

2022 & 2023

Wild Woodbury Bird Ringing Report



Written by Seb Elwood

Wild Woodbury

Wild Woodbury is a 420-acre rewilding site owned and managed by the Dorset Wildlife Trust (DWT). DWT purchased the land in July 2021 and are restoring natural processes (vegetation growth, mixed grazing, water restoration) across the site to create a mosaic of habitats which will benefit biodiversity, the climate, and people.

The non-prescriptive and non-intensive nature of rewilding will lead to a complex and diverse vegetation structure, providing more habitats for species to colonise and breed, as well as supporting more species migrating through the site. The water restoration, which has created approximately 80-acres of ephemeral wetland, will further add to this complexity and continue to support wetland species throughout the year.

Previous management of the site had been a relatively intensive farming system, a mixture of arable crops and permanent pasture, that lead to soil degradation and the draining of the land. Sitewide baseline surveying through the first year of DWT ownership showed the land as having poor ecological value whilst the previous farming system had been in place. There were two areas of set-aside that hadn't been farmed for several years, which held the most diversity and abundance across several species groups, and provided a look at what could develop across the site once the natural process lead management is in place.

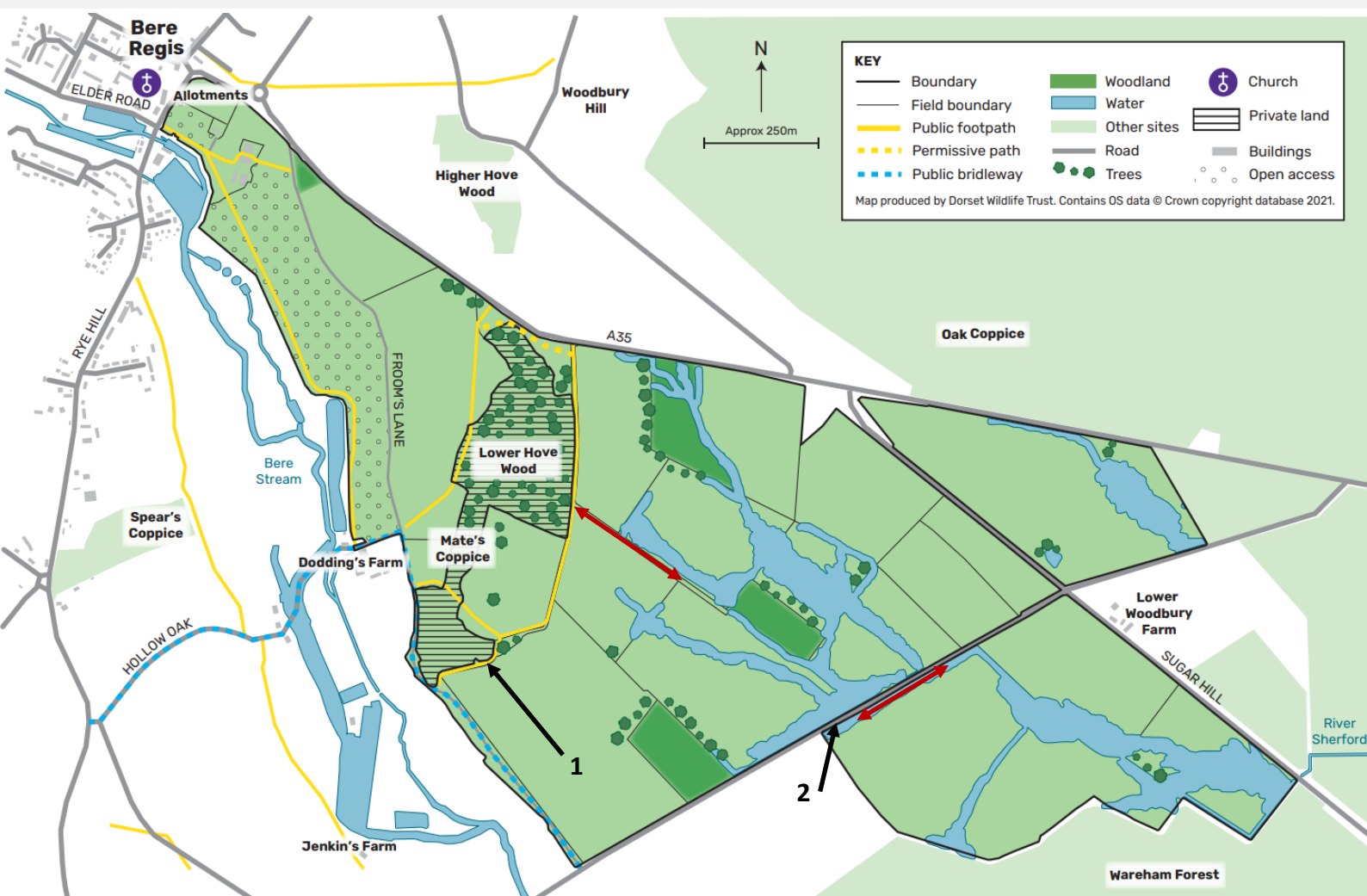
DWT are continuously monitoring several groups to see how the species diversity and abundance changes over time, as the site rewilds. This includes regular bird surveys to



monitor breeding populations, migrants, and overwintering birds. At the end of 2023, there have been 117 species of bird recorded on site, 28 are on the Red List for Birds of Conservation Concern, and 53 of which have been confirmed breeding on site. With the continuation of rewilding, it is vital that we continue to collect data and monitor species to see how the change in land management is effecting populations. To aid the understanding of how bird populations are changing and how the site is being used by birds throughout the year, Seb Elwood, Stour Ringing Group (SRG) member and Ranger for Wild Woodbury, set up a couple of ringing rides with the help of his trainer Shaun Robson.

SRG started ringing on site in the Winter of 2021-2022 with a few dazzling sessions using thermal imagers, to see whether the site held potential for Woodcock, Snipe, Jack Snipe, and any other species that roost on the ground. The first mist netting sessions were held in May 2022, and have continued regularly throughout both 2022 and 2023 since then.

Site Map



Wild Woodbury rewilding site. Main ringing rides denoted by red arrows, the one in the middle of the site being along a drongway, the south-east rides along a hedgerow. Main parking denoted by black arrows and numbers.

The 420-acres of Wild Woodbury stretches South-East from Bere Regis village until it reaches Forestry Commission land near Lower Woodbury. It is divided into 3 separate land parcels by roads, with the smallest block of 35-acres East of Sugar Hill Road, the medium sized block of 80-acres bordering Wareham Forest, and the remaining block of 305-acres. DWT do not own Lower Hove Wood, the large block of woodland in the centre of the site.

There is a public footpath that runs from Bere Regis and loops around the site, passing through several rewilding fields and near the top of the drongway rides. The footpath historically connected to a blind corner of the A35, and therefore was not well walked. DWT have connected this footpath off the road, to the North of Lower Hove Wood, and have seen an increase in use over the past two years. As Wild Woodbury becomes more well known, I expect footfall to increase further. This won't

impact ringing, as the footpath will only ever pass by the top of the rides, where the ringing table and ringers should be stationed.

Currently, access and permissions for ringing can be gained from SRG member Seb Elwood, who helps to manage the site for DWT. Were this not the case, SRG would have to let other site managers know of their plans to ring on the site prior to going.

Parking is along a bridleway for the drongway ride, and in a lay-by for the hedgerow ride. The bridleway is accessible off Lane End, the road that separates the largest and middle blocks. The lay-by limits the number of cars able to attend the southern ringing sessions to a maximum of 4. There are other access points should the ringing ride locations change in the future.

Ringling Rides



Drongway Rides

These rides run in between two lines of hedgerow and trees, dominated by Bramble, Hawthorn, Blackthorn, and Willow. In 2022 and 2023, we have been running 5 nets in this area, 4 going along the ride, and 1 going across the ride through holes cut in the hedges. The nature of rewilding will be to let these hedges grow out and naturally get taller, which will make some areas unsuitable for ringing in the future. However, the non-Willow parts of the hedges are still quite low, and will take many years to grow higher than the nets. We will also be clearing further down the drongway, which will give opportunity for several more nets to be erected.

We have ringed these rides throughout the whole year, with them proving particularly productive during Autumn migration. They have also been successful in catching thrushes during winter, and several resident species throughout the whole year.

Access to these rides requires walking for approximately 400m along a footpath from where you can park. The public footpath runs near the top of the rides, but this will always be where the ringing table is placed and therefore won't be any issue going forward. We've met a few walkers over the past couple of years, all of whom have been engaged with what we are doing and it has proven a good opportunity to inform about why and how we ring birds.



Hedgerow Rides

We have tended to ring the hedgerow rides mainly during the Winter months, placing nets along hedgerows to target wintering flocks of finches and buntings. The roadside hedges here will have to be cut for traffic management, and should therefore stay at a reasonable height for ringing going forward. The other hedges in these fields will be left to grow outwards and upwards, and will therefore become less suitable over time. However, the regeneration of scrub throughout the fields will present more opportunities to place nets once it gets established.

We have been running combinations of 5 nets along the hedges here, but there is potential to net much further along or in other locations in this field, and nets could be moved to where flocks are favoring on any given day. Going forward I will be using 4 pole sections, as many birds have been going over the nets into taller Willow trees. As scrub develops in the fields, a 2-panel net system may well prove productive in the field for species such as Skylark.

These start of these rides are approximately 100m from the gateway by where you can park, allowing easy access and ringing at the car possible.

2022 Overview

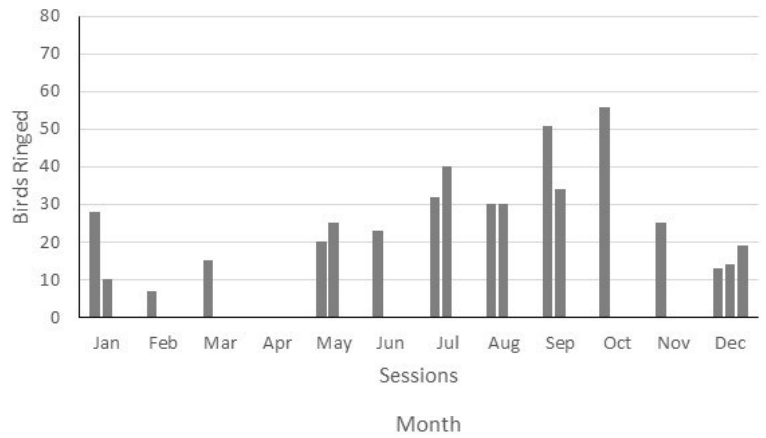
2022 was the first full year of ringing at Wild Woodbury, so we needed to work out where and when were best for ringing. The site provided potential for ringing all year round, with net rides for Autumn migration, wintering flocks, and fields for dazzling, and all were tested through the year. Ringing was undertaken on 11 out of 12 months, with sessions spread fairly evenly throughout the year.

We ringed 454 new birds of 35 species in 2022, with the highest numbers coming in Autumn. Sessions, on the whole, gave a slow but steady flow of birds with numbers averaging high-20s throughout the year. Given the previous management of the site, it was encouraging to see birds quickly colonising, breeding, and using it to feed during migration.

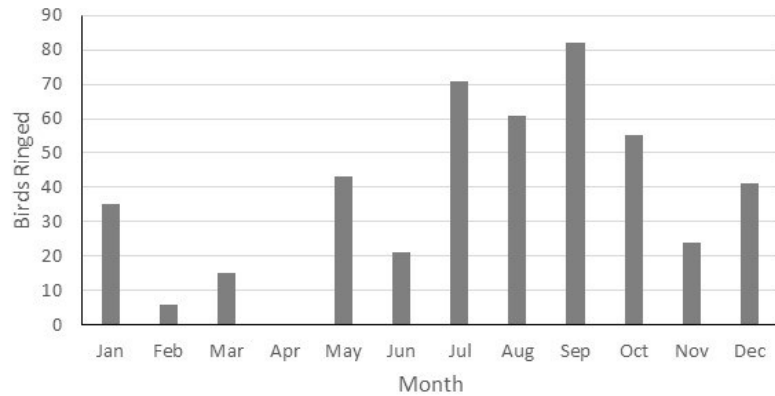
The southern ringing rides are in an ex-arable field that had large amounts of winter oat growing in during 2022, providing a lot of seed for finches and buntings. In particular, decent numbers of Yellowhammer frequented the field for many months of the year, my peak count was c300 individuals. We targeted these fields and were rewarded with 77 Yellowhammer, the top species ringed during the year. Top species 2 and 3, Chiffchaff and Blackcap respectively, were unsurprising given their status as two of the most numerous UK breeding warblers and should continue to grow in number on site. Our dazzling efforts at either end of the year put Woodcock in 4th, with a few of short swarded fields in particular proving highly productive - on the 27th Jan we caught 16 in a single night. Robin snuck into 5th, a bird whose breeding numbers will undoubtedly grow as the site rewilds. Other notable catches were 15 Tree Pipit and 5 Grasshopper Warbler.

It was overall a very encouraging first year of ringing, with several potential net rides located going forward and a good range of birds ringed. Heading into 2023 I hope that ringing effort will increase, especially as DWT have financed some ringing nets and poles, allowing more ringers to visit the site.

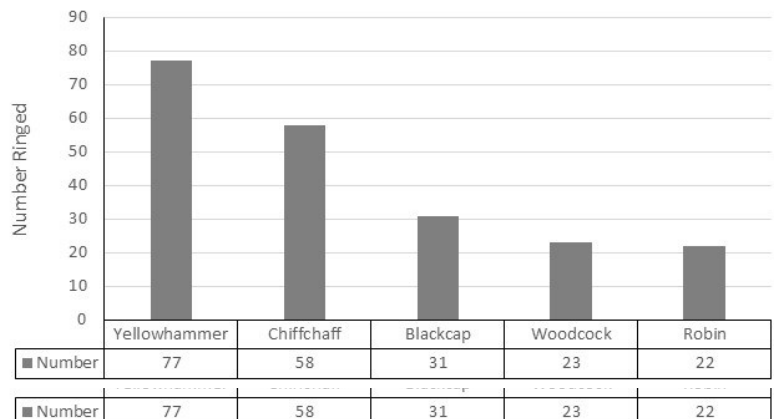
2022 Sessions



2022 Totals



Top 5 Species Ringed 2022



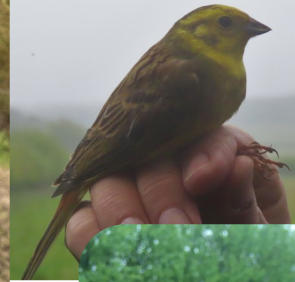
2022 Highlights

Yellowhammer

The ex-arable fields on site were still producing crops in the Spring of 2022, and were therefore providing lots of seed for several species. The southern field we net in had 100's of Skylark and Yellowhammer through the year, both breeding and passing birds. The wealth of Yellowhammer provided some great ringing, and with it the challenge of aging them. At first they seemed relatively straight forward, but as we moved through the year and re-caught a number of breeding individuals, it threw

up some interesting dilemmas - females that had far more yellow on than expected, and massive overlap in features between adults and juveniles, such as tail width and strength. A session with Matt Prior in Wiltshire, who has a lot of experience with Yellowhammers, shed some light on a couple of features that could reliably be used. By first using the streakiness of the uppertail coverts to sex an individual, you can then age using the primary coverts, on their pointedness/broadness and overall feather strength.

This has since proved very reliable for Yellowhammer we have caught in the past year. Unfortunately, due to an external fence being erected at Wild Woodbury during the Winter of 2022-2023, the ringing hedge took a battering, and the fence ran along the ringing line. Towards the end of 2023 the hedge had regrown enough to adjust the location of the nets and to start ringing again.



Dazzling

The proximity to Wareham Forest, naturally wet ground, and initial short sward of the fields at Wild Woodbury, all pointed towards that it had potential for dazzling. SRG took full advantage of these fortunate conditions and had several sessions on site in the Winter of 2021-2022. 11 Jack Snipe (left—top right), 3 Common Snipe, and 32 Woodcock (left—bottom) were ringed over these months, as well as a 18 Skylark (left—top left), 3 Fieldfare, and 1 Stock Dove.

As the site rewilds and the sward height gets more complex, it is likely to become less suitable for night-time feeding waders, or certainly more difficult to catch them in if not the former. The introduction of livestock on site will likely keep certain areas shorter, especially the more riparian areas, potentially making parts attractive to these species, but also creating suitable nesting habitat for others such as Lapwing and maybe even Redshank.

We will still continue to head out onto site in search of these birds, but will have to adjust our location over time to where is proving most productive on any given month/year.



2023 Overview

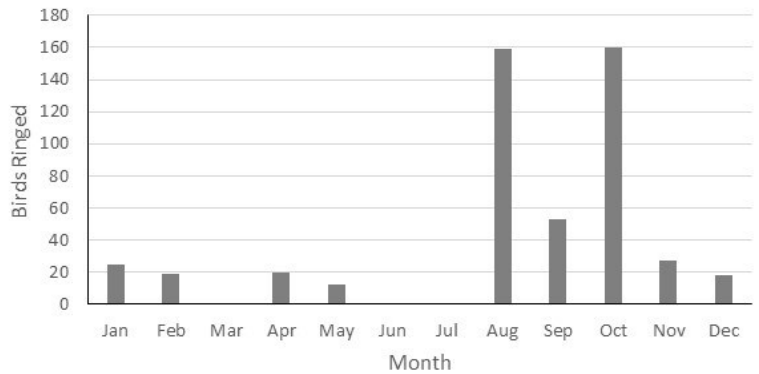
In 2023 we ringed 493 new birds of 44 species, with the most birds coming in the Autumn. Due to a mixture of poor weather and personal commitments, there were 3 months with no ringing at all. I was also only able to ring once in the whole of September, which was a shame, as there were lots of birds present on site and it would have been a great opportunity to get a decent number of birds ringed, as well as giving a better comparison to 2022 numbers.

Ringing was concentrated almost exclusively on the drongway rides, as the southern rides weren't ready to ring again until late 2023 once the hedge had re-grown. This was the main reason for the lack of Yellowhammer ringed in 2023, with the first coming once we re-visited the southern rides in December.

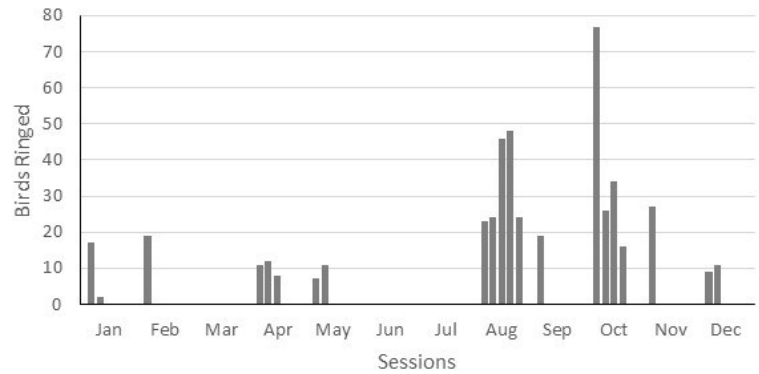
With more Autumn ringing in 2023, it is unsurprising that 1st and 3rd most common birds ringed were Chiffchaff and Blackcap respectively. More surprisingly, the 2nd most ringed bird was Tree Pipit, a species which held a minimum of 7 territories on site this year. Buoyed by others migrating through, we ringed 39 individuals throughout August. August was also the main month for Grasshopper Warbler, ranking as the 5th most common bird ringed. After just a couple of these in 2022, it's encouraging to see so many finding the site this Autumn, using the habitat and food before migrating. The site is looking good for potential breeding in the future for this species. Blue Tit completes the top 5 in 4th, with a few flocks hitting the nets throughout the year. We also managed to confirm breeding of Garden Warbler this year through ringing, having had a singing male for many months but not being able to pin down whether they had been successful. An adult female with brood patch and a juvenile in the nets together confirmed this for us.

Overall 2023 proved very successful, with several new species ringed and lots of data gained for how birds are using the site. It will be fascinating to see how the change in vegetation structure and water on site will effect numbers going into 2024.

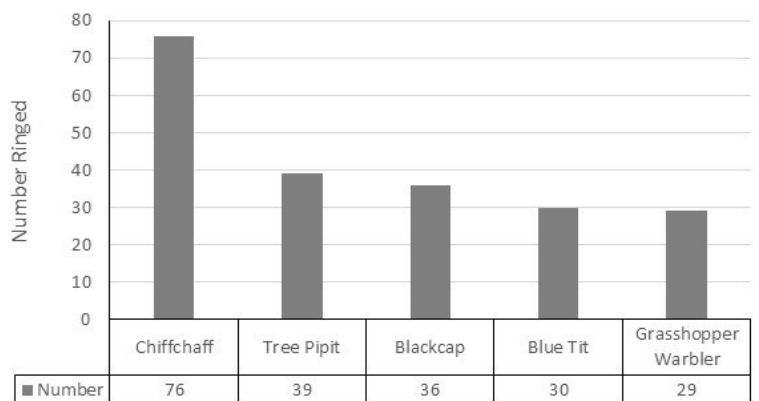
2023 Totals



2023 Sessions



Top 5 Species Ringed 2023



2023 Highlights

Nightingale

The Nightingale, a bird classically associated with scrubland and scrubby woodland, was one of the top birds on my list of species that I was hoping to capture at Wild Woodbury, especially as the site rewilds and moves towards a mosaic of scrubby wood pasture, but I certainly wasn't expecting one to turn up in the nets this early on into the project. Being optimistic about my chances, I started playing a Nightingale tape during Autumn sessions on the off chance one might appear, and on the 3rd September, this juvenile found its way into the mist nets.

I was ringing by myself on a bright and slightly windy morning, which was making the nets pretty visible, and I expect the main reason behind a slow start to the day. I had the Nightingale tape playing before dawn and had actually switched it to Whitethroat around 08:00, given that I thought I should prioritise a more common species on both of my tapes. It was therefore to my great surprise that, on an otherwise blank round at 08:30, I wandered down the rides to see this Nightingale in the nets, just the 7th caught in SRGs history.

I'd spotted the red at a distance and had assumed it was another Redstart, having been catching a few on other sessions, but soon realised it was a larger bird and got very excited as I got closer. Being the only bird of the round gave plenty of time to examine and appreciate the bird, getting a good look at all features and some record pictures. It is also a species that can take both A or B rings, so proved good experience of measuring the tarsus width, this juvenile took a B ring.

As Wild Woodbury continues to rewild and becomes more established with scrubland, it is going to create a habitat more suitable for species such as Nightingale, to not only visit during migration, but to hopefully breed in the coming years. There's a lot of positive conservation work happening on land surrounding Wild Woodbury too, which will hopefully work to create a landscape that can welcome back this scarce breeding species.



Ring Ouzel

At the beginning of October, there were many reports around Dorset of decent numbers of Ring Ouzel moving, with some sites holding several individuals. This coupled with the first Redwing of the Winter arriving, prompted the first ringing session to target thrushes at Wild Woodbury on the 10th October. A modest first net round with 4 Redwing, 2 Song Thrush, and a Blackbird provided a decent return of thrushes for the first day, but it wasn't until a few net rounds later we were surprised to find the Ouzel in the net.

As we approached the nets I could see a larger bird that was rapidly making its way along the net and almost escaping from the pocket. The unmistakable scaly appearance and a lovely flash of white under the throat made for a very quick dash to catch up with the bird, make sure it wasn't going to escape, and carefully extract it from the net. An absolutely stunning bird, and one I hope to see again in the hand in the future years. The wealth of berries at Wild Woodbury, which will only increase over time, will provide perfect opportunity for these birds to feed up on their migration and should attract more of them, as well as other thrushes, in the future.



2023 Highlights

Being only the second year of ringing at Wild Woodbury, we are seeing several new species being ringed each year. The first raptors were ringed this year, with 2 Sparrowhawk and 1 Kestrel finding their way into the nets. It was a decent first year for Redstart with 6 ringed throughout August and September, a species that I expect to be breeding on site in the future given the habitat change. A bigger surprise was a Pied Flycatcher at the beginning of August, which was a new record for the site as a whole, not just ringing. Not an uncommon bird, but not one that gets ringed regularly was a Jay that found the top panel whilst getting chased by another Jay on one of the first sessions of the year.



SRG was initially set up to focus on Nightjar ringing in the early 1980's, and have carried out vital trapping and tagging of the species over the past 40 years. We had 1, possibly 2, territories being held on site this year, but weren't able to confirm whether successful breeding took place. Besides breeding, the site was used by several individuals for foraging, undoubtedly encouraged by the huge increase in invertebrates on site, including moths. We didn't hold any dedicated evening sessions for Nightjar this year, but did tape for them early before a normal mist netting session, and caught 1 individual. The proximity of Wild Woodbury to Wareham Forest, the increase of invertebrates on site, and the change in vegetation structure all point towards an increase in Nightjar numbers going forward, both for foraging and breeding.



Clockwise from top:
Nightjar, Common Redstart, Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Jay, Pied Flycatcher.



Controls and Recoveries

Control - A bird ringed at another location and recaptured at Wild Woodbury.

Recovery - A bird ringed at Wild Woodbury and recaptured at another location.

Any data gained from recapturing a bird is fed back into the BTO (British Trust for Ornithology) and the relevant ringing person/group is notified that their bird has been caught elsewhere. Members of the public can also report any found rings e.g. from a dead bird found in the garden.

Being a newer site and having not ringed that many birds, we are yet to get many controls or recoveries, but managed 3 recoveries throughout the last 2 years, which can be seen in the table and maps below. The standout recovery is a 2298km movement of a Woodcock ringed on site on the 27th January 2022, and controlled in Russia 88 days later. This bird was unfortunately shot, but the finder reported the data back into the relevant organisations, so we were able to know the details. This bird would have been moving towards its breeding grounds, having been overwintering at Wild Woodbury and the surrounding area.

Age codes in the table below explained:

3 - Hatched during the year in question.

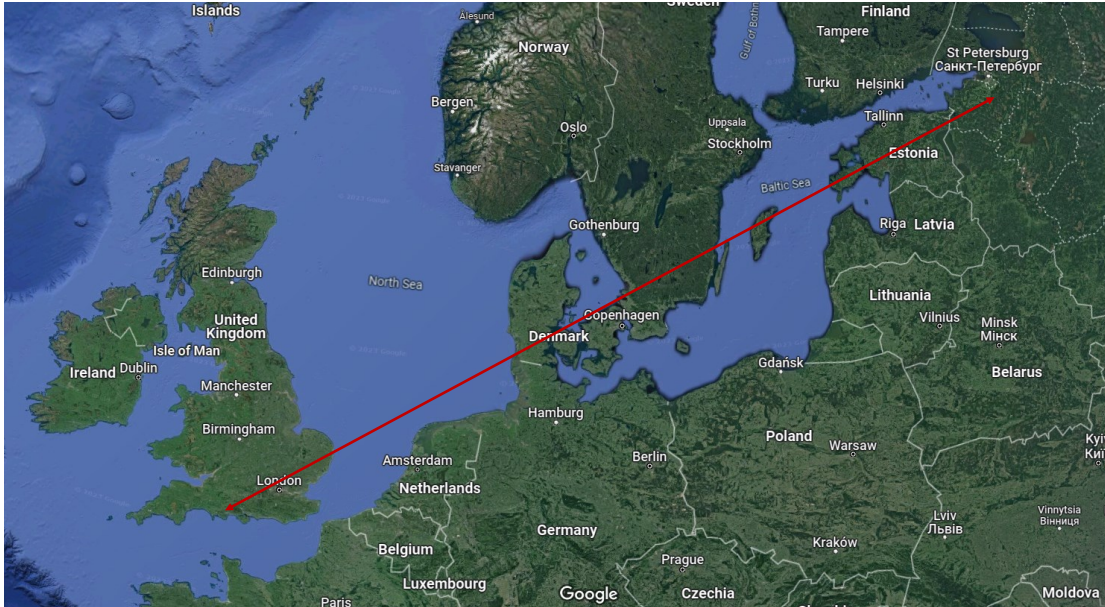
4 - Hatched any year other than the year in question, ≥1yr old.

6 - Hatched the year before the year in question, ≥2yrs old.

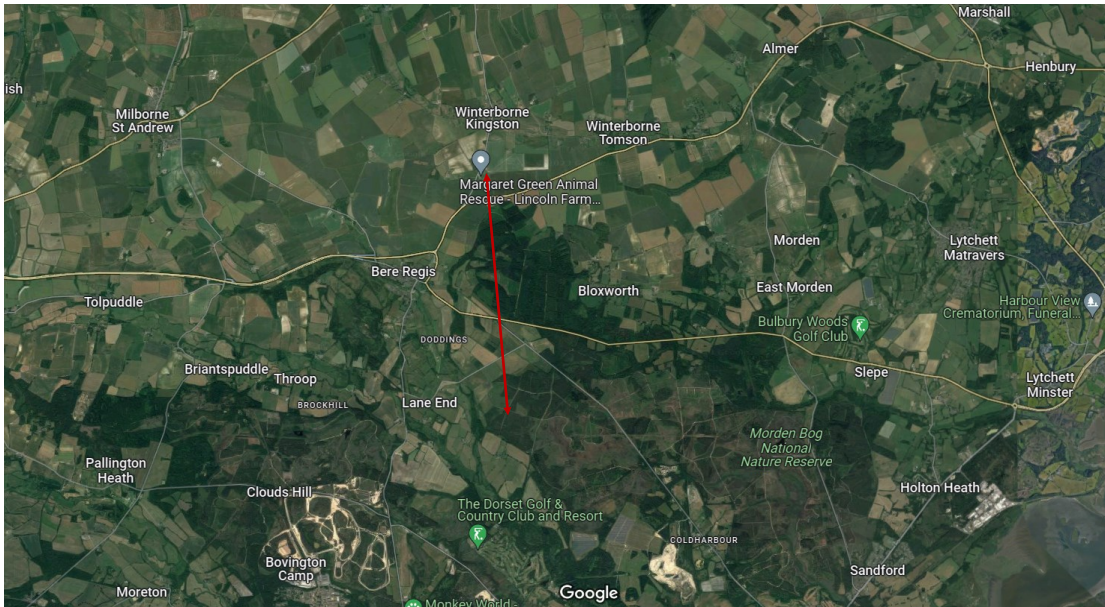
Recoveries

Species and Ring Number	Age	Date and Time	Location	Time since first Ringed	Distance and Direction	Ringer/ Group
Woodcock						
EY18864	6	27th Jan 2022 21:45	Wild Woodbury, Dorset, UK			
	x	25th Apr 2022 -	Mashino, Leningrad O, Russia	88 Days	2298km ENE	N/A Shot
Yellowhammer						
TW94100	3	10th Sep 2022 11:00	Wild Woodbury, Dorset, UK			
	x	17th July 2023 -	Winterborne Kingston, Dorset, UK	310 Days	4km N	Killed by cat
Sedge Warbler						
AYR3718	3	26th Jul 2022 06:15	Wild Woodbury, Dorset, UK			
	4	16th Aug 2023 13:30	Nanjizal, Land's End, Cornwall, UK	386 Days	259km WSW	K A Wilson

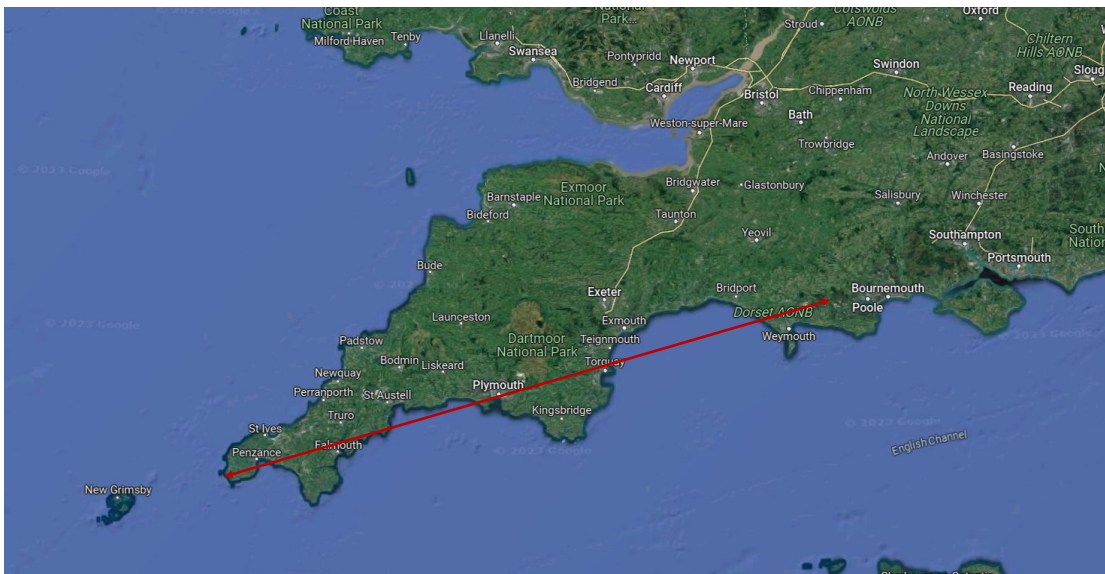
Controls and Recoveries



Woodcock recovery—Wild Woodbury to Mashino, Leningrad O, Russia. 2298km, 88days later.



Yellowhammer recovery—Wild Woodbury to Winterborne Kingston. 4km, 310days later.



Sedge Warbler recovery—Wild Woodbury to Nanjizal, Land's End, Cornwall. 258km, 386days later.

Totals

Species	2022	2023	Total
Blackbird	5	12	17
Blackcap	31	35	66
Blue Tit	20	30	50
Bullfinch	2	7	9
Cetti's Warbler	1	0	1
Chaffinch	1	1	2
Chiffchaff	58	76	134
Coal Tit	0	1	1
Dunnock	15	6	21
Fieldfare	3	2	5
Firecrest	1	4	5
Garden Warbler	0	2	2
Goldcrest	8	17	25
Goldfinch	17	9	26
Grasshopper Warbler	5	29	34
Great Spotted Woodpecker	0	1	1
Great Tit	13	15	28
House Martin	0	15	15
Jack Snipe	10	1	11
Jay	0	1	1
Kestrel	0	1	1
Lesser Redpoll	0	8	8
Linnet	7	0	7
Long-tailed Tit	1	20	21
Meadow Pipit	7	1	8
Nightingale	0	1	1
Nightjar	0	1	1
Pied Flycatcher	0	1	1
Redstart	0	6	6
Redwing	6	16	22
Reed Bunting	17	1	18
Reed Warbler	5	3	8
Ring Ouzel	0	1	1
Robin	22	20	42
Sedge Warbler	6	6	12
Siskin	1	0	1
Skylark	17	3	20
Snipe	3	0	3
Song Thrush	9	12	21
Sparrowhawk	0	2	2
Stock Dove	0	1	1
Stonechat	6	0	6
Swallow	1	16	17
Tree Pipit	15	39	54
Whitethroat	5	14	19
Willow Warbler	19	25	44
Woodcock	31	6	37
Wren	23	15	38
Yellowhammer	77	9	86
	454	493	947

Discussion

Rewilding is led by the restoration of natural processes, which at Wild Woodbury equates to a dynamic battle between vegetation growth and grazing, and the restoration of water across the site. These natural processes are going to hugely change the site over time; some areas will become scrubbed up with open grown trees, there will be lots of bare ground made by the disturbance of livestock, and several acres will be ephemeral wetland. This complex and heterogeneous landscape will provide the habitat for a variety of species, both for breeding and for using as a stopover on migration. The abundance and diversity of species will likely fluctuate as habitat availability changes in this non-prescriptive landscape - we're not going to be carrying out specific maintenance for specific species - but this is the dynamism that natural processes provides.

The species ringed in these first 2 years already show a change in how the site is being used. Finches and buntings are taking advantage of the natural seed on site provided by thistles and docks, ground nesters such as Skylark and Tree Pipit are profiting from the lack of disturbance, and migrants are honing in on the diversity of food and habitats during Spring and Autumn. The stopping of herbicide and pesticide application, that were being used under its previous owners, have contributed to a welcome explosion of invertebrates, further encouraging birds to use the site, and no more gamebird releases are undoubtedly having a huge positive impact too.

The modest number of birds ringed in 2022 and 2023 is a decent start to the site, and is a nice baseline for the first years of rewilding. I anticipate the average number of birds ringed per session to increase going forward, particularly over the main migration periods, and the number of common and scarcer breeding species increasing on site too. As low numbers of mixed livestock are introduced to site in the coming year, they will further diversity the vegetation structure and create more bare ground, benefitting several species. Their wormer-free dung will provide a process that is missing throughout much of the country, and should encourage a wealth of dung beetles and other invertebrates back onto site, another niche that could be exploited by many scarce UK bird species.

Moving into 2024 I hope that ringing will be undertaken the whole year round, so we can continue to monitor how the abundance and diversity of species are changing as Wild Woodbury rewilds. DWT hope to use the information gained from all our bird surveying to learn how natural process lead management changes bird populations, so we can then inform other projects and land management throughout Dorset, and further afield, to benefit both our local and national populations.

Acknowledgements

Ringing is only possible thanks to permission from Dorset Wildlife Trust, who have been supportive in the ringing locations and openness to moving around site. A particular thanks to Shaun Robson, Ian Lewis, and Paul Morton, who ran sessions before I gained by 'C' Permit in early 2023, and their support since. Thanks also to all other SRG members who have attended sessions over 2022 and 2023 and supported setting up the site:

Tony Taylor, Bob Ford, Terry Elborn, Joe Parker, Kate Fox, Jack Potter, Kath Herson, Alex Gould, Adam Day, Sam Lloyd, Sam Levy, Winter Stobart, Aspen Stobart, Brittany Maxted, Jade Cowles, Sam Ryde, Judith Kay, Ben Arkless.