

Lothian Bird Bulletin



The Newsletter
of Lothian SOC

2004 : No 1

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Editorial

Why do birds fly south in the winter? A question which has fascinated ornithologists for centuries. Thanks to a document I received at the Lothian SOC Christmas lunch in Aberlady, I now know the answer...

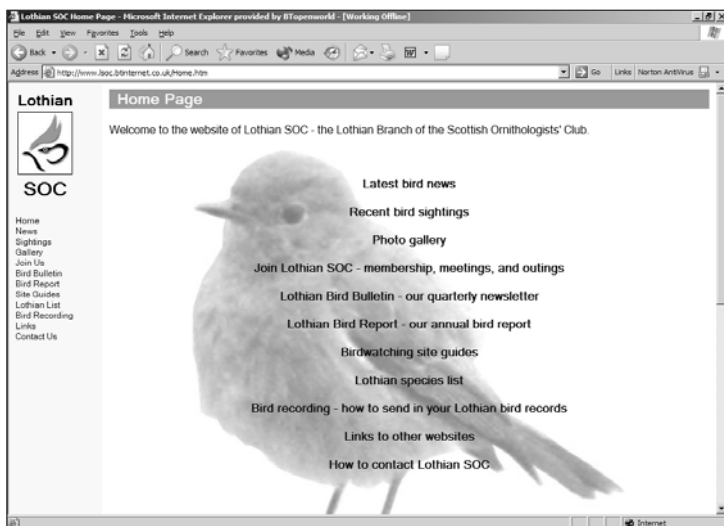
More of that in a moment, but first I'd like to thank everyone who contributed to this edition of the Lothian Bird Bulletin. For the first time I haven't had to write any articles myself - good news for me, and even better news for you. In this issue Johan Bos writes about the origin of Edinburgh's Black-headed Gulls, Eleanor and Clive Hurley describe the discovery of the Baird's Sandpiper at Threipmuir last year, Keith MacGregor and David Atkins report on recent LSOC outings, Chris Mylne delves into the history of the Slamannan Bean Goose flock, and John Pringle writes about his favourite Pentlands patch.

I hope you enjoy these articles - and maybe they'll inspire you to send in something yourself.

Stephen

P.S. In case you haven't guessed already, birds fly south in the winter because it's too far to walk. (Sorry)

News



New Lothian SOC Website

The new club website is now up and running at

www.lsoc.btinternet.co.uk. It includes details of bird sightings, LSOC meetings and outings, and a picture gallery. More details - space permitting - in the next issue of Lothian Bird Bulletin.

2000 Lothian Bird Report

The 2000 LBR sold out recently, leaving a few unfortunate people without one. If you have a spare

copy you'd be prepared to sell, please contact John Hamilton on 0131 445 5317. (Some copies of the 2001 report are still available from John, or from Charles Frank, Rose Street, Edinburgh.)

Scottish Seabird Centre Birdwatching Group

The group meets in North Berwick on the last Sunday of each month (with bacon rolls apparently), at 9am in winter and 8am in summer. Anyone living in the area is welcome. Contact Mary on North Berwick 892595 for details.

Pentland Patch

Three and a half miles west of West Linton Golf Club the water board track reaches Medwin Water. Turning north the track follows the burn for two miles up a largely treeless close-sided valley, crossing the water twelve times by concrete bridges.

The estate is heavily kept but this has not detracted from the wildlife interest to be found in this little valley. Whilst it can hardly qualify as a 'local' patch monthly visits are made throughout the year, increased when interest mounts.

Such was the period in April/May 1999 when two female Hen Harriers and a displaying male were found. Sadly the birds disappeared and no breeding took place...

This habitat does not produce a large species list - 45 or so in the valley and adjacent hills in seven years with 23 breeders. However, sitting quietly for an hour or so can produce results.

Hardly typical was the first year Golden Eagle escorted by three Buzzards coming lazily down the valley in October 2000. Nor the Buzzard taking a female Kestrel on the ground in November 2003, making a mid-air transfer to its mate, both being harried by a Peregrine, whilst a little male Merlin dashed along the hillside.

All is not high drama. In spring the expected breeders are busy - up to two pairs each of Dipper, Common Sandpiper, Pied and Grey Wagtail, Swallow and Stonechat with around six Whinchat males singing. Meadow Pipits, Skylarks, Wrens and Mistle Thrushes (a nest in the rotted hollow on top of a fence post failed!) are present and Teal and Mallard have nested.

On the hillsides Curlew, Golden Plover, Red Grouse are calling whilst a single Blackcock appeared in 1999 and 2003.

The N/S alignment benefits migrants - Snipe, Woodcock, Green Sandpiper, Thrush species, Wheatear, Bullfinch and Goldfinch have passed through. Raven is infrequent with one Magpie and three Red-legged Partridges definite rarities.

40-50 Twite arrive in winter but occasional small parties of Snow Bunting on nearby hills have yet to visit the valley.

Mammals are less obvious. Fox, Mink and Badger leave calling cards, whilst Blue Hare, Roe Deer and Stoat have been seen. A dead Mole and House Mouse laid neatly side by side on the track deserved further investigation rather than being buried under a heap of stones.

On a dreich winter's day the reward for an eleven mile hike (with another two miles to visit the Covenanter's Grave) may be short bursts of song from Dipper, Wren and Red Grouse whilst a single Buzzard passes over and the restless Twite bounce over the moor and out of view.

But, as with all birdwatching, next year could be even better!!

John Pringle, November 2003

The Origin of Black-headed Gulls Wintering in Edinburgh

The Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* is a common winter visitor in Lothian. Since the year 2000, I have been collecting information by reading the inscriptions of ringed Black-headed Gulls in and around the city of Edinburgh. This activity resulted in a large amount of data about the origin, age, and site fidelity of wintering Black-headed Gulls in Edinburgh. This short article gives an overview of the results obtained so far.

Method

The best locations for reading rings of Black-headed Gulls around Edinburgh are parks with ponds where people regularly feed the local waterfowl (especially swans and geese). Black-headed Gulls, often accompanied by Common Gulls, gather here during the day before they fly off to their night roosts. Roughly 1% of the Black-headed Gulls wear small metal rings with uniquely encoded inscriptions. These inscriptions can be read with the use of a telescope or binoculars (sometimes this requires a fair amount of patience). Once the code of a ring is completely read, it can be submitted to the BTO who update their database and send back a recovery form with ringing details about the bird in question. The places that I regularly checked are Duddingston Loch, Dunsapie Loch, St. Margaret's Loch, Figgate Park, Lochend Loch, Blackford Pond, Craiglockhart Pond, Inverleith pond, Seafield, Fisherrow, Musselburgh (lagoons and River Esk), and Cramond.

Results

So far I have managed to see a total of 101 different individuals ringed in six different countries. As illustrated by Table 1, roughly half of the ringed Black-headed Gulls seen in Edinburgh are ringed in Britain. Of these British gulls, around 50% are ringed as nestlings in the North Esk reservoir colony in the Pentland Hills.

Table 1. Origin (country) of metal ringed Black-headed Gulls seen in Edinburgh in the period 2000-2003. (includes 3 colour-ringed birds)*

| | |
|-----------|----|
| Britain | 54 |
| Norway | 28 |
| Finland | 8 |
| Sweden | 4 |
| Denmark | 4* |
| Lithuania | 3 |

For 57 Black-headed Gulls, I was able to reveal the complete inscription and hence get information about the exact origin and ringing date of these birds. Figure 1 shows a map with the ringing locations of Black-headed Gulls seen in Edinburgh (only included in the map are birds ringed outside Lothian). The map nicely shows that wintering Black-headed Gulls come from the north, northeast or east. There are no recoveries west of Glasgow, nor are there any recoveries south of Manchester.

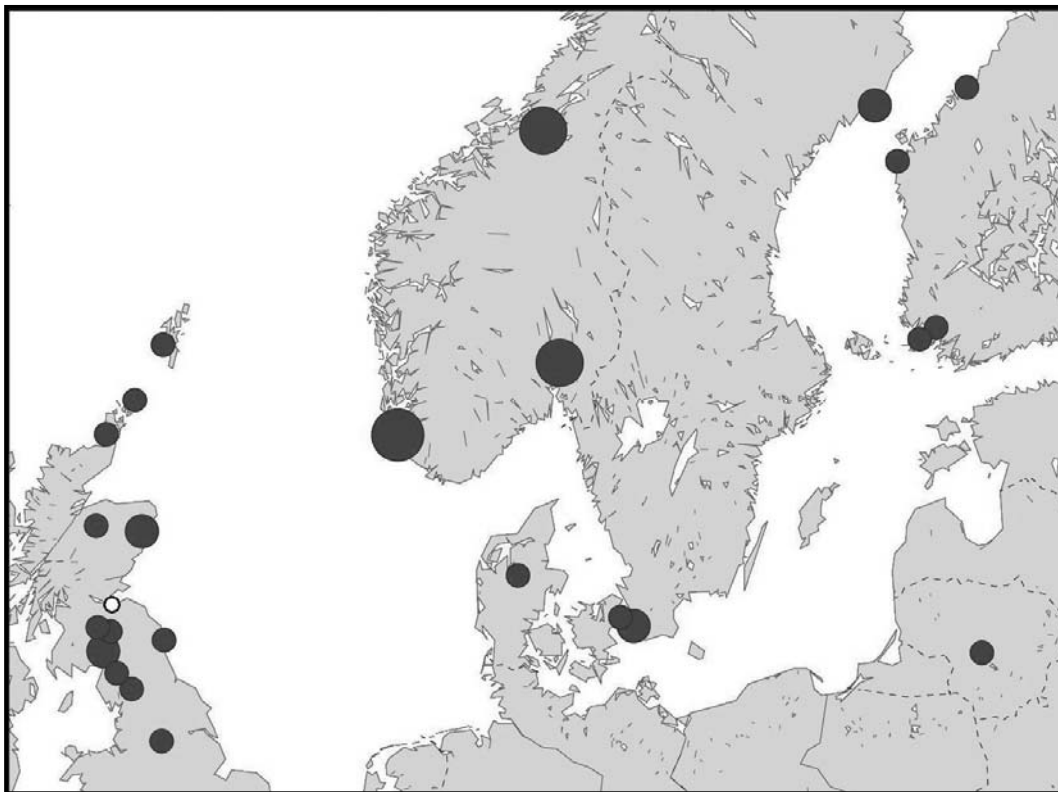


Figure 1. Ringing locations (black dots) of Black-headed Gulls seen in Edinburgh (white dot) from 2000-2003. Size of dots corresponds to number of recoveries of birds ringed in that location.

Black-headed Gulls wintering in Edinburgh are on average in their 5th year. The oldest Black-headed Gull recorded is a bird ringed as “2 years +” in Cumbria/England in June 1986, which was last seen in Musselburgh on 22 September 2002, yielding an age of at least 17 years.

The results suggest that the winter population of our Black-headed Gulls are mostly British birds (with roughly half of them ringed in Lothian), accompanied by substantial numbers from Scandinavia and Finland. However, a proper analysis requires quantification dependent on the relative annual ringing numbers in the respective countries. This goes beyond the scope of this small overview.

Black-headed Gulls are very loyal to their wintering locations. A case in point is the Norwegian Black-headed Gull ringed as OSLO MB 18927. This bird was ringed in Rogaland on June 15, 1999. I spotted it the first time at Duddingston Loch on September 9, 2000. Since then, I saw it there another 30 times, remaining at Duddingston the entire winter, and returning the subsequent winters of 2001/2002, 2002/2003 and 2003/2004. Most Black-headed Gulls follow this pattern, although some seem more adventurous by also visiting other locations in and around the city.

I plan to gather more information by repeating this survey in future winters. I am also investigating other species, in particular the Common Gull, the majority of which seems to come from northern Scotland and Norway.

Johan Bos, December 2003

(Johan would be pleased to receive details of ringed Black-headed, Common, and Mediterranean Gulls seen in the Edinburgh/Lothian area. He can be contacted at jbos@inf.ed.ac.uk, or by post at 18 Coates Crescent, Edinburgh, EH3 7AF.)

An Insight into the History of Bean Geese Wintering in Scotland

On the November Sunday excursion to find the Bean Geese on the Slamannan plateau, the RSPB Volunteer warden, Angus MacIver, who had located the flock for us, gave us clear evidence how restricted their movements are within a remarkably small area of rather isolated farmland where they find adequate undisturbed grazing on improved grassland. It was also very clear from what he told us, and from our own observations on the day, how extremely timid the birds are and intolerant of any close approach by man. We were lucky to get one part of the flock only about 400 yards from us when we stopped, so that most of us just had time to organise and focus our telescopes before they flew to join the others at twice that range.

A few days later I was clearing out some old files at home which included one marked 'National Trust for Scotland' dating from 1966 when I was their Adviser on Natural History, having just launched into my freelance career as a wildlife film-maker. As I was consigning the contents to the waste-paper basket, I spotted this note:

R.S.P.B. Scottish Office, 21 Regent Terrace, Edinburgh.
From: George Waterston. To: Chris K. Mylne.
Date: 7th February 1966.

CONSERVATION OF BEAN GEESE IN GALLOWAY.

I have been asked by members of the Dumfries Branch of the S.O.C. to see whether we can do anything to persuade the farmer who farms the Drum of Threave to desist from ploughing the grassland on the Drum as a regular rotational operation.

You may recall that after being under grass for quite a long period of years, it was ploughed a few years ago. It is now once again under grass and is attracting the geese as before. The Bean Geese are a great attraction in the area, and parties of bird-watchers come from all over Britain to see the birds in February. This weekend we had a 'motorcade' of thirty cars on the usual tour (i.e. the annual Dumfries 'Goose' weekend organised by the Branch) and we got splendid views of the Bean Geese. Apart from ourselves, there was a party of five bird-watchers from Belfast who had come over independently. A big party is coming up shortly from the London Nat. Hist. Society.

The Drum (High Tae) belongs to the N.T.S. and is leased to a local farmer. Would it be possible for the N.T.S. to reach some agreement with him about this? George.

I cannot now remember whether I was able to persuade the farmer, a tenant on NTS land, to alter his farming practices in favour of the birds, though I doubt it. But I do remember vividly those well-organised Dumfries weekends, always held in February, and the small party of Whitefronts almost always seen on the Drum with the Bean Geese, which for several years running brought with them the only Lesser Whitefront any of us had ever seen. 'Twitchers' hadn't really been invented then, but rarities still added spice to life. The Drum was a large conical hill (Glacial moraine?) in fields of grass only a few hundred

yards North of the main road out of Castle Douglas opposite the entrance to Threave Gardens. Apart from being an awkward place to stop a car on a busy road, it was merely a question of choosing the right time, pulling up on the verge and focusing on the birds – with binoculars. Few bird-watchers ran to telescopes in those days. Even so one could often identify five species of grey geese from the one viewpoint. Perhaps the Bean Geese gained confidence from the other tamer species but I do not remember having to take elaborate precautions as an observer, as one does now, not to disturb them. They could also be found in the Blackpark marshes nearby where they were harder to watch but their range was very restricted and they never seemed to move far. And for many years that was the only area of Scotland where they could be found each winter.

Their current chosen 'patch' has many similarities. They still like good grazing on improved pasture and freedom from disturbance but they now seem to associate less with other species and to be less tolerant of observers. It's perhaps worth remembering that 'selfish' watching on our part in Central Scotland, where we are favoured with reasonably easy access to one of our rarest species, could well see them return to their former choice in what seems such ideal habitat for them in Galloway. The Dumfries Branch would undoubtedly be delighted, not to mention all those Sassenachs only an hour's drive away in the Midlands. Let's see that we keep them on our patch.

For information, the excellent website, courtesy of RSPB, for all you need to know is www.bean-geese.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk. It covers flight shots; calls; viewpoints; precautions; addresses, telephone numbers and recent sightings, numbers etc. Brilliant!

Chris Mylne, November 2003

Baird's Sandpiper

Threipmuir Reservoir, 6th-15th September 2003

Our local patch, that we visit regularly, consists of Threipmuir and Mid-Threipmuir Reservoirs and at the western end Bavelaw Marsh. On 6th September we followed our usual circuit by walking first towards Bavelaw but with little expectation as it had become virtually dried out. We were not disappointed – almost nothing there. As we walked down the road towards the bridge between Mid-Threipmuir and Threipmuir Reservoir we commented on how shrinking water levels had created some fine muddy habitat for waders. However, when we ran the binoculars over the water's edge we could see only three waders: two of similar size and a smaller one.

Bringing the telescope into use we moved a bit further forward with identification. It was a bright day and the light was far from ideal and viewing was difficult unless the sun was behind a cloud. We could see from the three shapes that two were Ringed Plovers but the third a more interesting one would need closer examination.

We walked along towards the fisherman's hut and in so doing much reduced the distance between the birds and us but this did not improve the light conditions as we were now facing more southerly into the sun. We could however see that the interesting wader had a horizontal stance, appeared long-winged, rather short legged with a distinct breast band and a scalloped pattern on the mantle and scapulars. It was active throughout feeding within a small area by picking from the surface of the soft mud and keeping fairly close to the Ringed Plovers.

We watched for about 45 minutes relying on occasional passing clouds to blot out the sun for sufficiently long enough to pick out another feature. Crucially, we were able to see that the folded wings were longer than the tail. This focussed us on two American waders, which have that characteristic: Baird's Sandpiper and White-rumped Sandpiper. We have seen both of these species on birdwatching trips to the States: three Baird's at Cape May in New Jersey and a group of White-rumped in Texas. So we were not in totally unfamiliar territory.

The bird raised its wings on six occasions to show an indistinct wing bar on the upper wing with white underwing. We took down a complete description of the bird in a notebook, confident that it was a Baird's Sandpiper, we phoned out details of the find locally and nationally.

There have been only four previous records of Baird's in Lothian the last in 1984 at Gladhouse Reservoir. This bird generated considerable interest particularly as it stayed for over a week hardly moving from the spot where it was originally found. Many birders twitched it during its stay and some excellent photos have appeared on various websites. Some of these have been supplied to us and have been enclosed with our description now sent to the British Birds Rarities Committee for acceptance of the record.

Eleanor and Clive Hurley, December 2003

Lothian SOC Outings

Aberlady - 14th December

The 14th December saw a gathering of 19 members on a fine crisp sunny day at Aberlady car park awaiting the arrival of warden Ian Thomson who was to lead the party. However family illness had detained him so Richard Birch assumed command.

The walk to the Marl Loch produced the usual waders and a handsome group of Wigeon plus an elusive Reed Bunting and the first of what proved to be large numbers of Fieldfare feeding on the Sea Buckthorn berries. At the loch a Water Rail was glimpsed dropping into cover, legs dangling, to be followed by its squealing calls. A fortunate few had a view of an Otter as it swam to cover - an unexpected encounter at this site. By now the hen-like clucking of Fieldfares was all around, and from the more extensive Buckthorn clumps groups rose high, probably roused by the first of 2-3 Sparrowhawks, this a large female, no doubt attracted by the chance of an easy meal.

The shoreline at the start of the dunes was bare of hoped for Snow Bunting or Twite, and the call of Christmas lunch prompted the start of a more rapid return as a party of Golden Plover flew over. A Peregrine seen from the car park sitting out on the bay produced a final flurry of interest.

The Kilspindie House Hotel had set up a truly festive table and the missing warden plus 3 other members joined the party for an excellent meal along with crackers and fancy hats. A surprise Aberlady-orientated bird quiz of devilish ingenuity was sprung upon us by Jacky, this ending a successful and enjoyable day.

Keith MacGregor

Fife coast and Loch Leven - 11th January

"Sea area Forth – wind force six or seven, squally showers, some heavy and wintry." That was the weather forecast for the day of the first group outing of the year, to the southern Fife coast and Loch Leven! In the event, 12 members turned up and we had a good, albeit challenging, day's birding.

The river mouth at Leven is not what it used to be since the power station closed a couple of years ago. However, we did find here long-tailed duck, goldeneye, common and velvet scoter and red-breasted merganser. We were also surprised to see a very early (or was it very late?) kittiwake flying past along the sea wall.

By the time we got to Ruddon's Point, we were facing directly into a very strong wind, the sea was 'rather lively', and the showers had started to arrive. But, mainly due to Sid and his wonderful, big telescope, we did manage to spot a red-throated diver and one of the regular wintering surf scoters, although it was difficult to watch the birds between the white-topped waves and with the wind causing many a watery eye. Waders here included knot, sanderling and bar-tailed godwit.

A short stop at Kilconquhar Loch produced plenty of duck species, including wigeon, lots of pochard and about 20 scaup. Alas, we didn't see the little auk which had been reported here the previous day – it must have heard that the Lothian birders were in the area!

Then the weather really closed in during the drive across to Loch Leven, when it got decidedly murky with heavy, driving, sleety rain. But most of our intrepid band did venture out to the hides on the Vane Farm reserve; in the gloom and the cold, we managed to pick out goosander, gadwall, several pintail and, for a few of us, a single green-winged teal hidden amongst 100 or more common teal.

With darkness descending fast, we finished the day by having a well-earned cup of tea/coffee in the warmth of the RSPB café. Given the conditions, a tally of 57 species for the day was not bad at all.

David Atkins

Ayrshire - 8th February

It was a cold but sunny Sunday morning when four car-loads of intrepid Lothian SOC members headed west to the Ayrshire coast.

First stop was Irvine harbour, a popular site for waders and wildfowl. This was followed by a slight diversion inland to Shewalton Gravel Pit, where the star bird was a Kingfisher. Next port of call was Troon, where we watched seals in the harbour and Black Guillemots on the sea.

Finally the four cars headed - by a variety of interesting routes - to Ayr town centre. Our aim was to find an Iceland Gull - a rare sight back in Lothian. This turned out to be easier than expected when, by pure chance, we parked right next to where a striking immature bird was coming to feed on bread. Half a mile further upstream on the River Ayr we located an adult of the same species; a less distinctive bird than the youngster, but still an excellent conclusion to the outing.

Coming Up...

28th Mar: Glen Artney, Perthshire
23-25th Apr: Speyside Capercaillie Weekend

Contact the Lothian Bird Bulletin for details.

(This summer's outings will be announced soon - look out for details on the Lothian SOC website at www.lsoc.btinternet.co.uk.)

Lothian Bird Sightings

NOVEMBER

At *Aberlady*, 6 **Whooper Swans**, a **Peregrine**, and a **Greenshank** on the 1st; 5 **Bramblings**, 20 **Twite**, a **Greenshank**, and 6790 **Pink-footed Geese** on the 4th; a **Barred Warbler** on the 20th. At *Belhaven*, a **Jack Snipe** and 57 **Twite** on the 1st; 73 **Twite** on the 9th. At *Cramond*, a **Brent Goose**, a **Whooper Swan**, a **Greenshank**, and 3 **Scaup** on the 25th.

In *Edinburgh*, 40 **Waxwings** in Princes Street Gardens from the 11th-13th; 35 in Bruntsfield on the 12th; 35 at Canonmills on the 15th; 125 in Merchiston on the 24th and 140 on the 26th; 80 at Blackford on the 25th; 90 at Greenhill on the 28th; 60 at Dundee Street on the 29th.

At *Gladhouse*, the **Pectoral Sandpiper** remained until the 6th; 10 **Pintails**, 4 **Gadwalls**, and a **Scaup** on the 10th. At *Gosford Bay*, a **Black-necked Grebe** from the 1st-8th. At *Harperrig*, 28 **Whooper Swans** and a male **Pintail** on the 1st. In the *Lammermuirs*, a **Rough-legged Buzzard** in the Whitecastle Fort area on the 3rd; a **Golden Eagle** from the 9th-13th.

At *Musselburgh*, 2 **Mediterranean Gulls**, 53 **Slavonian Grebes**, a **Red-necked Grebe**, a **Puffin**, and 9 **Snow Buntings** on the 4th; a **Mediterranean Gull** and 50 **Slavonian Grebes** on the 6th; a **Great Northern Diver** and 6 **Scaup** on the 8th; 94 **Slavonian Grebes** on the 22nd, a **Great Northern Diver**, a **Red-necked Grebe**, an adult **Mediterranean Gull**, a **Snow Bunting**, and a **Kingfisher** on the 29th.

Over *Penicuik*, 3 **Bewick Swans** on the 3rd. At *Roseberry*, 28 **Whooper Swans** on the 10th; 2 **Greenshanks** and 30 **Whooper Swans** on the 16th. Past *Seton Burn*, a **Mediterranean Gull** on the 1st; an adult and a 2nd winter on the 3rd; an adult on the 8th. At *Vogrie Park*, a **Nuthatch** present.

DECEMBER

At *Aberlady*, 34 **Little Gulls**, 5 **Red-necked Grebes**, 14 **Snow Buntings** and a **Great Northern Diver** on the 3rd. At *Cramond*, 3 **Scaup** and a **Greenshank** on 3rd. In *Edinburgh*, 21 **Waxwings** in Morningside on the 12th; 20 at Canonmills on the 23rd. At *Gosford Bay*, a **Black-necked Grebe** on the 6th.

At *Musselburgh*, an adult **Mediterranean Gull**, 2 **Snow Buntings** and a **Black-tailed Godwit** on the 2nd; 20 **Waxwings** and 2 **Mediterranean Gulls** on the 6th, 10th and 21st; 57 **Slavonian Grebes** on the 9th; an adult **Nelson's Gull** on the 21st.

At *Silverknowes*, a **Brent Goose** on the 3rd. At *Tynninghame*, 188 **Twite** on the 15th; 7 **Greenshanks** on the 24th.

Thanks to Eleanor Hurley for these records.

Mystery Bird

Identify the species pictured below. The answer will be published in the next issue.

(The last mystery bird was a **Greenshank**.)

Charles Frank

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