



Wing Tagging East Anglian Marsh

Phil Littler from the North-west Norfolk Ringing Group and Marsh Harrier Wing Tagging Project Administrator, started the current wing tagging scheme at Sculthorpe Moor in June 2011 when a brood of six young birds were ringed and tagged. That year a total of 14 birds were ringed and tagged from four nests along the Wensum Valley and last year a total of 104 birds were tagged from 29 nests throughout Norfolk, mainly in the east of the county.

Mystery Marsh Harriers

Prior to the start of this scheme, the general consensus of opinion was that 'our' harriers dispersed into mainland Europe for the winter, and that those seen around East Anglia in the winter were migrants from Northern Europe and Scandinavia,

escaping the harshest of the winter. One of the purposes of this scheme was to find out if this was the case.

So, what have we learnt from the last seven years? Clutch sizes are still, on average, 3.5 young per nest and it seems that the females, if successful, will return to nest within 20m of the previous year's nest. Once fledged the young bird disperse, and one key finding has been the randomness of this, with sightings coming in from Scotland, the north-west and Wales. Some birds go even further afield and have been reported from all over the near Continent, and a couple from places that you wouldn't think of.

The first report of a foreign recovery was of a bird ringed and tagged at Sculthorpe in the first year of the scheme, which turned up in

Main photo - above: Marsh Harrier in flight showing the location of the wing tags, green tags on each forewing, with two large letters, unique to each individual bird and readable from some distance with binoculars or telescope.

Portugal on Christmas Day 2011. This represented the first live report of a foreign ringed Marsh Harrier to Portugal. Since then, reports of live birds have come in from Norway, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, all firsts for live British birds to those countries, and Eire, a sixth. Reports are regular from Spain, which, perhaps, was to be expected. We also have one sighting of a bird from Senegal, but sadly the observer couldn't read the tag correctly due to the heat haze.

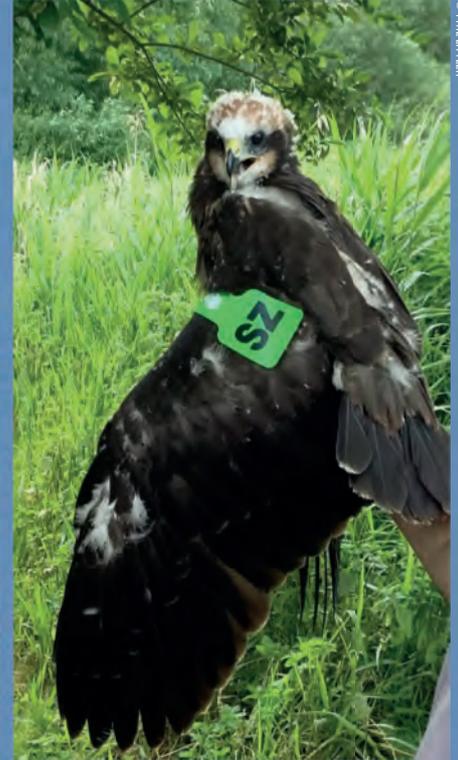
Stay-at-homes

Surprisingly, however, it has also been shown that many of the birds actually stay in the UK, and even around the area they were born. One bird, a young male, which was ringed and tagged near Haddiscoe, was reported once near Skegness, but

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Harriers and what it's revealing

returned via Gibraltar Point and has since not been seen more than 10km from where it was born. Many of the birds tagged are now themselves breeding and have proven another thing - that they tend to nest in the same habitat in which they were raised.

A bird born in Reeds is itself nesting in Reeds, and those raised in Oil-seed Rape are returning to the same habitat. The habitat that they nest in is quite varied and includes freshwater reed beds, tidal reed beds, agricultural crops such as Oil-seed Rape and Barley, nettles and scrub.

What next?

We are seven years into a ten-year project. The re-sighting (recovery) rate is currently running at a staggering 32.03%, which is very

high for this kind of project; the hope was for a 10% rate, so it has gone well beyond expectations. The distribution of the young away from their natal area has broadly been in line with what was expected, but the fact that many remain in the UK has been a surprise. Those young that have been proven to breed tend to still be within Norfolk, other than our star bird which was the first to Portugal (and third to Belgium) but has since been breeding in Lincolnshire.

None of this information would have been possible without the use of those individual wing tags, and in Phil's opinion, to get the most information back from ringing large birds you need to add an easy-to-see identifier, whether it be a wing tag or coloured leg rings, enabling the

Photos- above: Tags are also visible when the birds are perched, making this a valuable way of resighting and identifying individual birds without need to recapture them at any point. The tags are placed on the wings when the birds are in the nest and the process is similar to having an ear pierced, or putting a tag into an animal's ear.

birds to be individually identified without recapture. Phil also adds wing tags to Buzzards and, hopefully, this season Red Kites, as well as colour rings to Kestrels and the well-known Norwich Cathedral Peregrines.

Unless funding can be found to satellite track the Marsh Harriers, he will continue the wing tagging for the final three years of the project and hopefully continue to receive sightings for many years to come, revealing new insights into these wonderful birds.

If you see a wing tagged Marsh Harrier please report through the Hawk and Owl trust website, and for any other species of wing tagged or colour ringed birds via the BTO web page