



**MERSEYSIDE  
RINGING  
GROUP**



## **Annual Report 2014**

Mid-Cheshire Barn Owls, 2013 and 2014: two record years  
*Andrew Duncalf*

# ***MERSEYSIDE RINGING GROUP***

*Registered Charity No 700044*

*www.merseysiderg.org.uk*

*Report Editor: Peter Coffey*



Cover: a very special female Barn Owl of the continental sub-species *Tyto alba guttata* found nesting with a male *Tyto alba alba*. Whilst some *guttata* Barn Owls have been reared in captivity in the UK, this is only the second record of a wild *guttata* breeding here. See pages 3-8 (Photo: S Binney)

## **Acknowledgements**

Merseyside Ringing Group receives vital co-operation from many landowners, farmers and gamekeepers in Merseyside, Cheshire and north Wales. They permit group members to work on their property and without their generous help, much of the work of the group would be impossible. The Group also receives considerable support from local authority countryside and ranger teams, local Wildlife Trusts and private individuals. Thank you all for your support.

Maps showing the distribution of controls and recoveries have been produced using DMAP.

Merseyside Ringing Group operate under the auspices of the BTO Ringing Scheme which is funded by a partnership of the British Trust for Ornithology, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (on behalf of: Natural England, Natural Resources Wales, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Department of the Environment Northern Ireland), The National Parks and Wildlife Service (Ireland) and the ringers themselves. Data from the BTO Ringing Scheme has been used in several articles in this report and we acknowledge the use of this valuable resource.

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### Editor’s note

Two Barn Owl articles take pride of place in this edition. The first, by Steve Binney, documents the *Tyto alba guttata* female he discovered breeding in one of his nest boxes, only the second such record for the UK. The second is a tribute to Andrew Duncalf who died in January 2015; Andrew made a huge contribution to the Group’s Barn Owl ringling and the article is based on his own words from his blog which he steadfastly updated throughout his illness.

The successful breeding of Common Terns at Shotton for the first time since 2008 provided an opportune moment to reflect on the development of the colony and its significance nationally, why the colony failed to breed and what has happened since.

It is sixty years since our founder members, Rob Cockbain and Graham Thomason, started ringling in 1954 and ten years since the Group produced its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Report. This edition updates a summary of foreign controls and recoveries for 1954-2014.

# MID-CHESHIRE BARN OWLS 2013 AND 2014:

## TWO RECORD YEARS

Andrew Duncalf\*

### 2013

This was the worst breeding season since the formation of the mid-Cheshire Barn Owl Group, and was reported as probably the worst for fifty years nationally. The combination of low vole populations and a cold, wet, spring – particularly snow in late-March – meant that most adult birds did not achieve breeding condition and many of them held territory without laying. Pellets were noticeably smaller than usual and contained more shrews than voles, about one-third, or less, of the nutritional value but probably taking the same effort to catch.

The earliest egg laying date for mid-Cheshire Barn Owls in 2013 was 24 April. This compares to 3 March in 2012, 8 April in 2011, 2 April in 2010 and 11 March in 2009. The earliest chick, a single bird, was ringed on 1 July. Many breeding attempts failed; for instance, on 14 August three sites were visited in the south of the county, expecting to ring chicks, but all three broods had died. Only six active nests were found in July or August, and 16 chicks ringed.

There were occasional bright spots including a roosting adult male, trapped on 7 August near Comberbach, that had been ringed as a chick in July 2004 just a few miles away in Pickmere. As a bird in his tenth year, he becomes the oldest owl that I have ever recovered.

In 2013, 21 adults were newly-ringed, with 26 retraps and recoveries. Eight of the latter were found dead, and eight were breeding or roosting in the same box as in previous years. Only six were discovered more than 10 km from where they had originated. Amongst these was our furthest ever traveller, a female that had been ringed as a chick in 2007 near Malltraeth on Anglesey, 127 km away and the longest movement of a Barn Owl to or from mid-Cheshire.

Some conservation organisations published doom-laden reports about the poor breeding season but there were already more hopeful signs in the later part of 2013. As birds fed on the young voles born this year, some were prompted to breed and three Barn Owl nests were found from mid-September containing a total of 13 ringable chicks, the last of them ringed on 30 October. The year had ended with just nine broods ringed, a total of 29 chicks, but it was with some optimism that we approached the 2014 season.

### 2014

On 30 March 2014 the first Barn Owl nest was found, with a female already incubating a large clutch of seven eggs, and the next day the above-mentioned adult male, ringed in 2004, was found in a box with a female incubating five eggs. Another box visited on 8 April held a clutch of five eggs and a newly-hatched chick. The first chicks, a brood of five, were ringed on 1 May and it was clear that the 2014 season was going to be early, and productive.

Things moved on apace and the month of May was busy, with May Day bringing the 25th nest of the season, a brood of five chicks whose ages indicated eggs laid at the end of February, the earliest laying date locally since 2007. On 5 May a female was found incubating nine eggs, the largest clutch I have ever found and a direct reflection of the abundance of prey this year. By 31 May, 50 nests were being monitored. On 12 June the 150th owlet of the season was ringed,



Two Barn Owls ready to fledge from a mid-Cheshire nest-box (Photo: A Duncalf)

with the 200th following on 20 June. On 29 June there was another indication of this remarkable season when a ringed female was discovered incubating six eggs, her number revealing that we had already ringed her brood of six owlets on 26 May at a different site, not far away. She had quickly got on with a second clutch, on the earliest date that I have ever found a bird with a second clutch following successful fledging of the first.

On 7 July I had another record when a female brooding her young owlets tipped the scales at 497g, probably the heaviest Barn Owl in Cheshire and another indicator of plentiful food supplies. Ringing slowed down from the beginning of July, with a further 50 chicks until the last, a second brood of three on 30 October, matching the record of 2013 although that was for a late first brood.

Thus, 2013 and 2014 were both record years for Barn Owls breeding in mid-Cheshire, the former the worst and the latter the best, illustrating well the natural cycles in abundance and productivity, and this species' ability to bounce back from adversity.

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\*The above reports have been extracted by David Norman from Andrew Duncalf's blog <http://midcheshirebarnowls.blogspot.co.uk/>. What readers of his blog would not have known, for he never mentioned it, was that Andrew was suffering from cancer, diagnosed in April 2013, to which he finally succumbed in January 2015. He fitted in all of his nest-recording and ringing around surgery and sessions of chemotherapy, displaying immense fortitude and resilience. In 2014, as well as personally visiting 68 Barn Owl nests, he also recorded 11 Kestrel, 8 Tawny Owl and 6 Little Owl nests.

He was particularly skilled at trapping adult Barn Owls, yielding lots of useful information on site-fidelity. Over the last eight years (2007-14) he submitted (via MRG) 378 nest records to the BTO (313 Barn Owl, 38 Kestrel, 15 Tawny Owl and 12 Little Owl), and ringed over 1,000 Barn Owls.

It was touching that Andrew wrote, in November 2014 when he declined any further treatment, "I have been fortunate in that I have been able to get out and about pretty much as normal this year and the time that I have enjoyed monitoring and ringing my owls has provided a much needed escape from my illness without which life would have been much more of a struggle."

Davenham Church was full for Andrew's memorial service on 20 January 2015. It is probable that Barn Owls have never previously been mentioned so much in a funeral, or indeed ever, and it was especially good that several farmers attended, a tribute to the great network of conservation-minded landowners that he had nurtured. Alison, his wife, decided to share donations given in Andrew's memory between a local hospice and a bursary, to be administered by MRG, to support the continuation of his conservation and monitoring work with Barn Owls and other raptors.



A brood of four Barn Owl chicks showing a spread of sizes and ages resulting from their asynchronous hatching. (Photo: Andrew Duncalf)