter activity, it was soon obvious it was being used in the summer too when parents bring their new family in to show them where there is a ready food supply available. This summer dunnocks and robins did well with five young of each caught, but not until July so it is possible the first broods failed! Three young great spots were also tempted in.

Catching the species feeding is also a good tool into seeing just how long birds remain faithful to garden feeders, in May a male great spotted woodpecker was retrapped and the ring showed it was first caught in 2009 and identified as bird born in 2008, making it eight years old. In the intervening years it came to the trap in March 2013, and May 2015 so must have been getting a bit of dementia!

One other surprise was recently catching a long tailed tit that I first ringed here in Feb 2013 making it over three years old. Thinking this must be a very old bird I checked the BTO website and found one ringed bird in the Cotswolds got to eight years. Similarly my old great spot was three years short of the record of one in Norfolk that got to one month under twelve years!

Over the years twelve garden species have been caught this way, in addition to those already mentioned and these were blackbird, jay, wood pigeon, coal, great, marsh and blue tit, and nuthatch.