



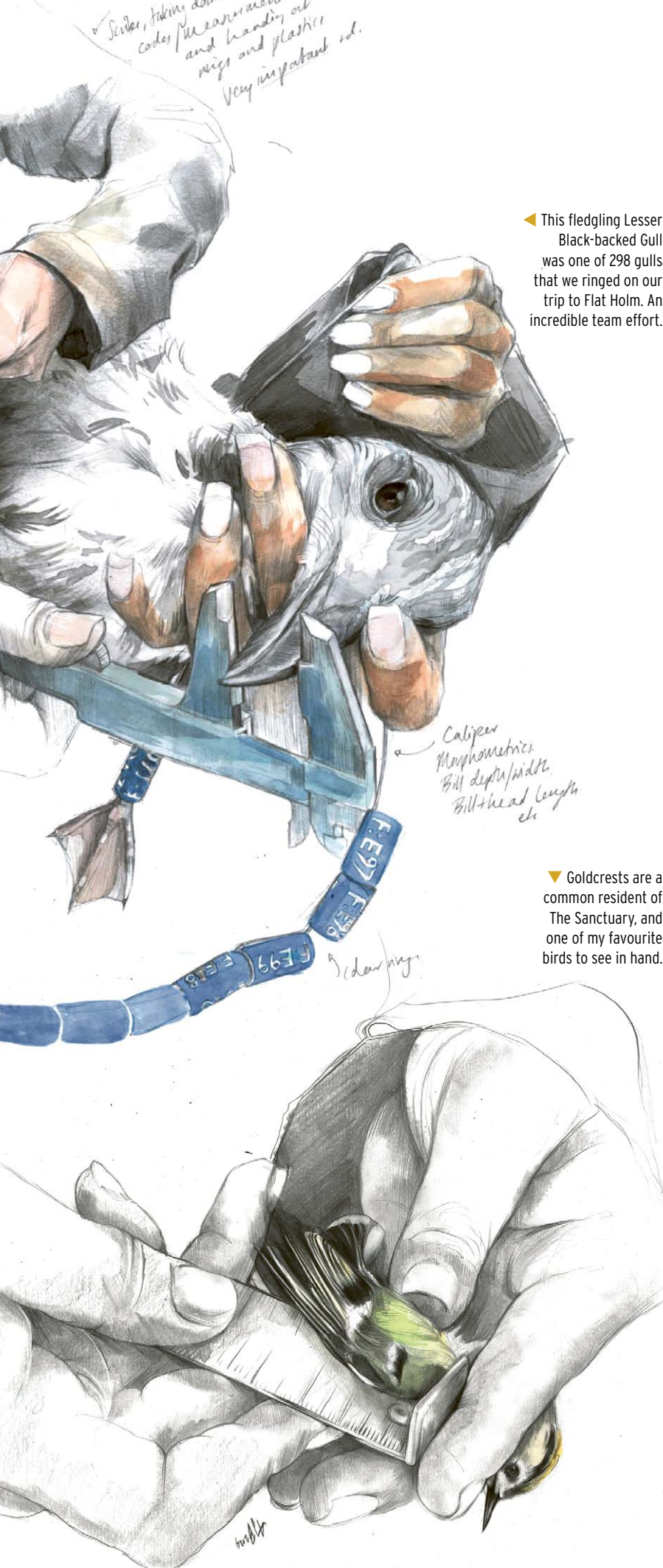
Healed by birds

Illustrator and BTO volunteer **Annie Booker** describes how becoming a ringer has changed her life.

More often than not, it is a two man job, requiring time and effort carrying the ladder from box to box.

Monitoring these boxes helps us monitor not only the owl species in the area, but also their diet - prey - and breeding success.





◀ This fledgling Lesser Black-backed Gull was one of 298 gulls that we ringed on our trip to Flat Holm. An incredible team effort.

▼ Goldcrests are a common resident of The Sanctuary, and one of my favourite birds to see in hand.

My journey into ringing started on a rainy day in September 2023. I had been visiting Portbury Wharf Nature Reserve (PWNR) in Portishead for a few months. It had become my solace after the recent loss of my father, and one morning while I was pulling weeds at a volunteering session, the warden brought up the subject of bird ringing.

This was the first time I had heard of this form of conservation science, and I had no idea then how it would change my life.

Through PWNR's warden I found Aurora Gonzalo Tarodo, an ornithologist and the lead ringer of The Sanctuary Ringing Group. Aurora welcomed me into The Sanctuary (our ringing site) and that changed everything. It was the first time I had ever seen wild birds so close, and it was an experience I will never forget. The team was small, only three ringers – Aurora, Ezra, Andrew – wonderful people with their individual expertise. And then there was me, the observer. They took such care describing their work that day, while they processed bird after bird, from Great Tits to Goldcrests. It was my first insight into the hidden world of birds all around me.

I would scribe for them, and help put up nets, and when I wasn't doing this I drew the birds, and the ringers

I remember vividly being cold and soaked through, but more captivated than I had ever been in my life, and when Aurora put that first Blackcap in my hands I was hooked.

I started attending ringing sessions with the intention of documenting the team's work through drawing, and helping in any way I could. I would scribe for them, and help put up nets, and when I wasn't doing this I drew the birds, and the ringers.

READING THE BIRDS

I was fascinated by the process of ringing, so I mostly drew the ringers' hands and the delicate practice of placing a ring. I scribbled and scrawled all I saw and heard, using my visual thinking as a way to understand the birds and the ringers themselves.

I observed through them the complexity that came with ringing. Birds are one thing to admire, and another to read. This was the part of ringing that mesmerised me the most – the reading of the bird. A bird can tell you its age, its sex and its condition but not with words. It takes a ringer to read the bird's plumage, identify moult, age, sex and many other factors. It's a whole different language. But it is also one of the most crucial aspects of ringing, and one I am now learning myself.

After a few months of this relationship, the ringers ringing and me drawing, it became apparent that I had found what made me feel conscientious, and



We had the pleasure of ringing many Bee-eaters, but only one little Bee-eater (Merganser) and one of the most deserving ringers did this bird. So much time spent considering nest placements and bird movement - so when we caught this bird everyone felt the excitement.

Beautiful and unique plumage - great to compare the plumage and morphometric differences against the larger European Bee-eater.

I spent all my spare hours and days with Aurora, learning all that I could from her. If I wasn't at The Sanctuary I was at home visually exploring all that I was seeing and learning. I even completed a diploma in ornithology alongside my crazy schedule. Very quickly a portfolio began to form of my bird ringing illustrations, and when I showed these to the group, they shared my enthusiasm.

JOINING THE RINGING COMMUNITY

This was when the idea of me becoming a trainee was passed around. I was thrilled. So I signed up with BTO, found my Trainer (Lyndon Roberts) and the work began. Watching people ring birds is very different to learning it yourself, but I adored every minute. I learned slowly at first, but all my scribbling and sketching helped inform my training.

I was very fortunate to have found my ringing group. They dedicated so much time and effort to my learning, and my sense of community only grew. This feeling of belonging and new-found

▲ A moment that took our breath away. A rare sight to catch a Peregrine, but welcome data, and a memory I cannot forget.



▲ The first and only Little Bee-eater I have seen in hand. The plumage was so striking and nearly impossible to do justice in paint!

I have had the absolute pleasure of immersing myself into the world of ornithology, learning with English, Spanish and Russian ringers alike

passion caused my creative career to pivot also; my fascination between people and birds was just as strong when it came to my illustration work.

Armed with a new portfolio, my team's support and encouragement, as well as a lot of hard work, other opportunities began to show themselves. I received a bursary from the Eric Hosking Trust which allowed me to dedicate much of my creative time to documenting bird ringing through illustration, and to engage with the locals who visited the reserve too. I volunteered on the Lesser Black-backed Gull colour-ringing project on Flat Holm island in Wales, where I connected with many other ringers from around the UK.

The Bristol Ornithological Club also supported my training and creative endeavours through financial aid

of my most recent trip that took place in November 2024. Led by Aurora, this research trip had us ringing in South Africa, where we captured both local and migratory species, with a special interest in palearctics such as the Swallow and the Willow Warbler. I learnt more there in three weeks than I have ever in my life.

I have had the absolute pleasure of immersing myself into the world of ornithology, learning with English, Spanish and Russian ringers alike. I have met and spoken with trainees and professionals from all across the UK, drawn dozens of hands and seen so much of the hard work that goes into avian conservation in the UK.

I started 2023 full of grief, and now I begin 2025 with a sturdy sense of direction and a passion for the natural world that no words can describe. ■

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