



**MERSEYSIDE  
RINGING  
GROUP**



# **Annual Report 2014**

*“Guttata” surprise Steve Binney*

# ***MERSEYSIDE RINGING GROUP***

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*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.

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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.

## “GUTTATA” SURPRISE

Steve Binney

The Barn Owl season in 2014 started off promisingly with a healthy number of early nests. Little did I know when I set out on 21 May for a routine evening visit checking my Barn Owl boxes in Wirral that I was to get the biggest surprise of my many years of ringing Barn Owls: I trapped a bird of the “*guttata*” sub-species. The box was occupied by a pair of adult Barn Owls, with one recently hatched chick and two eggs. The male had been ringed in the same box the previous year as an adult but the female was unringed and was distinctly different from the hundreds of other Barn Owls I have handled.

### *Taxonomy*

The Barn Owl was once considered the most widely-distributed land bird in the world being present on every continent except Antarctica. However, the advent of DNA sequencing has resulted in extensive re-classification and many Barn Owl sub-species are now considered to be species in their own right. Instead of there being one species (‘Barn Owl’) with a world distribution separated into 36 sub-species, the species ‘Barn Owl’ now has just ten sub-species covering Europe, Africa, Arabia, India and Asia southeast to Java. The sub-species in the UK, *Tyto alba alba* (*Taa*), is restricted to western and southern Europe and north Africa (from Scotland to Morocco and from Portugal to Greece). The darker sub-species, *Tyto alba guttata* (*Tag*), is found mainly in central and eastern Europe, from Sweden to Bulgaria and Netherlands to western Russia. A zone of intergradation, where extensive interbreeding occurs between the two races, exists in eastern France, Netherlands, Belgium, western Germany, central Switzerland, Hungary and the central Balkans.

### *Taa v Tag*

When I processed the female, my initial thought was that it was an “African Barn Owl”, presumably an escaped captive or a deliberate release which had been known to occur in other parts of the UK. I checked with other members of the Cheshire Barn Owl groups for similar records of dark phase Barn Owls – none had been reported. I then contacted Colin Shawyer, founder and co-ordinator of the Barn Owl Conservation Network; he is widely acknowledged as a leading expert in Barn Owls and a person who has handled birds of the *Tag* sub-species. Colin spent a couple of weeks in the Dijon region of France where the two sub-species commonly interbreed, giving him the opportunity to see and compare the adults and young of *Taa* and *Tag* and their offspring. He also found a *Tag* female breeding with a *Taa* male in Norfolk in 2008, the former having been ringed in Holland as a chick in 2007 and confirmed by his Dutch colleagues to be from an adult *Tag* pairing (the predominant sub-species in Holland). This was the first record of a *Tag* breeding in the UK.

Colin advised me of the key characteristics for identifying a *Tag*; a British Birds Rarities Committee review of the identifying criteria of “dark-breasted Barn Owls in Britain” (Paul R French 2009) was also referenced. As the *Tag* bird was a female, in the remainder of this article all comparisons with *Taa* birds relate to females because *Taa* males tend to have lighter-coloured plumage and few, if any, spots/freckles on the underparts. All of the images are of this *Tag* bird, with comparisons with several different *Taa* females.

There are no known biometric differences that would help in separating the sub-species. There were no shed feathers in the nest and I was not licensed to take feathers from the bird, so there is no possibility of molecular (DNA) analysis. The key characteristics for identifying a *Tag* bird are differences in plumage, examined in detail below.



## Wing

The *Tag* wing has a deep almost mahogany-like colour (red/brown pigmentation) present in the very dark outer vanes (including the barring) of the primaries and secondaries. The cross-bars are more extensive in *Tag* and the wing coverts are dark grey rather than burnt ochre or golden bronze on the upper wing surfaces of *Taa*.



**1:** *Tag* wing (top) and **2:** *Taa* wing (bottom): the contrast between the wings of *Tag* and *Taa* is clearly visible in these photos

Profiles of the birds, shown below, also demonstrate the difference in colour.



**3:** *Tag* profile

**4:** *Taa* profile

**5:** *Tag* front view

### Underparts

The dark buff colouration, with extensive dark freckles, covers the sides of the head of *Tag* and extends through the underparts, including the underwing (photo 6). This colour extends through the legs to the feet (visible on photos 3 and 5), a particularly important characteristic. Any bird showing a contrast between a dark breast and a pale belly and leg feathers is not a *Tag*.

*Taa* may have spots that are usually less extensive than a *Tag*, and a light buff colouration to the upper breast. However *Taa* females vary considerably: photo 7 shows a very pale female with the slightest tinge of buff colouration at the side of the breast and very few spots whilst photo 8 shows a female with buff colouration and extensive spots down the side of the head and across the breast. However both *Taa* females have white bellies.



6: *Tag* female

7: Light-coloured *Taa*

8: Darker-coloured *Taa*

### Facial disc

The facial disc of *Tag* is generally sooty in appearance, often more so than female *Taa*, with dark, often deep purplish, feathering usually extending from around the eyes outwards towards the edges of the facial disc. The edge of the facial disc is also darker, on average, in *Tag*. Both features can be seen in photos 9 and 10.



9: *Tag* facial disc

10: *Taa* facial disc



Despite these seemingly clear differences, it is nevertheless sometimes quite difficult to distinguish between a particularly dark *Taa* and a true *Tag*. Having examined the photos of my potential *Tag*, Colin Shawyer replied:

*“I have been sent numerous pictures of dark Barn Owls by BOCN Advisers/BTO ringers during the last 25 years but never have I considered any to have been a Tag until now”.*

The adult female *Tag* appeared to be in her third calendar year. As often happens with female Barn Owls, she was moulting some flight-feathers during incubation. Looking at the primary feathers (photo 1), P8 and P4 are emerging whilst the barring on P6 and P5 is of a lighter shade of grey, indicating these feathers would have been moulted last year; P9 and P10 are feathers grown as a nestling, being slightly more grey/brown in hue and with a somewhat more pointed shape. She would have first bred or attempted to breed in 2013.

### **Did the chicks inherit “guttata” characteristics?**

Two chicks, both females, hatched and fledged. The earliest photo (11) of the chicks, taken when the chicks were 35-38 days old, show no real difference to those of most *Taa* pairings although one appears to have inherited some of mum's genes, having a darker plumage than the other.



**11:** Chicks from *Taa/Tag* pairing; chick “A” on the left has a darker facial disc.

Photographs of the chicks taken three weeks later confirm that one chick has a darker facial disc. Chick A (photo 12) has more extensive and darker feathering around the eyes, feathers at the edge of the disc with more pronounced dark tips and a general discolouration compared to chick B (photo 13). The crown feathers of chick A appear to be darker grey and more extensive than those of chick B, and chick A has dark spots at the side of its head.

Photographs of the undersides show chick A (photo 14) has quite extensive coverage of dark spots, prominent on the flanks and underwing but muted on the breast which has a buff colouration. Chick B (photo 15) has fewer spots but has buff colouration on the upper breast.



12: Chick "A" facial disc



13: Chick "B" facial disc



14: Chick "A" underside



15: Chick "B" underside

At this stage, neither chick appears to have inherited the distinctive dark buff colouration of the mother; let's hope they are retrapped so that their adult plumage can be examined in detail.

#### ***Where did my Tag come from?***

Nineteen foreign-ringed Barn Owls have been recovered or controlled in the UK (Robinson *et al.* 2015) but the records did not differentiate between *Tag* and *Taa* birds. Ten were from the Netherlands, five from Germany, three from Belgium and one from Denmark. Most were found in the eastern counties, from Kent through to Suffolk, Norfolk, Lincolnshire, Yorkshire and up to Aberdeenshire. However some moved much further: two reached Cornwall, and singles reached Somerset, Worcestershire, Argyll and Bute, Highland and Orkney.

All had been ringed as nestlings and fifteen were recovered between October and April of their first year. The remaining four birds all survived long enough to have started breeding but three were found dead without proof of breeding before the start of a second breeding season. The final bird was the ringed female *Tag* discovered by Colin Shawyer breeding with a *Taa* male in Norfolk in June 2008, with a clutch of five eggs, the first record of a *Tag* breeding in the UK; she sadly perished in July, a casualty of traffic on the A10, close to the nesting site.



As noted earlier, my female's first breeding year would have been 2013. From the evidence of the foreign-ringed Barn Owls, it is most likely that my bird would have crossed into Britain in the autumn of 2012 or early in 2013. If she bred in 2013, it was probably somewhere in the UK.

*Tags* are far less sedentary than the nominate race. Over 54% of recoveries of chicks ringed in a German study were found more than 50 km from their natal site and that increased to 62% of birds more than one year old when ringed (Bairlein 1985). For *Taas* in Britain and Ireland, only 11.1% of chicks and 11.3% of older birds moved more than 50 km (Wernham *et al* 2002). More locally, within the MRG area and excluding vehicle-assisted movements, only eight out of 307 recoveries/controls in 2007-14 moved more than 50 km. All eight had been ringed as chicks. Interestingly, two chicks ringed in 2011 moved from Lincolnshire and Gloucestershire to Cheshire where they were controlled as breeding females in 2012 and 2014 respectively. Both moved 132 km, unusually long distances for *Taas*.

The distance moved by young *Tags* varies from year to year and the term "Wanderjahren" has been applied to years with increased dispersal. In those years, good breeding success is followed by widespread collapse in vole *Microtus* populations. The dispersal takes place in late summer and is completed by mid-November. Vole numbers in the UK were low in the winter of 2012/13 and into the spring of 2013 before recovering from July 2013 onwards. Many Barn Owls were underweight and out of condition for breeding and it may be that a naturally less sedentary *Tag* was encouraged to wander further afield in search of a good food supply.

Its origins, of course, are unknown and will remain so. The release of numerous sub-species and mixed sub-species of Barn Owl in the 1980s and 1990s resulted in their being placed on Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). The keeper of any bird of a species which lives in the wild has to be able to show that the bird is held lawfully (i.e. captive-bred) and a licence would be required to release the bird. Natural Resources Wales and Natural England confirmed that no licences were issued for the release of captive Barn Owls during the relevant time period (July 2012-May 2014). It is still possibly a captive escape – some wild birds are held illegally – but I leave the final comment to Colin Shawyer:

*"Whilst illegal escapes still occur and Tags are still held along with other sub-species in bird collections throughout the UK, on balance, and because breeding between a known wild Tag and Taa was confirmed in 2008, I believe your pairing in Wirral is also a true example of this".*

### **Acknowledgements**

Special thanks to Colin Shawyer for his helpful advice and comments upon which much of this article is based. I took all photographs in this article except photo 8 which is from Andrew Duncalf. The editor of this Annual Report, Peter Coffey, provided much useful guidance.

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