

# Treswell Wood

## Nestbox Report -1984



### Introduction

1984 marked the expansion of the North Nottinghamshire sponsored nestbox scheme to Gamston Wood which has been purchased by the trust. The boxes which were already there are being sponsored and new boxes are being added. Boxes remain in Claborough but we have been unable to secure an inspector this year. The title of the report, formerly Treswell Wood Nestbox Report, will now be North Notts Nestbox Report, and we hope to raise the standard of production using new technology. As before, sponsors will receive details of birds ringed in their allocated boxes.

As with every year we tend to see how good it has been by comparing numbers of birds with numbers in other years, and I suppose we look back to the good old days when numbers were always high. What is, in fact, much more interesting on a close examination of the years is the difference between them, showing the dynamic interactions within the changing habitats, weather conditions and populations. The lesson is that the balance of nature is not a fixed formula with each species at its correct level, but an ever changing mixture in which life continues as fully as possible.

The summer population this year has been depleted by a combination of weather conditions south of the Mediterranean. This has had little effect on nestbox populations since the hole-nesting species tend to be residents. (Redstart and Pied Flycatchers being notable exceptions, but regrettably not breeding in our woods.) Low populations of summer visitors may allow greater breeding success of residents since competition for some food for nestlings and young will be less. Whether residents have been able to take advantage of this will only be clear next year, provided the winter is not extreme. So far it does not appear that the resident species

have been able to take advantage of low populations. Numbers of birds in both Gamston and Treswell Woods have been generally down on normal and productivity (number of young per nest) also down. Captures of birds this autumn in Treswell Wood have also been much lower than usual, again indicating a poor breeding season. However, bird populations have very great expansion potential and so a poor year like this should not be taken to mean the beginning of a permanent decline in bird populations.

**Table 1. Events in Treswell Wood, 1984**

| Species            | Successful broods | Nestlings ringed | Failed broods |
|--------------------|-------------------|------------------|---------------|
| Tawny Owl          | 1                 | 1                | .             |
| Wren               | 7                 | 33               | 2             |
| Robin              | 1                 | .                | .             |
| Spotted Flycatcher | .                 | .                | 6             |
| Coal Tit           | 1                 | 10               | .             |
| Blue Tit           | 19                | 155              | 7             |
| Great Tit          | 8                 | 61               | 6             |
| Tree Sparrow       | 2                 | 8                | 1             |
| <b>Totals</b>      | <b>39</b>         | <b>268</b>       | <b>22</b>     |

**Table 2. Events in Gamston Wood, 1984**

| Species       | Successful broods | Nestlings ringed | Failed broods |
|---------------|-------------------|------------------|---------------|
| Coal Tit      | 2                 | 21               | .             |
| Blue Tit      | 4                 | 31               | 2             |
| Great Tit     | 3                 | 18               | 1             |
| <b>Totals</b> | <b>9</b>          | <b>70</b>        | <b>3</b>      |

**Table 3. Treswell Wood 1979 -1984**

Comparison of numbers of nestlings ringed, and of numbers of birds recaptured from each year.

| Species            | 1979             | 1980             | 1981            | 1982            | 1983            | 1984            |
|--------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Stock Dove         | 2                | .                | .               | .               | 1               | .               |
| Tawny Owl          | .                | 2                | 2 (1)           | 2               | .               | 1               |
| Wren               | .                | 10 (1)           | .               | .               | 4 (1)           | 33 (3)          |
| Robin              | 6 (2)            | 5 (1)            | 11 (1)          | 3               | .               | .               |
| Spotted Flycatcher | 12               | 5 (2)            | .               | 8               | .               | .               |
| Coal Tit           | .                | .                | .               | 10 (2)          | 10 (2)          | 10              |
| Blue Tit           | 101 (63)         | 240 (90)         | 231 (79)        | 171 (53)        | 117 (25)        | 155 (8)         |
| Great Tit          | 65 (34)          | 53 (10)          | 56 (10)         | 50 (10)         | 48 (12)         | 61 (9)          |
| House Sparrow      | 11               | 9                | .               | .               | .               | .               |
| Tree Sparrow       | 116 (13)         | 188 (15)         | 113 (3)         | 28              | 4               | 8               |
| <b>Totals</b>      | <b>313 (112)</b> | <b>512 (119)</b> | <b>413 (94)</b> | <b>272 (65)</b> | <b>185 (40)</b> | <b>268 (20)</b> |

Note. Bracketed figures are numbers of individuals from each year ever recaptured, correct to 9<sup>th</sup> November 1984.

## Species notes

(relating to events in nests only)

### Tawny Owl

One pair bred in Treswell Wood boxes this year and raised one young - typical for Treswell Wood. Unusually the nest contained very few bird remains and no bird rings. This contrasts with our first Tawny Owl nest in 1980 when 11 rings were found in the nest.

### Wren

A spectacular year in Treswell Wood, posing more questions than it answered. From 1979 to 1983 we had a

total of five nesting attempts by Wrens in boxes, of which three succeeded. This year alone we have had seven successful broods, two failures and a cock nest. (The cock builds several nests and the hen selects the best for nesting.) That nearly all nests were used must show that the female Wrens like boxes, but why they have suddenly taken to using boxes is less obvious. The northern part of the wood has been cleared of much undergrowth as part of the coppicing program and this will have reduced nesting sites, but most of the nests were not in areas affected. The boxes used were all mounted low, but there have been low boxes in other years. It may be that Treswell Wood Wrens have learnt that nestboxes are good and so now they use them. If this is so it gives hope to those of us who have nestboxes in the garden which are never used – wait a few more years.

One question which has been partially answered concerns an unusual domed Blue Tit nest built in 1980. It was identical to this year's Wren nests and so I believe it was a Wren nest commandeered by a Blue Tit, (or perhaps a Wren cock nest taken over by a Blue Tit).

## Robin

Treswell Wood had one brood only in boxes, raised early in the season in an open-fronted box.

## Spotted Flycatcher

The low fronted box illustrated on the 1982 and 1983 reports has again proved attractive. In spite of low numbers of migrants arriving in the country, five of the eight Treswell Wood boxes were selected by these birds within two or three weeks of the first bird being seen in the wood. Another nested in a conventional open-fronted box. Tragically a predator, probably a Jay, also found the boxes attractive and all six nests were robbed and destroyed. Spotted Flycatchers are a difficult species to cater for. They like an open situation in which to nest, but these situations are also obvious to predators. Nestboxes can do some species a disservice in this type of case – we have attracted birds to boxes which also attract predators. It is easy to be wise with hindsight, but next year we will put up a protective screen of 40mm chicken wire over these boxes.

## Coal Tit

Gamston Wood provided two successful nests raising 21 young. Treswell Wood, which is not so good a habitat for Coal Tits, had its statutory single brood of ten Coal Tits for the third year running. As usual the nest was in a conventional tit box. The Coal Tit boxes with their elliptical entrances have not been approached.

## Blue Tit

In Gamston Wood broods of Blue Tits have been reduced both in numbers and in success rate. Several nests took a long time to complete, as if the adults were stopping and starting instead of working continuously.

Treswell Wood Blue Tits were much the same. Several nests were abandoned at an early stage and later, new nests were built in nearby boxes. In one case a second nest was built by a different Blue Tit (an unringed bird, so an apparent newcomer to the wood) giving the impression that the original territory holder had perhaps been killed by a predator. In the other cases the nests were abandoned before the identities of the builders had been established.

Fledging success in Treswell Wood has been almost as high as normal in terms of numbers per nest, only 1980 being very much greater (Table 4). Treswell Wood's old friends included A213987, a 1980 nestling now nesting in our boxes for the fourth year in succession.

**Table 4. Comparison of average numbers of birds fledged per brood  
Treswell Wood 1979 - 1984, Gamston Wood 1984**

| Species   | Treswell Wood |      |      |      |      |      | Gamston Wood |
|-----------|---------------|------|------|------|------|------|--------------|
|           | 1979          | 1980 | 1981 | 1982 | 1983 | 1984 | 1984         |
| Blue Tit  | 8.4           | 10.0 | 8.3  | 9.0  | 8.4  | 8.2  | 7.8          |
| Great Tit | 9.3           | 7.6  | 8.0  | 10.0 | 6.6  | 7.6  | 6.0          |

## Great Tit

Each year Treswell Wood promises to be the year of the Great Tit, and each year the birds find new enemies - Tree Sparrows, grey squirrels, Great Spotted Woodpeckers or vandals. This year we have only suffered a poor breeding season and the usual predation of the odd nest or two, probably by weasels. The number fledged is our second highest total although the average number of young per brood is lower than usual. Our nesting adults included one originally ringed at Rampton Hospital.

One unusual sight was that of a Blue Tit inspecting a Great Tit box which at that moment held a sitting Great Tit. The inspection only lasted a few seconds. The Great Tit later deserted her nest, although there was probably no

connection between the inspection and the desertion.

## **Nuthatch**

Nuthatches have been seen and heard occasionally in Treswell Wood over the past three years, mainly during autumn when young birds will be exploring before selecting a breeding site. We hoped that this would precede colonisation of the wood and this year one ambitious pair attempted to use a box. Nuthatches plaster mud around the entrance to the nesting cavity until it is the correct size - about 30 mm in diameter. Our pair selected a box large enough for owls or Stock Doves which had an entrance 150 mm wide by 250 mm high. They duly lined the base with rotten bark fragments then began the construction of the mud entrance lining - a major undertaking! However, even though the box was near a plentiful supply of stickiest Treswell Wood clay, the pair understandably gave up the struggle. We believe a pair nested elsewhere in a natural site because a female was later trapped in breeding condition. At the end of the season, we removed the dried mud from the box and weighed it - 1 kg dry weight. It would have been far heavier when wet - hard work for birds weighing only 25 gm.

## **Tree Sparrow**

Treswell Wood just keeps its nestbox colony of these birds. Three boxes were used, two being successful. The lack of Tree Sparrows is the greatest factor in the low overall total number of nestlings ringed compared to earlier years.

## **Predators and other notes**

The outbreak of predation on the Spotted Flycatchers was by far the most consistent and serious I have yet experienced. However, it was not confined to the boxes alone, for at the same time several song Thrush and Chaffinch nests nearby were also attacked. It is possible that an individual Jay was responsible for all the damage. Once it had chanced upon a good source of food, it concentrated on it.

Again we have been fortunate with stoats and weasels as only two boxes have been attacked. Both belonged to Great Tits which are much noisier than Blue Tits and so much more obvious to predators.

Wood mice have used nestboxes but have not damaged any nests this year. One particular box was used as a grain store. The mice must have transported half a cupful of wheat from somewhere to the box in the middle of the wood. The same box later held a single Great Tit egg with no nest. I wonder if the mouse transported the egg to its larder, or if we just had a Great Tit in a great hurry. Bees have used two boxes. In 1981 bees nested in a box which had been used by Tree Sparrows, this year both bees have used Blue Tit nests. I have no idea whether bees oust the birds, or if they only take over abandoned nests.

Box 38 was the only box which was removed from its site by the vandals in 1983. By chance I stumbled across it lying in the undergrowth where it had been hidden for a year. By coincidence the ringers had just recaptured a Coal Tit fledged from that same box in the previous year. The old box 38 is now repaired and stuffed with polystyrene foam ready for replacing in the wood, hopefully to attract Willow Tits which have to excavate a cavity themselves.

## **Recaptures of birds from previous years**

This year has produced the lowest autumn recapture rate on record for Blue Tits; we have only caught about one fifth of the expected number. Great Tit recaptures are well up (Table 4) and Wren numbers are good.

During the summer, tits normally flock together and rove around the wood. Some of the flocks are usually intercepted by the bird ringers. This summer we have not heard nor seen any large flocks and in spite of the hot, dry summer we have surprisingly seen almost no birds coming to drink at the ponds. We expected birds to be drawn to the pond from some distance outside of the wood since there are few other drinking sites nearby. The reason for the general lack of bird life is a complete mystery.

We have continued to recapture birds from previous years (Tables 4 and 5). There have been no spectacular reports this year but instead several Blue and Great Tits have been retrapped in Retford then retrapped later back in Treswell Wood.

### **Table 5. Capture histories of selected birds.**

#### **Blue Tit A213517, our oldest known surviving nestbox-reared Blue Tit**

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| 29 May 1980  | Ringed in nestbox, north-east corner of Treswell Wood. |
| 6 June 1981  | Retrapped in south-east corner of Treswell Wood        |
| 9 April 1982 | Retrapped in south-east corner of Treswell Wood        |
| 8 July 1984  | Retrapped in south-east corner of Treswell Wood        |

## **Great Tit NJ02944, our oldest known surviving nestbox-reared Great Tit**

|                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| 29 May 1982     | Ringed in nestbox, near main cross roads in Treswell Wood |
| 12 March 1983   | Retrapped in Babworth, near Retford                       |
| 16 April 1983   | Retrapped as south end of Main Ride, Treswell Wood        |
| 14 October 1984 | Retrapped in centre of Treswell Wood.                     |

## **Fleas**

This year, with the welcome absence of vandals, we have restarted the second-hand nest export trade to Loughborough. Malcolm Greenwood now has a student working full time on fleas and our harvest is providing her with a rich source of material. Results of the study will be forthcoming, but observations do take time.

For those interested it is worthwhile to observe the fleas' annual life cycle in the comfort of your own garden. The fleas will first emerge from your Blue Tit box (provided it is infested - which is fairly likely) about the time when the birds fledge. Fleas will continue to hatch throughout the next year. On any day, new hatching fleas wait on the outside of the box until a bird arrives. They leap onto the bird or onto any other moving object nearby. Those that fail to find a host may attempt to crawl to a suitable place. The sequence of events from this time until the next spring is not known but by then some of the adult fleas will have found a nest in which to lay their eggs. They probably do not spend all the winter on the body of the bird, but where they do hide is unknown. The peak time of flea emergence is in the spring when the birds are visiting holes, prospecting for nesting sites. A good crop of fleas sitting round the entrance to a nestbox waiting for a passing bird is a sight well worth seeing (from a distance). There may be several hundreds of fleas hatching from a good nest. Incidentally these bird fleas are not very partial to humans, they prefer a feather covered body. Should the odd handful of fleas leap your way, remain calm! They will probably crawl away quickly and in any case will not be the problem to you that human or cat fleas would be.

## **Plans for 1985**

We intend to increase the number of boxes in Treswell Wood a little during 1985, and at the same time extend the area of the wood in which they are sited. They will cover the northern half of the wood. the variety of boxes will also be increased with the addition of polystyrene filled boxes for the Willow Tits and Great Spotted Woodpeckers. Some hole entrance boxes will be mounted higher up for Nuthatches. Spotted Flycatcher boxes will be given protective screens.

Gamston Wood is ready to receive more boxes, particularly for Spotted Flycatchers. Any work done in Clarborough will depend on finding willing volunteers to look after the boxes there.

## **Acknowledgements**

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