

The Oldest Stonechat in Britain --- well nearly!

In the Spring and Summer of 2020, a breeding bird survey was carried out in the Silvercove Valley. It was expected that one of the species to be encountered on this survey would be stonechat. Much of the valley is covered in old growth heather, prime nesting habitat for this species. Furthermore, stonechat are known to breed in adjacent locations in the Ennerdale Valley.

It was no surprise that a male was encountered on the first survey on 27/04/20. Two breeding territories were located over the course of the 3 survey visits and both pairs successfully fledged young.

All stonechat records were in the altitudinal range of 250m to 440m and in tall old growth heather, either virtually treeless or in sparse scrubland.

A pair alarming in the Silvercove new plantings enclosure at NY130128 on the third survey on 27/05/20 was indicative of young in the nest. A supplementary survey on 26/06/20 discovered that the female of the above pair was a colour-ringed individual with a blue ring over an orange ring on the right leg and a silver metal ring (BTO ring) over a red ring on the left leg. A further visit on 30/06/20 was made to obtain a photographic record of the colour-ringed female.



A pioneering long-term study of European Stonechats *Saxicola rubicola* in western Cumbria has been carried out by the Cumbrian ornithologist John Callion. The details of this study "Some observations of European Stonechat in Cumbria" can be found in *British Birds November 2015 -vol. 108, issue11, pp648-659*. This study involves locating nests and colour ringing pulli (nestlings). Most Cumbrian birders are aware of this study

and any sightings of colour-ringed stonechat are reported back to John. John is a prodigious nest finder, a skill learnt from his father. Below is an extract from the BB (British Birds) article of 2015 cited above, which demonstrates his ability to find nests and the dedication to unlocking the secrets of our Cumbrian stonechat:

Number of birds ringed from 1990 to 2013, 3,700 nestlings were ringed, of which approximately 2,200 were colour-ringed using a series of eight single coloured rings (green, blue, sky blue, pink, purple, orange, red and white). Each bird carried two colour-rings and a metal BTO ring. By using a combination of sequences and ring positions I was able to ring over 1,000 individuals without repetition. On several occasions, after exhausting the colour combinations (in 1995 I ringed over 500 nestlings), I ceased colour-ringing to avoid duplication of combinations on surviving birds. I allowed four years before reviving original colour sequences. There are no sightings of a colour-ringed bird older than three years in my study, and the longest-lived ringed Stonechat, according to BTO data, is four years 11 months.

As I knew that John would be interested in the sighting I passed on the details. The reply that came back was very enlightening:

This bird was ringed from a brood of five on 27-April 2014 at Sale Fell Wythop; this is my longest lived bird, so really good news. Also, I've just been on the BTO site to check the national longevity record; it's four years-11 months, so this exceeds it by more than a year.

For a few days we thought that Ennerdale held the national record for the oldest Stonechat in Britain until further research by Steve Westerberg (RSPB) unearthed details of an older Stonechat in Norfolk!

So presently the Silvercove female is the oldest Stonechat in Cumbria and the second oldest in the UK. The author intends to revisit the site in 2021 to see if the bird returns to breed. We can only wait and see if this venerable veteran of the bird world will break the national record!

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