
CAMBRIDGESHIRE BIRD RINGING REPORT 2018*Michael Holdsworth*

2018 was a relatively quiet and undistinguished year for Cambridgeshire bird ringing. The total of 18,021 new birds ringed was lower than the 20,017 of the previous year (now revised up by the BTO from the 19,671 of our last report*). This is the lowest total since 2012, and well below the average of the previous six years which is 19,362 – though even this number see-saws up and down as historical numbers are continually revised. Our record total, from 2016, and again recently revised, is 24,163. There is probably no single cause for this fall in numbers. Some resident species were undoubtedly impacted by the end-February cold snap which brought the sort of snowfall and freezing conditions many of us had long forgotten. Some migrant species showed up in reduced numbers, particularly Sedge Warblers. But overall there was a general reduction in ringing activity across the board. The Wicken Fen Group, for example, hit a ten-year low of 3,025, partly because there was no targeting of migrant Meadow Pipits and Reed Buntings on Burwell Fen.

2018 was also distinguished by the lowest number of different species ringed annually in the last ten years – just 82. Not surprisingly no new species were added to the County list. The record (both 2011 and 2012) is 98 species and most years easily top 90. Higher totals in previous years have been helped along by wildfowl, wader and gull ringing, which barely featured in 2018. No large gulls have been ringed in the County since the brief resurrection of landfill ringing at Milton in 2013–14. Fourteen species from 2017 failed to show, including ‘scarce regulars’ such as Corn Bunting, Firecrest and Redstart. In contrast, eight species were recorded in 2018 but not in 2017. Four of these cropped up in Tony Martin’s ‘garden’: two Buzzards and a Marsh Harrier in his new baited trap; six Jack Snipe with his new thermal camera (the first for a long time); and two more Yellow-browed Warblers to sound lures. There were an additional two Yellow-browed Warblers caught at another fenland site. After a blank year, Yellow Wagtails were back on the list with 95, a nationally significant number, of which 61 were from the revived Wicken Fen roost.

For the first time, Cambridgeshire’s most-ringed species aligned themselves to the national Britain and Ireland pattern. Our top four has previously tended to feature our fenland favourites – Reed Warbler and Reed Bunting – but 2018’s new leader table has Blue Tit, of course, followed by Goldfinch, Great Tit and Blackcap. Nationally, it’s a slightly different order: Blue Tit, then Great Tit, Blackcap, Goldfinch. An astonishing 134,623 Blue Tits were ringed in B&I in 2018 with a third of these being nestlings, probably almost all from nestboxes (which is the same proportion as Great Tits). In contrast, hardly any nests of Blackcaps (249 pulli nationally) and Goldfinch (161) were ringed. Adults of both these species provide the easiest of targets for ringers. Their populations and ranges are expanding – with both changes to climate and garden feeding no doubt playing a role. Goldfinches now seem addicted to nyjer and sunflower hearts in our gardens (sixth in the RSPB’s Garden Birdwatch); and Blackcaps are ultra-responsive suckers for sound-lures both in spring and autumn – a sad fact that has in the last decade industrialised ‘traditional’ *ambelopoulia* trapping in Cyprus and other parts of the Middle East.

* The BTO’s online Ringing and Nest Recording Report is subject to revision after first publication. Some of the totals for previous years published in CBR Ringing Reports do not now match those shown online. Where this is the case, and where earlier Ringing Reports had a different number, the revised total has been shown here in italics.

These top four species accounted for almost exactly one in three of the overall total of 983,176 birds ringed in Britain and Ireland, a total which was also below the level of recent years. In Cambridgeshire the top-four proportion was greater (worse?) at 38% of the annual total; it had been 28% in 2017 for these four. In a slim and slow year, their numbers held up much better than those of the other migrant warblers, of woodland and farmland species or of any species of conservation concern. The table below shows the tallies and rankings of the top twenty species. As usual, the typical garden feeder species are highlighted in bold.

The table below shows the tallies and rankings of the top twenty species:

	<i>Species</i>	2018	<i>2017*</i>
1	Blue Tit	2,676	<i>2,571*</i>
2	Goldfinch	1,658	<i>1,600*</i>
3	Great Tit	1,518	<i>1,398*</i>
4	Blackcap	1,000	<i>1,174*</i>
5	Reed Warbler	898	<i>933*</i>
6	Reed Bunting	865	<i>1,182*</i>
7	Greenfinch	583	<i>610</i>
8	Blackbird	558	<i>799*</i>
9	Long-tailed Tit	537	<i>599*</i>
10	Starling	508	<i>475</i>
11	Chaffinch	449	<i>457*</i>
12	Dunnock	448	<i>642*</i>
13	Sand Martin	447	<i>618</i>
14	Robin	429	<i>651*</i>
15	House Sparrow	395	<i>469</i>
16	Wren	390	<i>549*</i>
17	Chiffchaff	364	<i>798*</i>
18	Swallow	329	<i>143*</i>
19	Redwing	314	<i>423*</i>
20	Barn Owl	283	<i>404*</i>

While the year total for birds of all ages was down, nest-recording and pullus ringing held up well at 2,314, almost exactly the same as 2017's 2,303*, but a higher proportion – 13%. Nestbox Blue Tits were back to average at 702, but Great Tit pulli numbers, for some reason, remain depressed – 363 against earlier years (for example, 608 in 2016, 835 in 2015). The big-box species had a relatively poor year: 272 Barn Owl chicks (377 in 2017) and only 64 Kestrels (107). Our two Sand Martin projects, at Dunkirk and at Ferry Meadows CP, did badly: 352 (519). Tony Martin's 186-hole bunker at Dunkirk accounted for 199 of these. The long-term ringing there of every chick and almost every adult continues to yield insights. One female fledged her 40th chick, with the help of six different mates, and eight others have produced 25 fledged chicks or more. The capture of adults ringed as chicks elsewhere, and the reporting of Dunkirk-ringed chicks breeding in other colonies, has led to an investigation of natal dispersal in this species using all the BTO data. The results are intriguing, and the resulting paper will be offered to a BTO journal for publication. Other focussed breeding studies and projects continue to deliver. Forty-one Black-tailed Godwits, associated with the RSPB's head-starting project, represent most of the national total. Ninety-four pulli Spotted Flycatchers were a continuing by-product of the geolocator project. Nineteen more flycatchers were tagged out of 39 new adults caught. Two new nest-recording projects deserve a mention. Forty-seven Tree Sparrows ringed at Redmere were the first for very many years. While some way short of Wiltshire's eye-watering battery-farm total (2,322 Tree Sparrow pulli in 2018 was their best year ever) it is hoped to continue this work in future years. Simon Evans, working with Dick Newell's 'Action for Swifts'

accounted for 124 of the 144 nestling Swifts ringed in the county; and 105 of an identical 144 ringed next-door in Suffolk. The two counties combined represent over half the national pulli total. The Cambridgeshire numbers come from church nestbox initiatives in Ely, St Neots and Landbeach; the 124 came from 57 broods.

The national ringing total in 2018 for Britain and Ireland fell to 983,176 to which Cambridgeshire's totals made a disproportionate contribution both in numbers and in the variety of species processed. Some nationally significant numbers are shown below.

	Cambs 2018	Britain and Ireland	County ranking and percentage of national total	Top county and total
Black-tailed Godwit	44	242	Second – 18%	East Yorks (76)
Corncrake	5	201	Third – 2%	Norfolk (166)
Swift	150	661	First – 24%	
Lesser Whitethroat	116	2,614	Fourth – 4%	Suffolk (372)
Spotted Flycatcher	135	1173	Third – 12%	Isle of Man (181)
Yellow Wagtail	95	846	Second – 11%	Dorset (424)
Pied Wagtail	221	2,541	Third – 9%	NE Scotland (348)
Reed Bunting	865	13,325	Third –6%	Norfolk (1268)

Apart from the first two RSPB special cases, it's always surprising to see how low the national total numbers are for what might be considered quite common species (and remember those 135K Blue Tits...). For Cambridgeshire, most of these good numbers come from a single site – 73 Lesser Whitethroats at Dave Culham's RAF Wyton Bomb Dump site; 61 Yellow Wagtails from Wicken Fen; 138 Pied Wagtails from the BP/McDs roost at Whittlesford. Ninety Spotted Flycatchers had been good enough for first place last year, so it was personally a bit disappointing to see my 135 having to settle for bronze this year behind observatory ringing on the Calf of Man and Portland. Flycatchers remain common in the north and west. Their national total is boosted by nestbox and garden ringing – 420 pulli in 2018. In contrast, there was not a single nest of Yellow Wagtails ringed anywhere in Britain and Ireland in 2018. Our Green Woodpeckers, usually a feature of this table, tied in 2018 with Hertfordshire in fifth place (at 11). That from just 205 nationally, fewer than the 220 Yellow-browed Warblers...

134 ringing sessions for the Wicken Fen Group took place at several different sites in 2018, somewhat fewer than in recent years. The year's ringing total was 3,025 new birds of 51 different species, in over 4,900 'encounters', including the first Mallard for over ten years. Blue Tits topped the list for numbers ringed (352), followed closely by Blackcap (343), then Reed Warbler (288). Common Tern, Kingfisher, Jay, Tawny Owl and Mallard were the only species to register just one new capture each. Unsurprisingly no new species was added to the Group's overall list, which thus remains at 106. After nearly fifty years as the leader of the Group Chris Thorne stepped down in April; management of the Group is now in the hands of a steering group of senior members. During the summer the Group took part in the Bioblitz and hosted Chris Packham; and later presented a ringing demonstration as part of the CBC's November Migration conference.

Apart from Wicken I have received individual 2018 totals for a handful of additional Cambridgeshire ringing sites (with new bird ringing totals >200) RAF Wyton 1,440, Madingley Wood 754, Dunkirk 551, Great Stukeley 493, Holt Island 457, Chippenham Fen 370, Lordship Farm, Hinnton 326, Paxton Pits CES 316, Five Arches Pit 276, and Ely Beet Pits 250.

BTO Constant Effort Sites projects continued at Bainton (Chris Hughes), Ely Beet Pits (Dave Culham), Five Arches Pit (Alan Brimmell), the Great Fen (Dave Neal), Paxton Pits (Derek Guar) and Wicken Fen (WFG).

As and when time allows, work continues on the website <http://cambridgeshirebirdringing.org/>. For the moment this is intended as a repository of Cambridgeshire ringing data and analyses rather than an exercise in social media!

Ringing totals for 2018

There are three age categories in the following summary table. Pulli are birds either ringed in the nest or as not-fully-grown dependent juveniles where the place of ringing will definitely be the place of birth. Juveniles are birds in their first calendar year. Adults are birds in their second or any later calendar year. Unaged birds are fully-grown flying birds where plumage characters do not allow first calendar year to be excluded (for example, a November Tree Sparrow or Long-tailed Tit). Recovered are reports (captures, field sightings or birds found dead) of birds away from the site of ringing, often by another ringer (a 'control'). Recovered may include either birds ringed in Cambridgeshire and found elsewhere, or birds ringed elsewhere and found in Cambridgeshire. Retrapped are reports of birds found alive (captured or re-sighted) within 5km of their original place of ringing. Species shown in *italics* recorded recoveries without there being any new birds of those species being ringed (just LBBG this year).

	Pulli	Juvenile	Adult	Unaged	2018	Retrapped	Recovered
Shelduck			1		1		
Gadwall			1		1		
Mallard		3	8		11		4
Teal		2	19		21	2	4
Sparrowhawk		6	7		13	3	
Marsh Harrier			1		1		
Buzzard			2		2		
Corncrake			5		5		
Mute Swan		13	12		25	158	29
Moorhen			1		1		
Lapwing	2				2		
Black-tailed Godwit	41		3		44	7	
Jack Snipe		1	4	1	6	3	
Black-headed Gull	5				5		1
<i>L Black-backed Gull</i>							2
Common Tern	1				1		
Stock Dove	18	1	2		21		
Woodpigeon		4	25		29		
Collared Dove	2	1	7	1	11	1	
Cuckoo			2		2		
Barn Owl	272		11		283	9	22
Tawny Owl	8		1		9		
Little Owl	1				1		2
Swift	144		16		160	7	

	Pulli	Juvenile	Adult	Unaged	2018	Retrapped	Recovered
Kingfisher		4	3		7		
GS Woodpecker		27	26	2	55	43	1
Green Woodpecker		4	7		11	5	
Kestrel	64		1		65		4
Jay		2	7		9	5	
Magpie		2	1		3		
Jackdaw	11	1	6		18		1
Coal Tit	18	45	29	2	94	57	
Marsh Tit		36	25	1	62	44	150
Blue Tit	702	1,442	529	3	2,676	1,647	23
Great Tit	363	777	376	2	1,518	1,253	5
Bearded Tit		24	5		29	7	2
Skylark				2	2		
Sand Martin	352	32	63		447	80	6
Swallow	48	257	24		329		
House Martin		10			10		
Cetti's Warbler		50	15	11	76	45	1
Long-tailed Tit		65	194	278	537	412	4
Willow Warbler		95	73		168	48	1
Chiffchaff	6	277	69	12	364	55	143
Yellow-br Warbler**				4	4		
Sedge Warbler	1	153	67		221	71	1
Reed Warbler		589	309		898	175	10
Grasshopper Warbler		9	8		17	7	
Blackcap	4	740	250	6	1,000	86	7
Garden Warbler		46	41	1	88	23	
Lesser Whitethroat		67	49		116	23	
Whitethroat		220	49		269	24	1
Goldcrest		75	46	6	127	44	
Wren	6	277	103	4	390	186	2
Nuthatch		5	5	14	24	25	
Treecreeper		28	12	6	46	38	
Starling	48	268	160	32	508	82	7
Blackbird	6	208	343	1	558	278	8
Fieldfare		12	21		33		
Song Thrush	11	50	32		93	16	1
Redwing		252	49	13	314		
Mistle Thrush		1			1		
Spotted Flycatcher	94	2	39		135	9	1
Robin	3	303	122	1	429	279	2
Nightingale			5		5	2	1
Stonechat		5			5		

**not all have had descriptions submitted to the club so do not necessarily appear in the systematic list or totals

	Pulli	Juvenile	Adult	Unaged	2018	Retrapped	Recovered
House Sparrow	14	128	89	164	395	92	
Tree Sparrow	47		4	9	60		
Dunnock	3	237	201	7	448	340	1
Yellow Wagtail		88	7		95	1	
Grey Wagtail		4	1		5		1
Pied Wagtail	10	105	106		221	6	1
Meadow Pipit		133	9		142		
Chaffinch	1	154	289	5	449	75	2
Brambling		3	11		14		
Bullfinch		54	75		129	79	
Greenfinch		308	272	3	583	38	13
Linnet		114	43		157	6	
Lesser Redpoll		19	123		142	77	6
Goldfinch	8	995	647	8	1,658	218	14
Siskin		2	10		12		
Yellowhammer		146	80	4	230	2	
Reed Bunting		469	357	39	865	89	9
	2314	9450	5615	642	18021	6282	493

Longevity

In addition to tracking the movements of birds on their seasonal movements and migration, ringing studies provide our only source of information on survival and longevity. The extreme ages achieved by some birds will of course be the exceptions. The oldest recorded wild bird, 'Wisdom', a female Laysan Albatross, is still breeding successfully at about 68 years old, and survival like that won't happen very often. Our British and Irish record is a Bardsey Manx Shearwater aged 50 (when last caught in 2008) and which may also still be living. In general, the larger the bird, the longer the life-expectancy. Some seabirds, auks, wildfowl and waders will regularly make it into their 30s and 40s. Within the passerines, lifespans in the 15 to 30 year range are limited to the corvids. For most songbirds the records suggest likely general maximum ages in the range 7 to 12 years. Sub-Saharan migrants such as Reed Warbler, Cuckoo, Spotted Flycatcher, will be doing a round-trip of about 10,000 miles each year. Our Bainton Reed Warbler (below) had flown the equivalent of over five times around the world.

Cambridgeshire has a long and distinguished history of bird ringing and has eight national records to its name. These are shown below. All encounters have been included.

[Full details and geographical coordinates of the locations listed below can be found in the **BTO Online Ringing and Nest Recording Report**.]

National GB & I records from Cambridgeshire

Mallard

GM24822	First-year male	08-09-1965	Borough Fen Decoy
	Alive	25-02-1986	Steeple (Essex) 126km SSE 20y 5m 17d

Tufted Duck

FR84887	First-year male	27-01-1985	Peakirk, Peterborough
	Shot	10-05-2009	Verkhniy Chov, Russia 3,214km ENE 24y 3m 13d

Black-tailed Godwit

EF90838	First-year	24-10-1977	Butley (Suffolk)
	Caught by ringer	18-09-1993	Holbeach St Matthew (Lincs) 128km NW 15y 10m 25d
	Caught by ringer	30-08-1996	Holbeach St Matthew 18y 10m 6d
	Colour rings	29-03-1999	Whittlesey 119km WNW 21y 5m 5d
	Colour rings	26-04-2000	Pollengi (Miðhálandi) Iceland 1,842km NW 22y 6m 2d
	Colour rings	14-02-2001	Fen Drayton 108km WNW 23y 3m 21d

Cuckoo

DA17416	Adult male	05/06/1976	Wicken Fen
	Caught by ringer	07/05/1983	Wicken Fen 6y 11m 29d

Merlin

EB28714	Nestling	29-06-1976	Loch Rannoch (Perth and Kinross)
	Freshly dead	18-03-1989	(Cambridgeshire) SSE 12y 8m 17d

Hobby

ER74556	Nestling	15-07-1992	(Northamptonshire)
	Dead	03-06-2007	Fordham E 14y 10m 19d

Golden Oriole

RA59406	Adult female	24-05-1986	(Lincolnshire)
	Ring read	10-07-1995	(Cambridgeshire) 73km S 9y 1m 16d
	Ring read	25-06-1996	(Cambridgeshire) S 10y 1m 1d

Reed Warbler

E872034	Adult male	25-07-1988	Bainton
	Caught by ringer	02-06-1996	Rutland Water 23km W 7y 10m 8d
	Caught by ringer	16-07-2001	Bainton 12y 11m 21d

Regular ringing at established sites over very many years continues to yield insights into the life-expectancies of common species. Again, the real old-timers won't be representative, and won't help to answer that regular layman-to ringer question: how long do birds live? – just how long some can live. There follows here a small selection of Cambridgeshire record-holders. It's often surprising how – even on small and intensively ringed sites – birds can sometimes go missing for years on end before turning up again. Again, all records are shown here. It's also odd how some birds allow themselves to be caught just once each year. Some of the birds listed here may of course even be still alive and may be encountered again in the future...

Cambridgeshire records – non-passerines (selection)**Mute Swan***GB&I record: 29 years 1 month 11 days (2009)*

Z5936	Second-year	25-05-1963	Peterborough
	Hit wires	10-10-1985	Spalding (Lincolnshire) 23km NNE 22y 4m 15d

Bewick's Swan*GB&I record: 28 years 1 month 27 days (2011)*

Z51019	Adult female	18-01-1988	Welney (Norfolk)
	Colour rings	10-11-1989	Creil The Netherlands 362km E 1y 9m 23d
	Colour rings	28-12-1990	Creil The Netherlands 2y 11m 10d
	Colour rings	02-03-2004	Domitz/Elbe Germany 741km E 16y 1m 13d
	Caught by ringer	02-02-2008	Dunkirk, Little Downham 10km SSW 20y 15d

Grey Heron*GB&I record: 23 years 9 months 2 days (2003)*

112027	Nestling	06-05-1934	Mepal
	Dead	26-10-1952	Near Earith 6km SW 18y 5m 20d

Avocet		<i>GB&I record: 24 years 4 months 21 days (2015)</i>	
ET43256	Nestling	31-07-2004	Welney (Norfolk)
	Ring read	25-04-2012	Dunkirk, Little Downham 8km S 7y 8m 25d
	Ring read	27-03-2017	Dunkirk, Little Downham 12y 7m 24d
	Colour rings	03-05-2018	Dunkirk, Little Downham 13y 9m 2d

Black-headed Gull		<i>GB&I record: 32 years 3 months 26 days (2018)</i>	
ER18167	First-year	09-12-1989	Godmanchester
	Caught by ringer	17-12-2016	Pitsea (Essex) 98km SSE 27y 0m 8d

Barn Owl		<i>GB&I record: 15 years 3 months 21 days (2016)</i>	
GH77274	Nestling	26-07-1990	Eastville (Lincolnshire)
	Dead	01-04-2005	Near March 58km S 14y 8m 6d

Swift		<i>GB&I record: 17 years 11 months 5 days (1999)</i>	
SB69143	Adult	13-07-1993	Gamlingay
	Dead (cat)	08-07-2004	Gamlingay 10y 11m 25d

Cambridgeshire records – passerines (selection)

Marsh Tit		<i>GB&I record: 11 years 3 months 5 days (2015)</i>	
L208459	Adult male	02-09-2010	Wennington Wood
	Caught by ringer	21-03-2018	Wennington Wood 7y 6m 19d

Cetti's Warbler		<i>GB&I record: 9 years 3 months 28 days (2008)</i>	
T941212	Full-grown male	15-04-2007	Wicken Fen
	Caught by ringer	03-05-2014	Wicken Fen 7y 18d

Long-tailed Tit		<i>GB&I record: 8 years 11 months (2014)</i>	
BCR091	Full-grown	18-10-2007	Wicken Fen
	Caught by ringer	02-08-2008	Wicken Fen 9m 15d
	Caught by ringer	12-03-2010	Wicken Fen 2y 4m 22d
	Caught by ringer	29-01-2011	Wicken Fen 3y 3m 11d
	Caught by ringer	08-01-2012	Wicken Fen 4y 2m 21d
	Caught by ringer	09-03-2014	Wicken Fen 6y 4m 19d
	Caught by ringer	17-04-2016	Wicken Fen 8y 5m 30d

Garden Warbler*GB&I record: 10 years 1 month 6 days (2015)*

X875672	Adult Male	04-05-2010	Wicken Fen
	Caught by ringer	04-05-2012	Wicken Fen 2y
	Caught by ringer	27-05-2013	Wicken Fen 3y 23d
	Caught by ringer	12-05-2015	Wicken Fen 5y 8d
	Caught by ringer	18-05-2017	Wicken Fen 7y 14d
	Caught by ringer	01-06-2018	Wicken Fen 8y 28d

Wren*GB&I record: 7 years 3 months 6 days (2004)*

BRD040	First-year	08-04-2008	Wicken Fen
	Caught by ringer	11-05-2011	Wicken Fen 3y 1m 3d
	Caught by ringer	19-06-2012	Wicken Fen 4y 2m 11d
	Caught by ringer	26-10-2013	Wicken Fen 5y 6m 18d

Spotted Flycatcher*GB&I record: 8 years 3 days (2012)*

HA16508	Nesting	21-06-1965	Meldreth
	Shot	06-09-1970	Bragança Portugal 1,304km SSW 5y 2m 16d

Nightingale*GB&I record: 8 years 1 month 11 days (1996)*

P689663	Adult	05-05-2001	Paxton Pits
	Caught by ringer	18-05-2008	Paxton Pits 7y 13d

Dunnock*GB&I record: 11 years 3 months 7 days (1962)*

H42113	First-year	08-07-1961	Cambridge Botanic Gardens
	Dead (cat)	17-02-1970	Cambridge Botanic Gardens 8y 7m 9d

Chaffinch*GB&I record: 13 years 11 months 26 days (2011)*

V834220	Second-year male	21-06-2008	Wicken Fen
	Caught by ringer	03-04-2009	Wicken Fen 9m 13d
	Caught by ringer	01-02-2010	Wicken Fen 1y 7m 11d
	Caught by ringer	22-03-2011	Wicken Fen 2y 9m 1d
	Caught by ringer	11-03-2012	Wicken Fen 3y 8m 19d
	Caught by ringer	17-12-2013	Wicken Fen 5y 5m 26d
	Caught by ringer	10-02-2015	Wicken Fen 6y 7m 20d
	Caught by ringer	02-12-2016	Wicken Fen 8y 5m 11d
	Caught by ringer	30-06-2018	Wicken Fen 10y 9d
	Caught by ringer	25-03-2019	Wicken Fen 10y 9m 4d

Bullfinch*GB&I record: 9 years 9 months 9 days (1975)*

JV46507	Second-year male	23-05-1975	Wicken Fen
	Caught by ringer	05-07-1975	Wicken Fen 1m 12d
	Caught by ringer	20-05-1978	Wicken Fen 2y 11m 27d
	Caught by ringer	13-06-1980	Wicken Fen 5y 21d
	Caught by ringer	25-06-1983	Wicken Fen 8y 1m 2d