



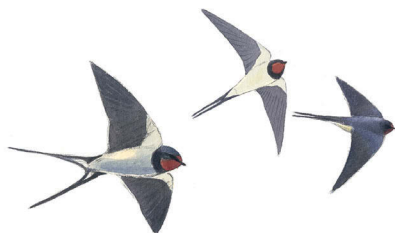
FIELD GUIDE TO THE
BIRDS
OF BRITAIN AND IRELAND



MARK GOLLEY

B L O O M S B U R Y

FIELD GUIDE TO THE
BIRDS
OF BRITAIN AND IRELAND



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The Wildlife Trusts are the UK's largest people-powered organisation caring for all nature - rivers, bogs, meadows, forests, seas and much more. We are 47 Wildlife Trusts covering the whole of the UK with a shared mission to restore nature everywhere we can and to inspire people to value and take action for nature for future generations.

Together we care for thousands of wild places that are great for both people and wildlife. These include more than 760 woodlands, 500 grasslands and even 11 wildlife gardens. You're never too far away from your nearest Wildlife Trust nature reserve, and on average in England, you're only three miles away from escaping to the sounds and sights of nature that we protect.

Our goal is nature's recovery – on land and at sea. To achieve this we rely on the vital support of more than 800,000 members, 43,000 volunteers, donors, corporate supporters and funders. To find the Wildlife Trust that means most to you and lend your support, visit wildlifetrusts.org/your-local-trust

Importantly, we encourage people to experience wildlife for themselves. We believe that a deeper appreciation and connection to nature can start with a book such as this one by Mark Golley. We need more people to understand and value the birds and other wildlife that share our countryside with us.

Few realise just how endangered much of our British wildlife is. In recent years, once-common bird species such as the sparrow and starling have largely declined, mainly due to the demands that modern human-living has placed on habitats.

The Wildlife Trusts believe, however, that plenty can still be done to reverse the losses of the past, and that we all have a role to play in making this happen. One way to begin is by contacting your local Wildlife Trust for information on wildlife events, volunteering opportunities and the wild places that are close to you. Help us to protect wildlife for the future and become a member today. Visit www.wildlifetrusts.org for further information.

We hope that, with the help of this book, you have fun learning more about our British Birds and end up appreciating them just as much as we do!

The Wildlife Trusts is a registered charity (number 207238).

INTRODUCTION

In an introduction, it is always so hard to explain to the bookshop browser, the catalogue connoisseur or the 'stocking filler' shopper just what makes one bird book more appealing than one of the plethora of similar titles that adorn the shelves.

The first question that needs to be asked is 'who is *Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Ireland* aimed at?'

Well, this is a book both for the beginner and also the novice, as well as those with a little more birdwatching experience too. Primarily, it is a book for those with a passion for birds.

Next we need to ascertain what distinguishes this title from the abundance of related titles on the shelf. What makes one book 'better' than another that seems so similar? Much of it is to do with price, personal preference, layout, readability of the text, and above all else, the quality and warmth found amongst the mass of illustrations. If all these meet the buyer's own criterion, then there is one final factor that may be decisive and that is just how easy to use the book is, whether checking notes made in the field or when you get back to the car or the house.

Some find the systematic lists of the heftier field guides a little confusing as you forever thumb up and down searching for a certain species. It could also be said that for many more casual birdwatchers, the bigger field guides can be a little overwhelming in the number of species which are often irrelevant (and possibly even confusing) in a purely British and Irish birdwatching context.

This guide does have some systematic points to deal with – hopefully conveyed in a user-friendly way - but the species chosen are ones that you will see (with the all important luck and perseverance) in the glorious variety of habitats that make up Britain and Ireland. The descriptions are written in a straightforward manner and are sound companions for the delightful illustrations. Hopefully then, you will take a peek at *this* particular book and think that is made for you.



How this book works

The aim of the book is to be an easy, informed read with a wealth of illustrations to help you with most of the identification challenges that you may come across whilst birdwatching in this country. There are over 280 species described and illustrated here, and the primary aim is for user-friendly text and artwork to guide you towards conclusive identification remedies. Wherever you may live, wherever you may head away to for your birdwatching, the spread of species here covers a broad range of our different resident and visiting birds found amongst a wide range of familiar habitats too.

What else do you get on the page? As well as super artwork, there are measurements (taken from bill tip to tail tip of a live bird); a brief introductory paragraph on the species; notes on where and when to find the species; possible confusion species and also short, bite-sized paragraphs full of identification tips. Finally, there are notes on the all-important calls too.

This book does follow recognized taxonomy and nomenclature, using the *List of Recent Holarctic Bird Species* (Voous, 1977) as the standard. This is widely used in many publications but, as with other recent guides, this book has also incorporated more recent work on taxonomy and nomenclature, most notably *Palaearctic Birds* (Beaman, 1994).

The taxonomy of birds is a subject that creates untold chat and discussion worldwide and for the beginner and the novice, there's no reason to embed yourself with the chop and change of science. One much more important aspect of birdwatching, though not nearly as laborious as avian taxonomics, is topography. Even a basic grasp of the correct terminology of what's where on a bird will help you improve your birdwatching skills (and your enjoyment) no end. What's more, it's becomes great fun as you see things fall into place whilst out and about in the field - no more confusion over what's an eyestripe and what's a supercilium when you scribble a few notes on something in front of you!



The parts of a bird

Most of this book avoids overly complex topographical detail, but it does appear occasionally - knowing the difference between the median and greater coverts or the secondaries from the primaries may make all the difference. But don't be daunted by it - the terms *will* fall into place and you may enjoy your birdwatching all the more if you become familiar with at least some of the main terms.

As well as learning the more difficult things such as the names of feather tracts, there are a number of things that you can do to improve your identification technique.

Always try to judge the size of the bird by comparing it to either another species close to it or even by objects nearby, be it a tin can, a brick, or even a leaf.

Take note of the shape, as well as the size of the bird. Remember though that weather may change the shape of a bird - looking sleek in hot weather, or puffed up in cold conditions.

Remember to try and note exactly the colours on the bird and where they are.

Listen to any calls or song the bird gives - it's fiendishly hard to transcribe them, but try to commit familiar species to memory first and, in time, others will follow.

See if the bird has any particular behavioural traits and always be aware of exactly what sort of habitat it's in.

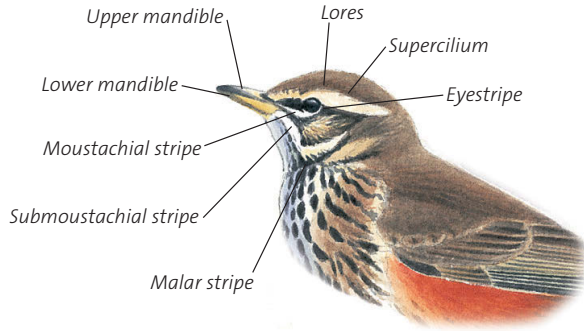
Think about the time of year... you are unlikely to see a Waxwing in July or a Cuckoo in January!

Finally, make sure you have a few basic essentials with you - binoculars (use what you feel comfortable with and what you can afford); a good quality lens cloth (there's no point paying upwards of £1800 for a pair of 'bins' only to clean away the coatings with a grotty tissue!); a notebook and pencil (a 'police style' one is perfect) and *Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Ireland*, too! Most importantly, always take your enthusiasm along with you - with that, you can't fail.

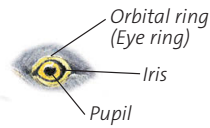
Good birding!

Mark Golley

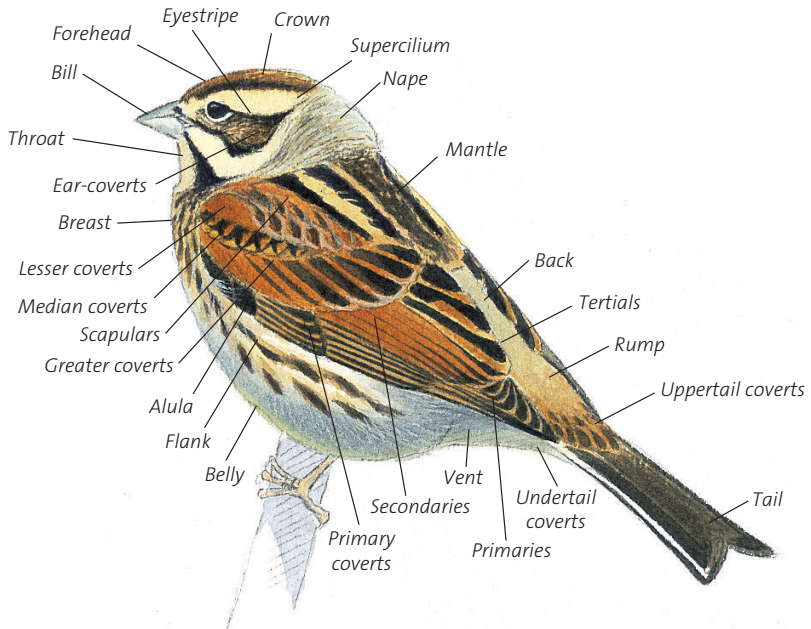
Redwing



Cuckoo



Female Reed Bunting



HABITATS

Coastal birds

Coastal habitats include cliffs, dunes and beaches, woods and scrub, fields and hedgerows, estuaries and rivers. One of the many joys of such varied areas within one habitat is that there is always something to see and somewhere to go at any time of year, and at any time of day. As with all the other habitats dealt with, spring and summer offer most birding opportunities, if only in terms of the hours of daylight in which to go birding in. Unlike other habitats, however, coastal sites are equally as good, some would say better, in the autumn and winter months.

When birding coastal sites it can be difficult to know what optics to take. A telescope is recommended, whether searching through hundreds of waders at a winter roost or summer flocks of terns. However, a telescope is essential for seawatching, especially in autumn.

Seawatching isn't to everyone's liking - the thought of sitting on a beach exposed to the wind and rain really is pretty off-putting, but the sight of skuas, shearwaters, petrels, Gannets and Fulmars careering across the waves makes it all worthwhile.



Wetland birds

As you will notice, there are many variations on the Wetland theme, but most can be watched in a similar way. Whether you are at a reservoir, a marshy lagoon or alongside some of our larger rivers, you may find that a pair of binoculars aren't quite enough for you. If that's the case, you may need to think about using a telescope. Although initially cumbersome, birding wetlands becomes far more pleasurable with one. Many wetland sites boast hides for you to watch from, and footpaths that you can wander around, all without disturbing the birds. The optimum periods for heading to wetland sites is seasonally dependant: spring and autumn are particularly good, even at sites which are many miles from the coast. They are frequently used as stop-off points by waders or terns moving across the country, navigating by using major river courses and estuaries. Many birdwatchers feel that reservoirs, marshes and rivers come into their own during winter months, when wildfowl and gulls join the throng. If you regularly visit a wetland, you'll soon begin to pick up on the best times and conditions to visit. Autumn can be a wonderful time as migrants hustle and bustle for food as they prepare for a southbound passage, or as new arrivals replenish themselves after arriving from their own distant summer breeding grounds.



Woodland birds

Birding a good area of woodland can be one of the most rewarding aspects of bird-watching almost anywhere in Britain and Ireland. More often than not, you can leave the heavy 'scope and tripod at home and just use your binoculars.

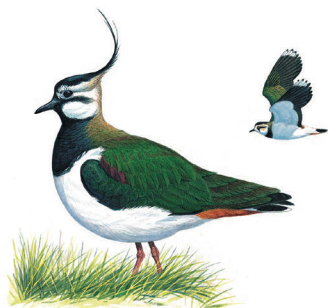
Few would argue with the fact that a boisterous spring dawn chorus is one of the most thrilling events in the ornithological calendar and almost any woodland can provide a variety of species. If you feel a little unsure about trying to identify all the bird song on your own, how about heading out on a guided dawn chorus event? There are many county wildlife trusts and bird conservation groups that run events like this during the spring.

You can visit woods at any time of the day and at any time of the year (winter is often the quietest season in a wood) and there will almost always be birds to see. Although there may be fewer numbers of birds in winter, they are much easier to spot and therefore identify due to the lack of dense foliage. Early and late visits are often best; birds get a little sleepy in the middle of the day. Always be as quiet as you can, so that you can pick up the more subtle calls. Standing in one spot for a while is a good idea. If it seems quiet, move on. Different types of woodland will host different types of birds. Some species overlap between deciduous and coniferous woods, but some woodland is very specialized, such as the Caledonian forests of Scotland.



Farmland birds

Farmland habitats are, at first glance, some of the less appealing areas to visit, especially in this age of mono-cultures and hedgerow-free zones. Thankfully, this sad scene is limited to areas of southern England, elsewhere, there are some beautiful areas of bird-rich farmland, home to a diverse range of species, some of which are pretty scarce. Many of the species seen on farmland are resident and seen at anytime of the year (crows, partridges and Pheasant), but some (Stone Curlew, Quail and wild geese) are seasonally dependant. You may need to visit throughout the year, and often visit different areas of farmland across the country to see some species - it will always be worth it when a Montagu's Harrier drifts over an East Anglian barley field, or a Corncrake rasps away from



a Hebridean iris bed. Often the telescope can stay at home when searching farmland areas for most species, but it is essential when scanning distant geese flocks. Species such as Pink-footed Goose are prone to disturbance on their wintering grounds, be it deliberate or inadvertent. Far better to view them from a distance, revelling in the sights and sounds as they go about their daily routine.

Urban birds

Birding within a large town or city may seem rather unrewarding, from both an aesthetic point of view and with regard to the number of species you may see. This may be true to an extent, but, as with birding in any other area of the country, you get as much out as you put into it.

Imagine the pleasure of seeing a flock of migrant thrushes flying over a city centre in the first days of autumn, or seeing a Grey Wagtail flit along wet guttering in winter, as all around you seem immune to the outside world. It doesn't even have to be the unexpected that brings enjoyment to the urban birdwatcher - the sight of Feral Pigeons being 'spooked' by a passing Kestrel, or vast numbers of roosting Pied Wagtails in a city centre, all add to the diversity of an often neglected habitat.

Of course, it is not just buildings that make up the urban birdwatching habitat - there are open areas of green in most towns, be it parkland or a small garden. You may feel a little self-conscious wandering along with a pair of binoculars, but it doesn't last! And when you spy the first returning Swift of the year, see a roosting Tawny Owl, or hear the scratchy warble of a male Black Redstart, you'll be oblivious to everything else.

Urban birdwatching has also benefited conservationists - the decline of the House Sparrow in the mid 90s first became apparent when birdwatchers started to ask 'Where have they all gone?' Along with the importance of urban breeding species like Peregrine, the worth of cities and towns as bird habitats should not be underestimated.



Upland birds

Another specialised habitat and perhaps one of the hardest areas in which to go birding, if only because of all the hills! Many of the species found in upland habitats are sedentary and can be seen at almost any time of year. Others are migratory and arrive from April to May, departing in early autumn. Many species can be seen at almost any time of the day, although Golden and White-tailed Eagles will wait for some degree of warmth before taking to the air. A pre-dawn trip to look for lekking Black Grouse is also well worth the

effort, if you are in the right part of the country (nowadays, the moors of north-east England, southern Scotland and the Highlands). You can birdwatch on moors throughout the year, but the late autumn and winter weather can be rather inclement. It is also likely that a telescope will be something of a bind, especially if hiking the top of Cairngorm, searching for Ptarmigan or Dotterel. It is vital to take note of your surroundings when in upland areas; an Ordnance Survey map is recommended and a compass is also very useful. Safety is paramount when birdwatching in upland areas, particularly in the Scottish mountains. The weather can turn pretty quickly on the tops, even during the summer. Always ensure that you are properly prepared for your day on the hills – pop waterproofs, a thermos and food in a rucksack, along with that map and compass.



Heathland birds

Heathlands are perhaps one of the most specialised areas of habitat that you will visit on a birdwatching outing. Although they have less bird species, they are still fabulous areas to visit. The species you do find on heathland areas are some of the most enigmatic you will encounter anywhere.

As with many other habitats, heathland birdwatching is often best in the early morning, particularly in the spring and summer. However, this is not always the case. Some species, such as Stonechat and the delightful Dartford Warbler, can be seen at any time of day and at any time of the year. Others, though, are migrants only, such as the ever-increasing Hobby. If the habitat is suitable, the weather warm and you have time to spare on a summer night, you could see and hear a Nightjar.

You may benefit from taking a telescope on heathland, although it is not essential, as many species tend to be fairly approachable. In the autumn and winter, head to higher ground and scan the trees and bushes for raptors (Merlin and Hen Harrier use heathlands as feeding and, sometimes, roost sites). If you are very lucky and in the right place, you may even find a Great Grey Shrike.

Due to the delicate nature of our heathland, a little caution is always advised. Try to stick to paths through the heather, rather than forge ahead on your own. Some of the species nesting in and around our heaths are Schedule One status, so disturbing them is actually an offence.



Mute Swan • *Cygnus olor*

140–160cm, 55–63in

When Throughout the year **Where** Freshwater and estuaries. Often in parks, lakes and also marshes **Confusion species** Bewick's and Whooper Swan, Spoonbill (in flight only) **Call** Mainly heard in spring, a rasping *herr-ahh*



▲ In flight, **Mute Swans** (left) look largest, orange bills obvious, even at long range. Their wings whistle in flight. **Whoopers** (middle) are longer-necked and larger-bodied than **Bewick's** (right). You may also be able to see the different bill patterning at closer range.

▼ One of the most familiar birds to be seen in Britain and Ireland. Large, white birds with distinctive bills. **Adults** are easy to identify. Wholly white plumage contrasts with their bill, orange with a black tip and large, black knob on the forehead, also black lores.

▼ **Juveniles** are a subdued, greyer version of the adult. Upperparts are washed grey-brown. The youngster's bill is dull pink, with a less-glossy tip and knob.



Bewick's Swan • *Cygnus columbianus*

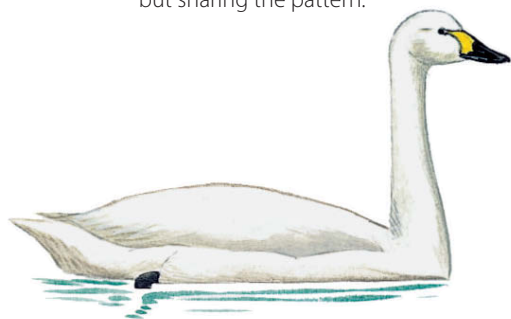
115–127cm, 45–49in

When Arrives from late autumn, staying into early spring **Where** Found on grazing meadows, damp pasture, farmland, mainly southern Britain **Confusion species** Whooper Swan **Call** Goose-like honking, higher-pitched than Whooper



▼ **Juveniles** are greyish all over. Bill is pinkish with a dark tip, lacking the adult's yellow, but sharing the pattern.

► The smallest swan seen in Britain and Ireland. They look stocky, with short necks, compact body and bills.



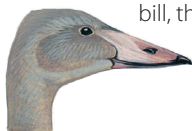
◄ **Adults** are entirely white, with distinctive bill patterns. Shows a squarish (sometimes rounded) yellow patch, which covers about a third of the bill. Each bird has a subtly different bill pattern, so take careful note.

Whooper Swan • *Cygnus cygnus*

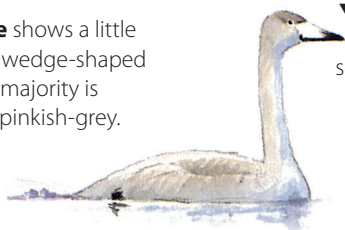
140–160cm, 55–63in

When Arrives in late autumn **Where** Similar habitats to Bewick's Swan. More common in northern Britain and Ireland **Confusion species** Bewick's and Mute Swan **Call** Loud *whoop-whoop*, especially noisy in flight

▼ The grey **juvenile** shows a little black on the wedge-shaped bill, the majority is pinkish-grey.



▼ Similar in size to Mute Swan and with a good view, should be comfortably separated from the similar Bewick's Swan.



► Whoopers look longer-necked than Bewick's and the bulk should also be readily apparent. The bill of an adult shows far more yellow than a Bewick's - the pattern looks more triangular and the bill itself looks more wedge-shaped.



Taiga/Tundra Bean Goose • *Anser fabalis*

69-88cm, 33in

When Arrives late October/early November. Stays into early spring **Where** Arable grazing fields, inland or coastal. Taigas in southern Scotland and east Norfolk. Tundras mainly in eastern Britain **Confusion species** Pink-footed Goose **Call** Deep, nasal *angk-angk*

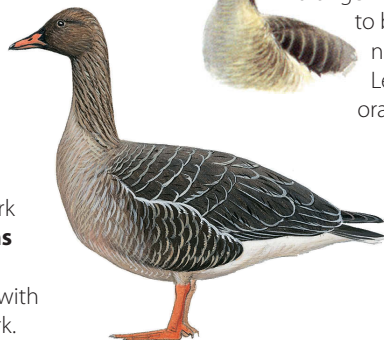


◀ **Taigas** (*fabalis*) are hefty, large-looking dark geese, generally similar in size to Greylag Goose. Longer necks and bills than Tundra Bean.



◀ **Tundras** (*rossicus*) are slightly smaller, less bulky than Taiga Bean Goose. Darker, shorter bill, with orange near the tip only. Tend to be darker on head and neck than Taiga Beans. Legs are satsuma orange coloured.

▶ A medium-large, dark grey goose, which can be pretty tricky to find. Dark on the back like Tundras, **Taiga Beans** (*fabalis*) have slightly paler heads and necks. Main difference is bill - longer with more orange. Both forms are very dark.



Pink-footed Goose • *Anser brachyrhynchus*

64-76cm, 28in

When Appears from September, leaves by early-mid April **Where** Coastal farmland, notably in eastern Scotland, Norfolk and Lancashire **Confusion species** Taiga/Tundra Bean Goose, White-fronted Goose **Call** In flight, high-pitched *wink-wink* or ringing, far-carrying *ung-ung-unk*

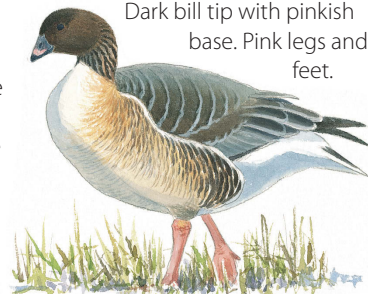
▼ A small, compact, attractive grey goose. Round-headed, with small bills and distinctive plumage. Often fly in V formation.

▼ Dark brown head, contrasting with the greyish-looking wings (often looking scaly due to paler tips) and buff-brown chest and flanks, and white rear belly and undertail.

Dark bill tip with pinkish base. Pink legs and feet.



Close relative of the Bean Geese (not so long ago they were thought to be the same species).



White-fronted Goose • *Anser albifrons*

64–78cm, 29in

When From late October onwards, leaves in early spring **Where** Traditional wintering sites, in Ireland, Scotland and southern England **Confusion species** Pink-footed Goose **Call** An excited, high-pitched *kyu-you-you*

Medium-sized geese, compact, with shortish neck. Wintering birds arrive from two different- looking populations, Russia and Greenland.

► **Juveniles** lack white blaze on forehead, and the heavy black barring of adult. Separable from European juveniles by size, plumage and bill colour.

► **Adult Greenlands** (*flavirostris*) winter in Ireland, Scotland, East Anglia. Adults are told from Russian adults by the longish, heavier orange bill, overall darker plumage, almost wholly dark tail. Appear slightly larger and chunkier.



▲ **White-fronted Goose** (left)
Pink-footed (centre) **Greylag** (right).

► **European White-fronted Goose** (*albifrons*).



Greylag Goose • *Anser anser*

74–84cm, 32in

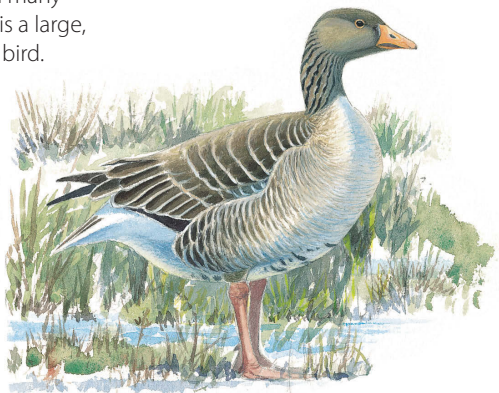
When Feral birds throughout the year, breeding birds similar **Where** Genuine Greylags breed in Western Isles, some in Ireland. Feral birds on park lakes, ponds **Confusion species** Other grey geese **Call** Honking, noisy call - flocks can be very vocal



Found commonly in many areas of Britain, and is a large, rather plain-looking bird.

► Undertail is white. The bill is orange, legs dull-pinkish.

► Bulky birds, generally fawn-grey all over, slightly paler on the underparts, with a trace of some barring on the belly.



Canada Goose • *Branta canadensis*

90-100cm, 36-39in

When Throughout the year. Wild birds in winter only **Where** Feral birds on park lakes, rivers and marshes. Genuine vagrants on farmland and estuaries, often in Ireland and Scotland **Confusion species** None **Call** Loud, di-syllabic honking



◀ An extremely common sight across the whole of Britain and Ireland. Originally introduced from North America, the Canada Goose is now established firmly as one of our best-known waterbirds.

Interestingly, several of the smaller, darker forms of Canada Goose have turned up in parts of Britain and Ireland as wild vagrants.

▶ Large birds with long necks and contrasting plumage. Head and neck are black, except for a white patch on side of face. Underparts are buff-white and upperparts are grey-brown, with a white rump and black tail. Black bill, eye and legs.



Barnacle Goose • *Branta leucopsis*

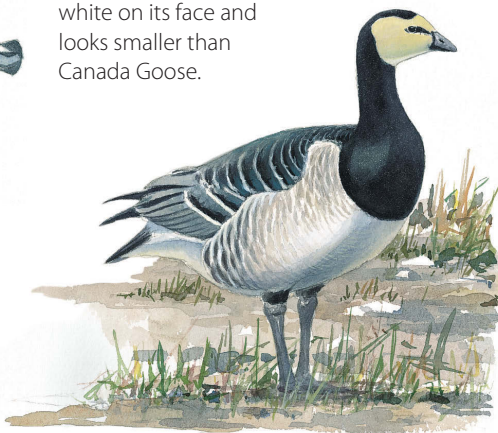
58-70cm, 26in

When Begin to arrive from September onwards. Leave in late winter **Where** Coastal farmland in Scotland and Ireland. Feral flocks in southern England **Confusion species** Canada Goose **Call** An almost dog-like barking *kaw*



◀ In flight, shows more white on its face and looks smaller than Canada Goose.

A medium-sized goose, fairly compact with thick, short neck, smallish round head and small bill.



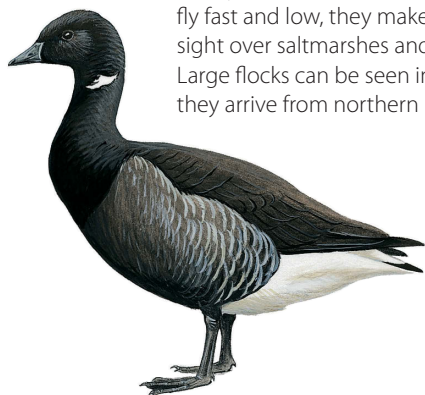
◀ The creamy face patch contrasts with the black head and neck. The upperparts are steely-grey with intricate black and white edges to the feathers. Rump is white and the tail black. Underparts silvery white. Eyes are black, greyish legs, small black bill.

Brent Goose • *Branta bernicla*

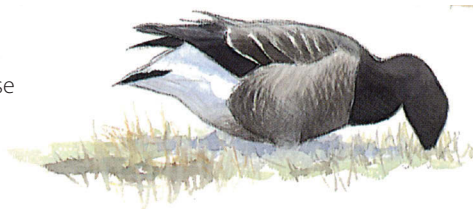
55-62cm, 24in

When Begin to arrive from early September onwards, leaving in spring. A few summer on east coast **Where** Coastal marshes and grazing meadows in southern England, East Anglia and Ireland **Confusion species** None **Call** A low-pitched, growling *krronc*

◀ In flight, Brent Geese form large, tightly-packed flocks. Preferring to fly fast and low, they make a familiar sight over saltmarshes and fields. Large flocks can be seen in winter as they arrive from northern Europe.

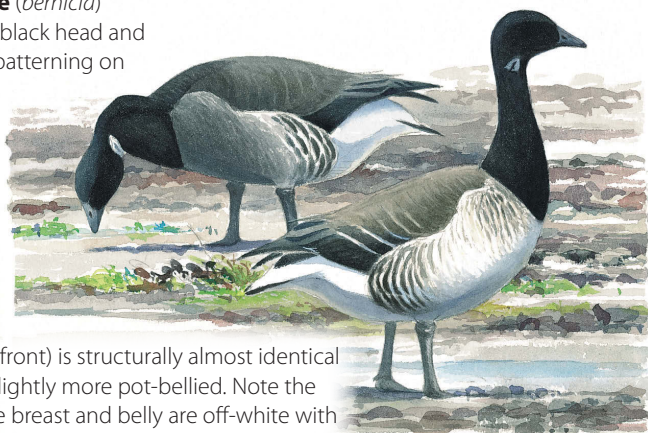


▲ ► There are two distinct forms of Brent Goose commonly seen. Both small, dark geese with small bills. **Juveniles** of both forms lack the white neck patches, appearing by first winter. Wings have pale bars.



► **Dark-bellied Brent Goose** (*bernicla*)

(back) is a small goose with a black head and neck, with a white slash. The patterning on the underparts is variable, with plenty of pale mixing into the grey. The rear end is white. The upperparts are dark charcoal, with darker-looking wings. The tail is white with black outer feathers.



► **Pale-bellied form** (*hrota*) (front) is structurally almost identical to the Dark-bellied, perhaps slightly more pot-bellied. Note the colour of the underparts – the breast and belly are off-white with greyer smears, completely different to Dark-bellied Brent.