

Overview of BTO Ringing Scheme training and licensing procedure

Ringing Scheme governance

- The BTO has delegated authority from the Country Conservation Agencies under the Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981) for issuing permits to ring birds. BTO organise, administer and regulate the Ringing Scheme in Britain & Ireland, with over 3000 trained volunteer ringers, ringing around 1 million birds annually (see <http://www.bto.org/ringing>).
- The Ringing Scheme is governed by the BTO Ringing Committee (RIN) which is itself a committee of the governing Council of the BTO. Members of RIN are qualified and experienced ringers, and among their responsibilities is the maintenance of high standards of training for all ringers.
- The trapping of wild birds, and the fitting of conventional numbered metal rings, and coloured plastic rings, to the legs of birds are activities covered by a conventional ringing permit. In addition the BTO Ringing Scheme has for many years regulated the use of special methods for trapping and marking wild birds, including fitting of harness-mounted satellite tags. This is the remit of an independent, specialist group of experts in the fields of research, technology and veterinary animal welfare known as the Special Methods Technical Panel (SMTP); this is a formal Technical Panel of the BTO Ringing Committee, and maintains oversight of efficacy of methods, bird welfare, usefulness and quality of research, and safety.

Training to ring

- Training to ring is a strictly controlled process. All Trainee (T permit) and Provisional (C permit) ringers are individually mentored by an Advanced (A permit) ringer with a Trainers' endorsement. All applicants for progression to Advanced and Trainer status are assessed in the field by a qualified, independent Trainer and applications are also reviewed by sub-Committee of RIN, the Ringing Standards Select Committee.
- Trainees are not permitted to undertake ringing activities independently. Provisional ringers can operate unsupervised but the nature of those activities can, and is highly likely to be, restricted in terms of taxonomic coverage and catching techniques by their Trainer via use of endorsements and bespoke restrictions. Applicants for a provisional permit must have processed at least 750 birds of about 40 species, which typically takes 1-2 years of regular ringing.
- Scientific researchers studying a particular species can qualify for a limited ringing permit to cover the capture and marking required by their specific research objectives, but this still requires an appropriate level of training.

Special methods

- SMTP operational protocols have been agreed by the Home Office Animals Scientific Procedures Inspectorate, to which the SMTP sends a written report on an annual basis and with which the SMTP meets annually. Methods are only considered by the SMTP if the level of potential harm to individual birds is less than that described in the Animal Scientific Procedures Act (ASPA) as the lower threshold.
- Special Methods endorsement applications are received via a standardized form outlining personal experience, evidence of similar practice elsewhere, potential risk/level of harm and means of mitigation, research aims and data archiving details, where possible supported by published literature.

- All applications must be suitably detailed to assess (a) the risk of harm to birds, (b) the probability of delivering the expected data and (c) whether the findings would be of sufficient value to justify the risk (including potential for publication). In exceptional circumstances the panel may request additional input from the Home Office concerning the evaluation of criterion (a). The SMTP is at liberty to consult additional external referees and impose changes/restrictions in relation to methods used, sample sizes and training required.
- All individuals holding endorsements must report to the SMTP annually for evaluation; this report must include numbers of individuals marked/sampled and a summary of the success or failure of the method, documenting any impacts on birds and cases of equipment failure. If evidence of harm at or above the ASPA lower threshold is detected, permission may be withdrawn or modifications requested.
- A documented subset of well established procedures may be agreed by the SMTP Secretary without circulation to the Panel; this subset includes fitting of wing tags to some regularly tagged species but does not include fitting of harnesses to any species.

Harness use

- The SMTP provides details of design and fitting procedure for well-proven harness types; any deviation from these guidelines must be approved in advance by SMTP
- All new applicants (including those who have previously worked with different species/harness designs) must receive field training from experienced harness users.
- Details of the person who fitted each harness, harness size and the body size of the bird must be submitted to SMTP for every individual tagged to provide an audit trail.
- For newer harness designs or rarely marked species, the SMTP may require a control group to be established.
- The capture data for every tagged bird are submitted to the BTO Ringing Scheme as per standard Ringing Scheme protocol and records of all birds reported injured or dead must be reported to the SMTP whether or not there is evidence that the harness may have been a causal factor.

Patagial wing tags

- Applications for tagging endorsements are only approved for those species where there is no indication that the tag will interfere with flight or foraging, and where identification in flight is essential to the project.
- The SMTP provides details of the fitting procedure and specification of tags and all materials involved; any deviation from these guidelines must be approved in advance by the SMTP.
- All new applicants (including those who have previously worked with different species) must receive field training from experienced tag fitters.
- Observations from the fieldworker and members of the public are submitted to the BTO Ringing Scheme as per standard Ringing Scheme protocol. Records of any issues encountered are submitted to the BTO Ringing Scheme and passed to the SMTP for consideration.

15 March 2017

Jez Blackburn, BTO Licensing Officer
Dave Leech, Head of BTO Ringing and Nest Record Team