Dartmoor Ring Ouzel Survey 2018

Introduction

Ring ouzel survey work in 2018 was conducted primarily by volunteers and co-ordinated by Fiona Freshney, the Dartmoor Moorland Bird Advisor, who also participated to a limited extent in the survey work on a voluntary basis. Additionally, some 25 interested parties contributed incidental sightings which helped confirm territories and breeding and helped target the restricted survey effort.

The small, declining population of Dartmoor ring ouzel has been monitored annually since 2010, although survey effort has varied across years. The initial intensive period of monitoring began in 2010, with 2011 and 2012 seeing two full time surveyors engaged in identifying territories, tracking the progress of each nesting attempt enabling calculation of productivity. In subsequent years the formal survey effort was reduced (although co-ordinated volunteer input increased)

All historical sites were visited at least once with those most regularly used receiving two or more visits; a couple of sites received less coverage than desirable leaving hope that a pair at least might have been missed. Whilst it seems likely that most, if not all breeding pairs were located, the reduced survey effort is no longer adequate to confirm breeding for all pairs or track all nesting attempts, particularly second broods. Since 2016 the level of confidence has been sufficiently low that it has not been possible to reliably determine productivity figures.

Summary of the 2018 season

In 2018 six pairs were confirmed with the likelihood of one further pair. There was evidence that 4 pairs bred successfully. Of the ring ouzel located at least 5 were Dartmoor ringed birds with 3 of them closely related. Two males were from the same 2015 brood ringed in Tavy Cleave. One of them bred with his mother on his first return, possibly remaining with her in the second year. In 2018 he had a new mate. However, it looks strongly likely that his sibling nested with an ‘aunt’ in 2018. Is this a sign of an ever decreasing, fairly closed population? Two of the ringed birds, the males were 2015 birds and the two identified females were ringed in 2012.

Site accounts in brief

Figure 1 below shows where pairs in 2018 were located and breeding either confirmed, probable or possible in relation to previous nest locations. No grid references were taken for nests although the pair in Black Tor used a previous nest site on the middle stack of Black Tor.

By 31st March, evidence suggested that the Tavy Cleave stronghold held a possible 3 pairs of ring ouzel, 3 males seen and heard by one volunteer during a single visit and one being part of a pair.

The pair were ringed, the male a bird ringed in Tavy Cleave in 2015 (right: O/M; left: Y/O/Y) and the female, photographic evidence strongly suggesting (right: B/M: left: B/Y/Y). The female was ringed in Tavy Cleave in 2012 and was a sibling of W/Y/Y who returned to breed in 2013, 2015, 2016 (with her son R: O/M; L: LG/O/Y the sibling of Y/O/Y above !) and possibly in 2017 with LG/O/Y (but not 100% confirmed). Several early survey visits indicated that at least this pair had a nest and late season they were seen with juveniles. It was not possible to follow the progress of the other two possible pairs but a few sightings and song form other males suggested that there were pairs there later in the season.

On the 20th April a pair was observed in the West Okement valley on the north stack of Black Tor, seen by Ian Brooker a DNPA Ranger. The male appeared to have yellow rings on its left leg. A record received of a pair/bird further south near the end of Black a Tor copse suggested this pair may have moved south, and a male was heard singing in this location in late June. Possibly linked to this pair was a sighting of an ouzel still
further south by the RSPB team surveying the Dartmoor ranges. They spotted an agitated ouzel in the upper reaches of the West Okement valley. Unfortunately there was inadequate time to ever confirm the status of this southern pair although a visit was made to where the agitated ouzel was spotted but no ouzels were seen. A further pair of unringed birds were located at the middle stack of Black Tor in May with a nest and 4 newly hatched chicks by 4th June. The male was seen feeding juveniles a few weeks later with no sign of the female so we assumed they went on to try for another nest, but no further survey work was conducted in this area.

On 22nd April a pair were discovered at Lake Down and still present on 13th May; their behaviour suggested that there was already a nest. Both birds were ringed; the male part of the same brood ringed at Blacktor in 2015 and mentioned above (LG/O/Y) with a ringed female; not his mother this time! Her ring combinations were not confirmed. LG/O/Y has returned to Dartmoor each year since 2015. Further visits by volunteers confirmed they were still there on 22nd May is but there was some concern as a sparrowhawk or similar was seen approaching the nest location, with the adults showing signs of agitation with fears for the nestlings. However, the pair were relocated by volunteers on the 26th May so fears for the nest were unfounded. Volunteers recorded seeing the male feeding the female a snail; could this actually have been the male feeding a well grown fledgling? Had the nest been predated it is unlikely that the birds would have remained in the valley at Lakedown.

At Headland Warren, a historic stronghold, a pair were seen early season but not located after that despite dedicated survey by very experienced volunteers on several occasions during the summer.

Finally, evidence of breeding came late in the season at Manga Hill, on the North Teign. This site was visited twice early season with no sign of ring ouzel but in June a record of an ouzel was received from the Dartmoor Training Area RSPB surveyors of a female feeding on bilberry in the valley. Fiona checked this out in July, and up to two large juveniles were spotted (flying with difficulty across the gorse slopes in strong winds and rain showers). No adults were seen and the weather was not ideal for viewing. Maybe this could have been the pair seen at Headland Warren?

Figure 1. Location of pairs 2018
Ring ouzel exclosures: West Mill tor and Tavy Cleave

Helen Booker (RSPB) and Fiona Freshney (RSPB/Dartmoor Moorland Bird Advisor) continue to monitor the vegetation in the exclosures annually. The exclosures in Tavy Cleave have been in place for nearly 5 years now. The small one is showing good recovery of heather, bilberry, moss layer and compares well with the over-grazed slopes outside. The larger exclosure is a more mixed picture. Western gorse over the nesting crags has increased with heather cover also improving. Many rowan saplings have emerged (good perches), but *Molinia* is becoming more dense with the smaller areas of short acid grassland disappearing. The exclosure is summer grazed but stock do not appear to be utilising the area very much even in the summer months. The habitat offers much more potential for a range of species but Helen and Fiona wonder if the *Molinia* growth below the crags is deterring ring ouzel from nesting in this area; perhaps making it potentially harder for ring ouzel fledglings to disperse down slope to the river and the rocky areas. There have been no known nesting attempts since the fence was erected.

At West Mill Tor, the dwarf shrub development began well, but issues with sheep still managing to determinedly getting in through the wire strands has at intervals suppressed the heather and bilberry growth. However, the growth is still significantly healthier than that outside the exclosure. This exclosure still has a few years to go before being removed. Thought is being given as to how to use this information in conversations with others in the future.
Large exclosure Tavy Cleave 2019

Small exclosure Tavy Cleave
February 2019

One of our returning males: O/M; LG/O/Y – back for the 3rd year running