



Welcome

Autumn has definitely arrived – the summer migrants have all but gone and the skies are filled with noisy flocks of geese. This edition of the newsletter has a strong autumn and winter theme with articles about the goose and thrush species which add excitement to birding at this time of year. There is also an article about our smallest bird – the Goldcrest which, despite being an insect-feeder, stays with us through the toughest winter weather. The waters off Moray support internationally important numbers of seabirds and other marine birds in the winter months and this edition highlights how these birds have now been given extra protection. Glenlivet Estate is worth a visit at any time of the year – at the moment the birch woods will be turning golden and are often full of newly arrived Redwings. The Estate Head Ranger, Mark Johnston tells us more about Glenlivet and the wildlife it supports – hopefully the Club will be able to visit next year.

Autumn also sees the start of our programme of talks – these will all be virtual again. Details of our first talk on the 21st of October can be found on page 11. We look forward to seeing you all then.

David Law

Chair

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Goose Identification

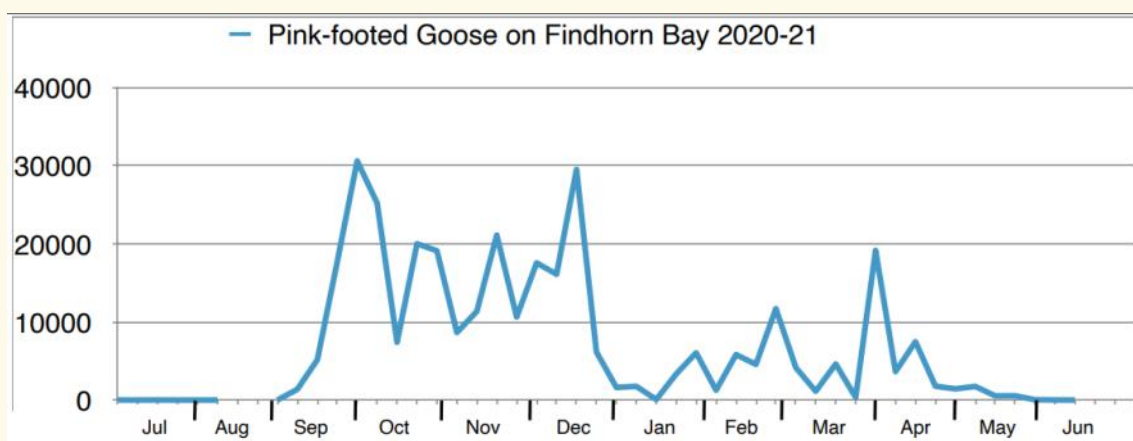
Richard Somers Cocks

The coming of autumn is often associated with the influx of huge numbers of geese to Moray, and in particular to Findhorn Bay. They remain for much of the winter using the bay as an overnight roost and moving out to feed on local fields during the day. Geese species can be divided into two genera: 'grey' geese (*Anser*) and 'black' geese (*Branta*). Among the 'grey' geese that we see are Greylag and Pink-footed Geese the latter of which is by far the most numerous. Lesser numbers of 'black' geese are also seen and these include Barnacle, Canada and Brent Geese.

Pink-footed Goose



Pink-footed Goose. Over the summer these birds are breeding in Iceland and they start to arrive in Moray in mid September. Build up in numbers can be quite dramatic usually reaching a peak in late September to early October. At the end of September 2019 for example we had a record count of 56,200 on Findhorn Bay. These numbers start to drop off fairly quickly as many



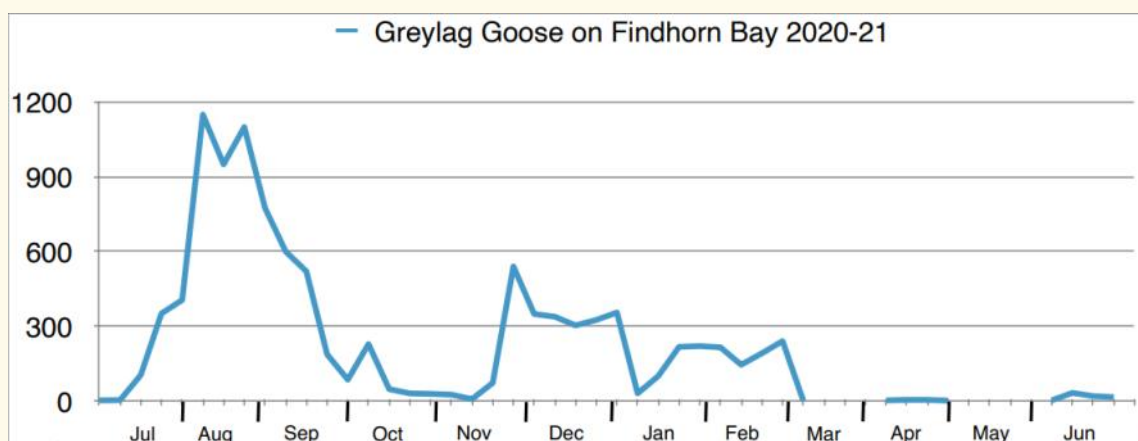
birds continue their journey to estuaries further south, but nevertheless several thousand will remain in the area. At the end of the season numbers will start to rise again in late March as they gather pre-departure, and most will have gone by the end of April.

Greylag Goose. The Greylags that we see on the bay come from two populations. In August we see birds returning from the inland breeding sites like Dava and Lochindorb and 1000 or more are often seen by early September. After a bit of a decline in numbers there is then usually another peak in November, almost certainly accounted for by birds flying into the UK from the Icelandic breeding population.

Pink-foot vs Greylag identification. At a distance telling these two species of 'grey' geese apart can be quite tricky when they are roosting, as the plumages are similar. However, a clear view of the head will readily identify them. The Greylag Goose has a striking orange bill, paler head and a somewhat thicker neck. By comparison the Pink-footed Goose has a largely dark bill with only a



small amount of orange and its head is noticeably darker. It is also a slightly smaller bird. They both readily fly at night and can be identified by their calls. A Pink-foot has a higher pitched call compared to a Greylag which has a more typical cackling call similar to a domestic goose.



Barnacle Geese

© Richard Somers Cocks

Barnacle Goose. Barnacles are a regular sight in autumn, but their numbers vary from year to year. Their winter grounds are largely on the west coast and Moray is just a stopover on their journey from breeding areas like Svalbard in northern Norway. Slightly smaller than the Pink-footed Geese, which they are often mixed in with, they can be identified by their slate grey backs and whitish underparts. Their heads are largely white and their necks and upper breast are black.

Canada Geese

© Richard Somers Cocks

Canada Goose. Canada Geese are a regular sight in late summer on Findhorn Bay. These are part of the UK resident population and around 50 have been present this year for their summer moult, during which they become flightless for a while. Compared to the Barnacle Goose it is much larger, longer necked and has a brownish tinge to its body. White is less extensive on the head and only the neck is black. Just occasionally we see the odd one mixed in with the Pink-foot flock later in the winter, and these are worth looking at as they can be genuine North American vagrants.

Dark-bellied, Pale-bellied and Grey-bellied Brent Geese

© Richard Somers Cocks

Brent Goose. The main area to see them locally is off Nairn in the winter, although a few do get seen occasionally on the estuaries elsewhere in Moray. They are slightly smaller than a Barnacle and their plumage is somewhat darker. Head and neck are black and a small white crescent is usually visible at the top of the neck. The sub-species we normally see are Pale-bellied Brent Geese which have arrived from Greenland or Svalbard. A few Dark-bellied Brent Geese, coming in from arctic Russia are sometimes present, but this sub-species normally over-winters further south. Very occasionally a Grey-bellied Brant from the arctic coast of North America is seen.

Snow Goose

© Richard Somers Cocks

Other Geese. Other species have been noted. Every year there are usually one or two Snow Goose among the flock of Pink-footed Goose on Findhorn Bay. Most winters there are the occasional records of both European and Greenland White-fronted Goose. Another 'grey' goose sometimes

recorded with the Pink-footed Geese is Bean Goose. This species may be under-reported as they are very similar to Pink-feet, but the orange legs are the usual giveaway.



Although the geese can be widely seen across our region during the day, one of the best places to watch them from is at Findhorn Bay as they depart at dawn from the roost. It starts just before sunrise and can last up to an hour afterwards and is a truly spectacular sight and sound. Covid permitting, we hope to organise an outing in late October.



Birdsinmorayandnairn.org

is a one-stop-shop for everything to do with birds and birding in the region. View latest sightings, forthcoming survey work, bird club news and more.

Available to Download

The SOC's free mobile app; *Where to Watch Birds in Scotland* is available for Android and Apple devices. The award winning app has over 560 sites and new sites will continue to be added and existing ones updated as far as possible.



Scalan

© Mark Johnston

A Short Migration

© Richard Somers Cocks

Mark Johnston,**Head Ranger, Crown Estate Scotland, Glenlivet Estate.**

Last time I wrote for this newsletter and spoke to Moray Bird Club I was Wildlife Ranger on Dorenell Wind Farm in the Cabrach. I reported back some interesting sightings such as Red-footed Falcon, Black Redstart and Rough-legged Buzzard. As summer arrived though, an opportunity of a move south along Glen Suie and on to the Glenlivet side of the march boundary arose. During my time at Dorenell I had walked or cycled between the Cabrach and Glenlivet several times, but this time I had to take the long way round, moving my stuff by road.

River Avon from Campdalemore

© Mark Johnston

This meant less opportunity for Eagle spotting but I wasn't concerned as I knew there would be plenty to interest me once I arrived in Tomintoul. First, I had to learn more about my new employer and how to work within the role. Crown Estate Scotland (CES) is a self-funding public corporation which invests in property, and natural resources. It is made up of:

- * Virtually all seabed out to 12 nautical miles
- * Just under half the foreshore
- * Four rural estates comprising 37,000 hectares of rural land, as well as urban property
- * Rights to fish wild salmon and sea trout in river and coastal areas
- * Rights to naturally occurring gold and silver across most of Scotland



Thankfully I only need to get my head around Glenlivet....The Estate is 23000ha of land lying between the Ladder and Cromdale Hills. It sits between 200m and 750m, and is comprised of a mix of woodland, farmland, commercial forestry and the rivers Avon and Livet. Although owned by CES, much of the land is managed by tenant farmers and sporting tenants with significant areas of in hand forestry. So, where does a Ranger fit in?

Well, there are miles and miles of waymarked trails and other visitor infrastructure such as car parks, gates, stiles and bridges. All these take a lot of checking and maintaining. And of course, visitors must be engaged with, whether by providing information when out and about or through guided walks and events. We also provide educational visits and facilitate trips by groups such as the Wilderness Foundation. What about the birds, you say?

Biodiversity falls under my remit and I deliver the Biodiversity Action Plan for the Estate. The range of interesting habitats is pretty amazing, with six Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and species to be considered from raptors to Red Squirrels, waders, Black Grouse, and Twinflower. Unfortunately, in the short time I've been working here I haven't quite got on top of my patch like I was on the Cabrach. However, visits to various parts of Glenlivet such as the Lecht Mine, Drumin

Castle, Scalan Seminary and Carn Daimh have given up cronking Ravens and circling Buzzards, Grey Wagtails and Dippers. I don't need to travel for exciting mammal sightings as Red Squirrels visit the office. Glenmullie trail had a Spotted Flycatcher in a cloud of midges and the ponds by the car park were alive with dragonflies and damselflies. A trip to check out the owl nest boxes at

Spotted Flycatcher



© Mark Johnston

Grey Wagtail



© Mark Johnston

© Richard Some



© Mark Johnston

Blairfindy Castle suggested that Jackdaws had been the inhabitants this year.

My next quest is finding the best spots to experience the deer rut and wintering geese. Then it'll soon be time to plan for spring surveying – I'll be monitoring leks for Black Grouse and doing a range of raptor watches for Eagle, Hen Harrier, Merlin and Peregrine. Then down to the Peesie hide at Tomintoul, and other hotspots for the waders.

I believe the group has visited Glenlivet in the past and it would be great to have you next year and share some wildlife experiences. In the meantime, if you have any questions please don't hesitate to get in touch – mark.johnston@crownestatescotland.com.

For up to date happenings check out our Facebook and Instagram pages <https://fb.me/GlenlivetEstate> <https://www.instagram.com/glenlivetestate/> and there's lots more information on the webpage <https://www.glenlivetestate.co.uk/>



Goldcrest – Moray's Smallest Bird

Martin Cook

If you know your bird songs and are of 'mature years' you might think that Goldcrests are not as common as once they were. But from the birds' point of view, you don't need to worry - the British Trust for Ornithology's Breeding Bird Survey shows that the Scottish breeding population of Goldcrests increased by 55% between 1995-2018. The apparent absence of singing birds is more likely to be the result of an inability to hear their very high-pitched song and calls as we grow older!



The Goldcrest is a tiny bird - along with the rare Firecrest, Britain's smallest. It weighs only around six grams which is less than a two pence coin. Clearly such a tiny bird will lose a lot of its body heat so it has energetic, tit-like behaviour - continuously on the move as it seeks the small insects and spiders that make up most of its diet. Unlike most songbirds, it even sings as it forages rather than wasting good foraging time by singing from a perch.

In the breeding season, most Goldcrests are found in coniferous woodland but in autumn and winter they are found in all in scrub and gardens. Where been studied in winter it has small groups which defend of these groups roost vegetation and in cold warmth, in a ball with tails

15-20 young can be reared in a year

types of woodland as well as their social behaviour has been found that they live in winter territories. Members together in dense evergreen weather huddle together for protruding.

Winter is the time of Goldcrest. The weather

longer and insect food more difficult to find. Most of our small insect-feeding birds, such as warblers, Swallows and flycatchers, migrate south to Africa in winter but the tiny Goldcrest stays with us. In a mild winter, sufficient food can be found among conifer needles and under bark but if conditions are severe, especially with heavy snowfall, then mortality is high with up to 80% of the autumn population failing to survive.

greatest threat to a becomes colder, nights are

Such heavy mortality will of course greatly reduce the population but if a good breeding season

follows then numbers can quickly bounce back. Goldcrests lay up to ten eggs and the female often builds a new nest and starts to lay a second clutch of eggs before the first brood has fledged - leaving the male to feed them. In this way, 15-20 young can be reared in a year which can quickly restore the population after winter losses.

It would be reasonable to expect that such a tiny bird would be an unlikely long-distance migrant and indeed our own birds usually wander only short distances. However, ringing has shown regular movements from countries around the North Sea and Baltic into Britain for the winter. One has even reached us from Russia and several from Poland, though Norway, Sweden and Finland are their usual points of origin.

of them can survive two weather but some clearly ringed here in winter have Scandinavia.

One has even reached us from Russia

It seems amazing that any journeys as well as the cold do, as several Goldcrests been found back home in

When weather conditions Scandinavia, but birds then with easterly winds, large

encourage departure from encounter poor conditions numbers may be deposited

on the east coast of Scotland. The most remarkable 'fall' took place in autumn 1982 when as many as 15,000 Goldcrests were estimated to be on the Isle of May (Fife) on 11 October.

Watching a Goldcrest fluttering round a conifer in search of food might suggest that any migratory flight would be made over a long period of time but again, ringing has shown that this is not necessarily true. In the autumn of 2010, a Goldcrest which had been ringed in southern Norway was found 665 km away in Lincolnshire just two days later.

News

St Kilda

Our next virtual talk will be on Thursday, 21 October at 7.30 pm when John Love will give a talk on the natural history of St Kilda. More details on this talk, together with details on how to attend will shortly be sent out in an email.

Bird Outing

As mentioned in Richard's article the club hope to organise an outing to Findhorn to observe the spectacle of the geese leaving the bay in the morning. If this goes ahead as planned more details will be emailed soon.

Birdwatchers' Code

We know some of our readers are not experienced birdwatchers so some of you may be interested in the Birdwatchers' Code which puts the interests of birds first and respects other people. It has been drafted in consultation with other organisations and can be found at [SOC Birdwatchers' Code](#).

New protection for marine birds in the Moray Firth

David Law

Common Scoter



© Richard Somers Cocks

The coastal waters off Moray have long been known as a good place to see interesting birds such as Long-tailed Duck, Common Scoter and Great Northern Diver. Late last year the birds in these waters were given new protection by the Scottish Government as part of a larger Moray Firth Special Protection Area (SPA). This new site stretches all the way round the Moray Firth from Portsoy in Aberdeenshire to north of Helmsdale in Sutherland. The Moray section extends up to around 10 miles out to sea.

Long-tailed Duck (Summer)



© Richard Somers Cocks

Long-tailed Duck (Winter)



© Richard Somers Cocks

The Special Protection Area has been designated as it provides non breeding habitat for nine species of marine bird and also year-round habitat for Shags. The evidence to support the designation has come from years of survey work which has included survey from aircraft - many of the concentrations of birds are too far out to sea to be counted from the land. Most of the birds which use the SPA breed much further north and come to the Moray Firth once their breeding season is over. Eider and Shag are the exception as they breed more locally.

The waters off Moray are particularly important for a number of the species protected by the

Special Protection Area, so we'll focus on a few of these.

Great Northern Diver



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The Great Northern Diver is seen in good numbers between Lossiemouth and Buckie from October to May when they leave for their breeding grounds in Iceland, Greenland and Baffin Island. Their main prey is fish, including haddock, cod, herring and sprats and they are also fond of crabs.

Red-throated Diver

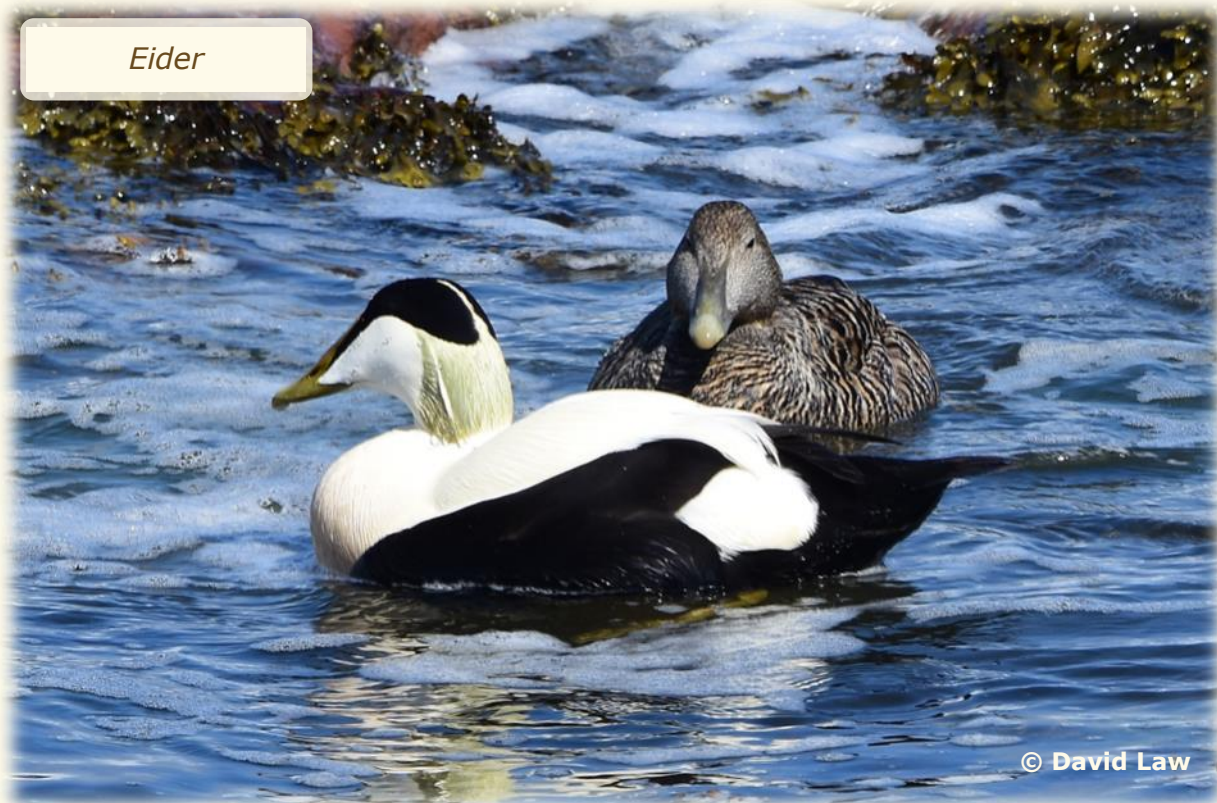


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Red-throated Divers also feed on fish and are most common in the waters between Lossiemouth and Buckie, arriving earlier than Great Northerns – usually from September when adults are sometimes still in breeding plumage. Most of these birds probably breed in Scotland, but some may have come from Greenland.

Large flocks of Common Scoter and Long-tailed Ducks are found in Burghead Bay and Spey Bay

where they dive to the sandy seabed to find their prey, which is mostly bivalve molluscs such as cockles and clams along with other seabed invertebrates. Common Scoters are thought to come mainly from Scandinavian and Icelandic breeding populations while the Long-tailed Ducks are thought to breed in northern Finland, Norway and Sweden and northwest Russia, although this is still uncertain.



Eider ducks also mostly feed on seabed bivalve molluscs. They are mainly found between Burghead and western Spey Bay. Compared with most of the other birds using the Special Protection Area, Eiders are relatively local breeders with most of the birds probably breeding in Scotland including along the Moray coast.

So how does the new site protect these birds? The designation means that when any new developments are proposed the impacts on the populations of important bird species have to be assessed and it has to be ensured that they are not adversely affected. The most serious potential impacts are likely to come from activities such as trawling that could directly or indirectly affect the seabed prey of the birds, or disturbance from increased boat movements in sensitive areas used by birds for feeding, roosting or resting. NatureScot is currently drafting advice which will help all those involved in management of the Special Protection Area to protect the internationally important bird populations. The Scottish Government has also recently announced ambitious new proposals for managing the marine environment which should help to ensure better protection for marine habitats and wildlife more generally.

If you would like more information about the Moray Firth Special Protection Area, including a complete list of all the bird species it has been designated for and a map of the site, details are available at [NatureScot](https://www.naturescot.gov.uk).



Autumn Thrushes

Alastair Young

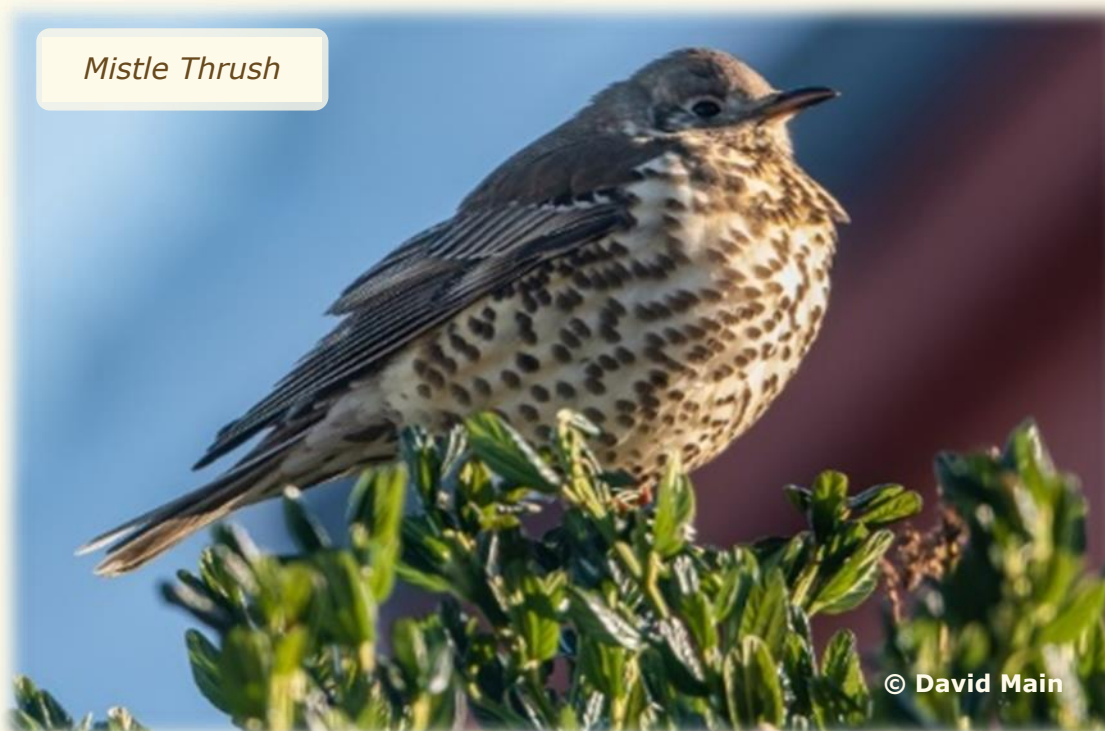


Blackbird

© David Main

At the end of the summer, many of us will be familiar with our local thrushes with Blackbirds, Song Thrushes and Mistle Thrushes all breeding birds in this area.

This is especially the case with Blackbirds which can often be found in our gardens and around towns and villages. Its distinctive black and brown colourings, uniform all over the body make it easy to identify.



Mistle Thrush

© David Main

However, with autumn now here, we are soon to get Redwings and Fieldfares with October being

Fieldfare

© David Main

the main arrival period for these birds. So how can we tell these from our local birds and which species are we most likely to confuse them with.

The Fieldfare is a large thrush which is slightly smaller than a Mistle Thrush with which it is most often confused. There are a couple of differences which once noted make them easy to identify.

Mistle Thrushes are the largest of the thrushes with an overall brown colour above with heavy spotting on the entire front on a pale buff background with a brown beak. They are generally seen in small groups or in pairs.

The Fieldfare, however, is a much more gregarious species and is normally seen in flocks which can often reach several hundred together. Like Mistle Thrushes they are most regularly found in fields and hedges, but the more colourful appearance is quite distinctive. The head and rump is blue grey with a rusty brown colour across the wings and central back. This contrast is obvious if you get a reasonable view.

The front is heavily spotted on the throat, upper chest and sides with the upper chest having an ochre background. The belly is however clear of spots and is whitish. With a good view you can also see a yellow beak with a dark tip. When flying, the darker colour on the wings and back contrast clearly with the grey head and rump. The other distinctive feature is the call which is a clear and loud chak, chak, chak, which they regularly do as they fly. This is often heard before they are seen, especially as flocks fly overhead on migration.

The Redwing is a smaller bird altogether and more like the Song Thrush, although again there are a some notable differences. The Song Thrush is an overall brown colour over the head and down the back and wings, with an indistinct head pattern. The throat chest and belly are creamy buff with heavy brown spotting extending across most of the area.

The Redwing is also a brown colour above and when seen well, the red patch on the sides can be obvious sticking out from under the wing. The front of the bird is a similar whitish colour with spotting all over although this can have more of an appearance of streaks.

The very distinct difference however is the clear and obvious white stripe above the eye and at the edge of the throat. The other thing to

Song Thrush

© David Main

consider is that Redwings are usually in flocks and often associated with Fieldfares. While the Song Thrush is a generally secretive bird the Redwing is much more out in the open in fields or in hedgerows. There is also a distinctive squeaky shrill call which the birds give when they fly, and like the Fieldfare this is often heard from flocks flying over in autumn.

In good years there can be thousands of birds so now is the time to look for these as winter approaches and perfect your identification skills.

If you want a bit more information you can find this on the BTO web site at: [Identifying Redwing and Fieldfare | BTO - British Trust for Ornithology](#) and you can also check out the [BirdFacts](#) for these species.



Quiz

1. What is the UK's largest songbird?
2. Can you name the five most common geese species in the UK by wintering population?
3. And, can you name the five most common duck species in the UK by wintering population?
4. Which of these birds has recorded the longest non-stop migratory flight?
A) Arctic Tern B) Bar-tailed Godwit C) Cuckoo
5. Which of our winter visitors has a Latin name that translates as talkative silktail?

Answers on back page

Members' Survey

David Law

Thank you to everyone who took the time to complete the Members' Survey earlier this year. 42 people responded, providing lots of feedback which was mostly very positive and encouraging. There were also many useful suggestions which the Club committee have been considering. Here is how we are going to take forward the suggestions:

- * When possible, we will try to record Zoom talks then making the recording available on YouTube.
- * Before the start of the main presentation at each Zoom talk we will have some time for a less formal discussion about local bird news and what sort of birds people might expect to see in the coming weeks.
- * We'll make sure that any baffling acronyms, e.g. BBS (Breeding Bird Survey) are explained at talks.
- * Topics suggested for future talks were ID skills, education about birds and talks on wildlife in general. We'll try to cover these in future programmes.
- * Some people are keen on outings for less experienced birders, so next year we hope to start small group outings for beginners including introductions to bird song and ringing.
- * The Bird Race we held in previous years will probably be replaced by a non-competitive members' birding day in the spring including a social evening.

Of course, if you have any other ideas about what the Club could do we would love to hear from you, so please get in touch by contacting Alison: moraysecretary@the-soc.org.uk

Next Newsletter

We hope you have enjoyed this newsletter. We would like to encourage our members to contribute to the newsletter and we would also welcome any suggestions for future newsletters and we will try to accommodate them.

If you would like to contribute an article that may be of interest to our members or have any suggestions please contact me on the email address below.

In addition, if you have any comments on the articles in this newsletter or any previous newsletter I would be delighted to hear from you.

Alison Ritchie
moraysecretary@the-soc.org.uk

Quiz Answers

1. Raven

2. **Pink-footed goose (510,000), Greylag Goose (230,000), Canada Goose (165,000), Brent Goose (135,000) and Barnacle Goose 105,000) (Source BTO BirdFacts)**

3. **Mallard (675,000), Wigeon (450,000), Teal (430,000), Tufted Duck (140,000) and Common Scoter (135,000) (Source BTO BirdFacts)**

4. **B) Bar-tailed Godwit (Source BTO BirdFacts)**

5. **Waxwing (*Bombycilla garrulus*)**