

Bearded Tits and Reed Warblers in the Tay Reedbeds



Drawing: I G Shepherd

Since 2000, Tay Ringing Group have been conducting a RAS project on Bearded Tits in the internationally important Tay Reedbeds. Despite it being the species' most northerly regular outpost, this site typically holds around a fifth of the UK population.

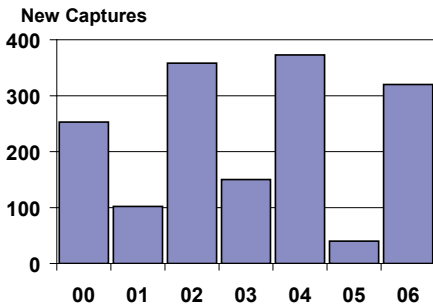
It was to our growing alarm that our early visits of 2005 produced few adult captures. The previous three years of the study had seen a general increase in the number of birds caught, culminating in 448 caught in the main study period during 2004. By the end of the 2005 RAS season it was clear that these drastically reduced numbers of adults had unsurprisingly also produced a much lower crop of juveniles, and in total we

ringed only 40 Beardies that year (with only 44 handlings), almost a tenfold decline from the previous season.

Clearly, it was important to know what lay behind this drastic change. RSPB, who had stepped in to continue the management of the reedbed after the collapse of the Tay Reed Company, have invested very significant resources in protecting the site and funded a number of research projects into food supply. The results have yet to be reported fully, but there are some indications that the winter seed availability may have dropped at a time when Bearded Tit populations were at a peak. This conjunction of events may also have been behind the rash of Scottish reports in 2005 of Bearded Tits away from their Tay stronghold.

The ratio between harvested and unharvested reed has always been thought to have an impact on the survival and productivity of a number of reedbed species, such as Bearded Tits. The collapse of the commercial reed company due to a series of years of poor reed quality and increased international competition had been presaged by a decline in the area harvested. Our RAS will play an important part in trying to unravel the links between habitat management and the fortunes of these reed-dwelling birds.

Thankfully, 2006 saw a return to previous high Bearded Tit numbers. Early indications were good and their promise was fulfilled with a total of 320 new birds ringed. Only nine birds from previous years were recaptured during 2006, however, suggesting that the increase was driven largely by juvenile recruitment. There were 111 captures outside the RAS period during two autumn visits, when Bearded Tits were moving in large flocks containing significant numbers of unringed birds. These could either have been third broods produced after the close of the RAS season (at this time of year it is not possible to





age Bearded Tits so it is difficult to verify this) or alternatively birds moving into the ringing sites from unsampled parts of the extensive Tay Reedbeds.

Even discounting the autumn captures, there was a clear increase in birds caught during the standard RAS period, indicating a substantial improvement in the population. It may be that such increases are part of a natural cyclical pattern, but alternatively they may reflect the increased area of reed brought into management by RSPB intervention during 2006.

Photos: Tay Ringing Group. In the aerial view below, one of the net rides can be seen in the centre of the picture.



By-catch from the Bearded Tit RAS study has provided proof of breeding Reed Warblers on the Tay, with a female with an active brood patch caught in June 2006 that had been ringed as a juvenile the previous year. In all 20 were caught that year, a Tay RG record – the majority being recently fledged juveniles.

Data from this study are fed to local ringing reports, SNH, and RSPB, and shared with local landowners. Tay Ringing Group have been exceptionally fortunate in the support we have had from the local landowners, and in the past SNH have provided financial support. We have now been awarded a substantial grant through the Perth & Kinross Quality of Life Trust/SITA Trust/landfill tax fund for our work in monitoring the reedbeds with particular reference to reedbed management.

Les Hatton

Since the catches have been so variable so far, it's not clear whether this RAS project will succeed directly in monitoring annual adult survival rates, but its value is undoubted in helping to optimise the management of this internationally important site. Eds.