

# Teesmouth Bird Club

## Newsletter



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Thanks to the contributors to this issue:- Chris Sharp; Alan Wheeldon; Mike Leakey; Philip Stead; Arnold Illingworth.

All unsolicited copy will be most welcome, ideally sent by email, or on 3.5" computer disk, using word processing software, but typed and handwritten copy is equally acceptable. Any topic concerned with birds or the local environment is grist to the mill.

### MONTHLY SUMMARY by Chris Sharp

#### December

The month began with the long staying Slavonian Grebe on the Reclamation Pond being joined by a second bird (1<sup>st</sup>). The Great White Egret re-appeared on Dorman's Pool (2<sup>nd</sup>) but hopes of it staying to winter were dashed as it wasn't seen again after this date. An unseasonal Black Redstart was at the Corus Steelworks, Middlesbrough (3<sup>rd</sup>). 2 Whooper Swans were on Dorman's Pool (5<sup>th</sup>) on which date 240 Dark-bellied Brent Geese flew south past Hartlepool and the County's latest ever Swallow was here over the Memorial Garden. 7 Mealy Redpolls were at Billingham Technology Park (6<sup>th</sup>) and small numbers of this recent 'split' continued to be reported from this site intermittently for the rest of the winter. An adult and a 2<sup>nd</sup> winter Mediterranean Gull were also seen here at this time amongst the large Gull roost. The 10<sup>th</sup> saw 10 Little Auk and a Bonxie past Hartlepool with a Black-throated Diver in the nearby Jackson's Landing. This bird remained up until Christmas and re-appeared again in early January. Smew numbers at Saltholme increased to 4 including a superb drake. 4 Barnacle Geese joined the Greylags here (19<sup>th</sup>). 3 Waxwings in Billingham (20<sup>th</sup>) were present over the Christmas period. 2 Green Sandpipers were reported wintering at Greatham Creek with another on the stream behind the fruit and veg stall at Portrack roundabout. 9 Dark-bellied and 1 Pale-bellied Brent Geese were on Seal Sands from 24<sup>th</sup> until New Years Day and a Rough-legged Buzzard was present a mile west of Scaling Dam Reservoir (27<sup>th</sup>).

#### January

Year lists got off to wet start on 1<sup>st</sup>, though a Great-northern Diver in Hartlepool harbour brightened an otherwise dull day. A Little Gull was also at Hartlepool with the regular wintering Mediterranean Gull. Snow Buntings numbered 74 at South Gare and a scattering of Woodcock were also seen. A Slavonian Grebe on Seal Sands remained until 11<sup>th</sup> and a female Scaup was also here. A Red-necked Grebe was in Hartlepool Fish Quay (5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup>) and the Black-throated Diver reappeared in Jackson's Landing (7<sup>th</sup>). Highlight, though of

the first week of the year was the Common Crane which headed slowly South over Jackson's Landing (5<sup>th</sup>). Portrack Marsh held up to 4 Jack Snipe and a Chiffchaff was also seen here. A small Canada Geese was around Coatham Marsh/Locke Park from 9<sup>th</sup>, though coming to bread somewhat suggested it might not be of wild origin. There was no doubting the wildness of the Tundra Bean Goose and 2 European White-fronted Geese which accompanied 60 Pink-feet at Crookfoot Reservoir (10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup>). Up to 4 Hawfinches proved easy to see at Hutton Village during January. A Short-toed Lark was also discovered in early January in a stubble field at Cowbar but many observers were left frustrated with flight only views. Both Iceland and Mediterranean Gulls were on Crookfoot Reservoir (14<sup>th</sup>) and the adult Glaucous Gull was reported intermittently at Hartlepool. An adult Ring-billed Gull was at Billingham Technology Pond (18<sup>th</sup>) but unfortunately only remained for about 20 minutes. Water Pipit numbers began to increase in the Saltholme area and up to 12 were reported often giving good views by the roadside. A Red-necked Grebe was on Scaling Dam from 21<sup>st</sup>. Water levels have been much lower here during the winter making the waterfowl much easier to count. The club has encouraged Northumbria Water to keep the levels lower and it is to be hoped that the muddy edges will prove attractive to waders later in the year. 2 Whooper Swans were in fields near Saltburn (from 27<sup>th</sup>) and reports of Waxwing increased towards the month's end. Strong northerly winds at the month's end saw 1350 Little Auks past Hartlepool (31<sup>st</sup>) along with 4 Velvet Scoter and a Long-tailed Duck.

#### February

Several Little Auks were left over from the previous day's blow and several were seen in Hartlepool Bay and the nearby Jackson's Landing. The single Bean and White-fronted Geese re-appeared at Crookfoot and a ring-tailed Hen Harrier over Greatham Creek. The Black-throated Diver remained in Jackson's Landing all month and a Great Northern Diver was in the harbour until (7<sup>th</sup>). A Spotted Redshank was on Saltholme (from 7<sup>th</sup>). Portrack Marsh

proved attractive for Jack Snipe with up to 20 seen mid-month. (a new county record). Some 200 Snipe were also present at this time. Waxwing numbers also increased mid-month with 92 in Stockton being the largest flock reported. 4 Smew remained around Saltholme all month as did the Slavonian Grebe on the Reclamation Pond. Several Bearded Tits remained on the Long Drag but proved difficult to see. Around 40 Twite showed well along Greatham Creek and the Slavonian Grebe was on Seal Sands, until (17<sup>th</sup>). A Ring-necked Parakeet was in Nunthorpe (20<sup>th</sup>) with 2 being seen in nearby Acklam late in the month. Several Ruff and 4 Black-tailed Godwit were around Saltholme late in the month. The goose flock at Crookfoot was seen sporadically at the month's end and contained single Bean and Greenland White-fronted, 4 European White-fronted and 118 Pink footed Geese. A Red-necked Grebe was off South Gare (28<sup>th</sup>).

### March

Early in the month there was little movement of note and as

usual March proved to be a quiet month. An Avocet was seen on Saltholme Marsh (3<sup>rd</sup>) and relocated at Seal Sands the following day and was often to be found roosting on Greatham Creek at high tide over the next few days, Large numbers of Waxwings were seen with the winter's largest flock of 180 in Melbourne Street, Stockton on Tees (9<sup>th</sup>). An early Sand Martin was over Cowpen Marsh (15<sup>th</sup>). Cowbar proved attractive for Shore Lark with 10 in a ploughed field there from 17<sup>th</sup> along with up to 4 Lapland Bunting. 5 Smew were still present at Saltholme (20<sup>th</sup>) and were joined nearby at Saltholme Marsh by 4 Barnacle Geese (20<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup>). A Dark-bellied Brent Goose was on Seaton Common (20<sup>th</sup>). The first returning Wheatears were at South Gare (from 18<sup>th</sup>) and a Sandwich Tern was reported there (19<sup>th</sup>). A Red-necked Grebe was offshore there (22<sup>nd</sup>). A singing Chiffchaff was at Skelton (23<sup>rd</sup>) on which day a very early House Martin was at Cowpen Bewley and a Little Ringed Plover was by Greatham Creek (both the earliest county records). A Marsh Harrier was on the North Tees Marshes (30<sup>th</sup>) and a Shore Lark was on Hartlepool Town Moor (31<sup>st</sup>).

## COMMITTEE NEWS

### Tees Valley Bio-Diversity Action Plan

Three committees were set up by the Tees Valley Wildlife Trust and the local councils to form action plans for the conservation of habitats and species at risk within Cleveland.

The club is currently represented on two of the committees with Russell McAndrew on the "Coastal and Wetlands" group and Vic Fairbrother on the "Farmland" group. The "Urban and Industrial" group currently has no bird club representative and anybody willing to represent the club should contact Russell McAndrew for details.

### Newsletter Requests

It would be a great help if members could receive their newsletter electronically. This saves the club postage and saves the secretary photocopying sheet after sheet. Please e-mail your address to [graeme.joynt@ntlworld.com](mailto:graeme.joynt@ntlworld.com)

### TBC Website

Rob Little is always on the look out for articles to keep the website "fresh". If you have any articles or suggestions for improving the website please e-mail him on the website address. The website address is [www.teemouthbc.freeserve.co.uk](http://www.teemouthbc.freeserve.co.uk)

### Webs Counters

The club is keen that the new reserve at Saltholme/Haverton is covered in the webs counts. These counts take place monthly on a Sunday afternoon. If you are willing to give up about 2 hours once a month please contact a committee member. Expert knowledge is not required. The counts merely require you to count the water birds present over the high-tide period. Current counters would be happy to take potential new counters out with them to show them the ropes.

### Crookfoot Reservoir

The club has received a letter from Hartlepool Water about certain activities by birdwatchers who were at Crookfoot Reservoir watching geese during January. It is alleged that the watchers were both driving and walking far beyond the roadside perimeter of the water down towards Amerston Hall Farm.

Whilst they have no information as to whether it was bird club members who were involved they have re-emphasised the extent of the area to which we have access. This access extends from the borehole site on the approach after Stofold Moor Farm as far as the upper gate near Crookfoot House. Neither cars nor walkers should stray from the road on either direction beyond these points other than to gain initial access to the site and cars should only be parked on the approved hard standing area.

### Ernest Gordon Clark, 1927-2002

Gordon died suddenly on December 21<sup>st</sup> last year. As a birder he was a dedicated and experienced 'southsider'. He will be sadly

missed by the other locals who enjoyed his company in the field and seeing the good birds he regularly found on the South Gare and in Locke Park. Many of us are indebted to him for his Serin, Arctic Redpoll, Night Heron and Woodchat to name just a few.

Gordon leaves his wife Enid, two sons and two daughters. The funeral service took place on Friday 27<sup>th</sup> December at St. Peters Church, Redcar, followed by cremation at Middlesbrough.

## **WETLAND BIRD SURVEY TEESMOUTH - WINTER 2002/2003 SUMMARY**

Coverage was good, with 113 out of a possible 115 sector counts undertaken during the course of the winter.

With a few exceptions (among them Great-crested Grebe, Cormorant and Pochard, the peaks of all of which were a third down on the norm) wildfowl fared well. For Shelduck, this proved to be our best winter since 1997/98, and the season also brought the second-largest maxima ever recorded on the Tees for both Wigeon and Gadwall. Shoveler too found conditions on the North Tees Marshes to their liking, the species returning its second-largest ever winter peak. However, the performance of Coot was perhaps the most spectacular of all, the 1384 in December comfortably constituting a new Tees WeBS record.

Most waders occurred in average or above average numbers, with the exception of Sanderling (down 26% on the norm) and Purple Sandpiper (down 35%). For Sanderling, there is a suspicion that Sunday counting may not effectively capture the important Coatham Sands population, which may be suppressed or dispersed by weekend disturbance. Data collected this winter to inform the Teesside Offshore Windfarm Environmental Impact Assessment indicate that the true Tees Bay population may be in the order of 400 to 500 birds.

For the second consecutive winter the Purple Sandpiper peak failed to reach 100 birds, a far cry from the winter of 1988/89 when no fewer than 347 were recorded. Conversely, this winter's Dunlin maximum of 854 was that species' best winter total since 1992/93. In similar vein, Bar-tailed Godwit yielded the best peak since 1997/98.

With the sole exception of December, the winter produced an excellent series of Curlew counts, among which the January tally of 1617 is pre-eminent. This is easily a new Tees record, but is likely to have been artificially inflated to some extent by double-counting. Interestingly, very few of these curlew feed on the intertidal flats of Seal Sands, where populations of their key prey (ragworms) have crashed dramatically over the last decade.

Redshank also returned a solid and remarkably consistent set of figures.

Following this winter's series of counts, and using the five-year mean of annual peaks, the Tees and Hartlepool Bay WeBS site is of national importance for Cormorant, Shoveler, Sanderling and Redshank. For the first time, Gadwall qualifies as being nationally important.

Mike Leakey  
WeBS Local Organizer  
April 2003

## WETLAND BIRD SURVEY TEESMOUTH - WINTER 2002/2003 SUMMARY

	November 17	December 15	January 12	February 16	March 16	Winter 02/03 maximum as % of average peak count over previous five winters
Little Grebe	11	7	4	2	<u>15</u>	96%
Great Crested Grebe	<u>17</u>	3	7	6	7	50%
Cormorant	84*	26	48	<u>121*</u>	111*	66%
Mute Swan	<u>45</u>	43	37	39	34	145%
Greylag Goose	<u>290</u>	53	170	264	168	130%
Shelduck	503*	684*	<u>809**</u>	597*	503*	117%
Wigeon	<u>2096*</u>	1005	1216	1375	1132	124%
Gadwall	<u>195**</u>	100**	73*	73*	70*	262%
Teal	432	382	<u>817*</u>	730*	504	79%
Mallard	<u>360</u>	205	258	219	190	100%
Pintail	30	19	39	<u>50</u>	35	159%
Shoveler	<u>195**</u>	57*	88*	103**	57*	158%
Pochard	62	65	<u>75</u>	<u>75</u>	43	60%
Tufted Duck	<u>122</u>	57	74	69	108	122%
Eider	7	34	<u>47</u>	46	27	100%
Goldeneye	50	61	<u>110*</u>	<u>110*</u>	35	120%
Red-br. Merganser	<u>36</u>	22	30	18	33	69%
Coot	1266**	<u>1384**</u>	1257**	721*	522	271%
Oystercatcher	<u>1486</u>	1226	669	1198	821	104%
Ringed Plover	34	15	31	<u>66</u>	11	116%
Golden Plover	<u>594</u>	197	338	100	57	134%
Grey Plover	150	<u>178</u>	77	128	70	92%
Lapwing	<u>6017</u>	2695	3070	1176	253	137%
Knot	148	<u>2604*</u>	2120*	880	484	95%
Sanderling	<u>280**</u>	186*	276**	204*	260**	74%
Purple Sandpiper	76	15	7	27	<u>93</u>	65%
Dunlin	148	198	<u>854</u>	106	119	276%
Ruff	<u>8</u>	1	2	2	1	103%
Snipe	6	<u>38</u>	5	17	8	171%
Bar-tailed Godwit	39	93	<u>226</u>	144	68	136%
Curlew	838*	389	<u>1617**</u>	879*	947*	173%
Redshank	<u>1398**</u>	1115**	1177**	1372**	1337**	102%
Turnstone	<u>329*</u>	110	119	136	119	122%

Underlined counts indicate winter 2002/2003 maxima.

\* indicates a count of >50% of national significance

\*\* indicates a count of national significance

\*\*\* indicates a count of international significance

N.B. 'Teesmouth' includes Hartlepool Bay.

## THE REDCAR GOOSE

On 9<sup>th</sup> January 2003 Martin Blick found an apparent Small Canada Goose with well over two hundred Canada Geese *Branta canadensis* on the Long Lake, Coatham Marsh. He paged his finding and also 'phoned Tom Francis.

When Tom and I arrived at Coatham Marsh we found the Long Lake to be devoid of geese. All the Canada geese – 223 of them, were in fact on the playing field adjacent to the Fire Station opposite. An obviously much smaller Canada goose was also in the same field although, to use a hackneyed phrase, it was not associating with its much larger cousins. Martin soon joined us, after having walked right round the Marsh and Tom proceeded to take some video footage for the sake of posterity. The small goose gave excellent prolonged views and appeared between 66% - 70% the size of the nearest Canada Geese.

Cackling Canada Goose *B. c. minima* was immediately ruled out with indecent haste. Other apparently identifiable forms such as Todd's Canada Goose *B. c. interior*, Taverner's Canada Goose *B. c. taverneri* and Richardson's Canada Goose *B. c. hutchinsii* were also quickly eliminated using a miscellany of published characters. It appeared to be a Lesser Canada Goose *B. c. parvipes* although, as we continued to observe it, the presence of an obvious area of white on the forehead intrigued us.



Photograph ©E. C.Parker

To re-iterate, it was approximately two-thirds of the size of the nearest *canadensis* we directly compared it with. It was evenly and well proportioned. Its head was rounded and it lacked the steep forehead of *taverneri*. Its neck was fairly short and thin and could appear kinked. It was shorter than *interior*. It had a brown breast which often looked somewhat paler in tone depending on the angle, although surprisingly one photograph shows it as having a darker tone, an impression never gained in the field. There was a very small irregular [almost half moon shaped] white area sullied with black, at the base of the black neck sock. In *parvipes* the breast colour is quite variable, from medium-brown to much paler. It may show a white collar but this feature is said to be of little consequence. In *parvipes* the underparts are never as dark as *taverneri* and it characteristically shows a subtle dark mark on the fore flanks which the Redcar goose displayed. Its bill was neat and well-proportioned, being neither short and stubby nor long and shallow. It was similar in proportions to nominate *canadensis*. *Parvipes* lacks the more compact bill of *taverneri*.



Photograph ©E. C.Parker

The three of us studiously observed the goose for almost an hour. Then we sought refuge from the squally wintry showers and repaired to the nearest cafe where two of us voraciously consumed various less-than-healthy but wonderfully satisfying foodstuffs.

Later on we met up with Ted Parker who informed us that a feckless youth with a football had deliberately disturbed all the geese resulting in their flight into nearby Locke Park. There he had taken several photographs of the small goose [two of which illustrate this note] which had come to bread. It was not quite an Islay scenario then.

Although the goose did appear to resemble *parvipes* more than any other form, I decided to send Ted Parker's excellent series of photographs to Chris Batty and seek out his expert opinion. Chris said that from the photos he agreed the bird was no *minima*. He added that if it were on Islay he would probably call it a *parvipes*.

### **The White Area on The Forehead of the Small Canada Goose**

Chris Batty then went on to say that the white on the forehead of the bird worried him and he felt that this might indicate a Barnacle hybrid influence somewhere down the line. He added that also, in one photograph, a slightly darker breast seemed apparent. Chris concluded that it may be a hybrid Barnacle x Canada x Canada, or however that would be written.

I also e-mailed a copy of Ted's photograph to Dr. Malcolm Ogilvie, restricting my enquiry of him to the white on the goose's forehead. This is what he said-

*'I can't remember having seen quite as much white on the forehead of a Canada Goose as this. I've seen a few white feathers or even a slightly larger patch, but not as big as this. And, unlike this bird, they normally start at the base of the bill. One possibility is that they are growing on the site of an injury. This is well known explanation for odd patches of white feathers where the bird has bumped into something rather hard and the pigment cells which supply the feathers have been damaged.'*

Ted Parker kindly informed me that in his 'North American Bird Guide': [2000] Sibley states that occasional variants of all populations have dark cheeks or white forehead. Chris McCarty independently confirmed that.

### **Addendum**

Chris Bielby, Ted, Don Page and I spent a few days on Islay during the last week of January. The main reason for our trip was to study the various forms of Small Canada Geese that have been reported there since last November. We had a wonderful trip, seeing thousands of Barnacle and Greenland White-fronted Geese, as well as a 'sun-lit' adult Red-breasted Goose and an adult blue morph Lesser Snow Goose.

We also managed to satisfactorily identify one Lesser Canada Goose *parvipes*, two Richardson's Canada Geese *hutchinsii*, one Todd's Canada Goose *interior* and perhaps the best of the lot, a dainty endearing Cackling Canada Goose *minima*.

With respect to this short note, it is a pleasure to thank Chris Batty for his time, interest and shared expertise, Dr. Malcolm Ogilvie for his helpful and informative comments, Ted Parker for his enthusiasm, interest and the excellent series of downloaded images he kindly e-mailed me [as well as endless cups of superb coffee] and last but by no means least, Tom and Martin for their respective contributions to our countless animated field discussions during the past thirty years or so.

©Mr. Beanless  
31st January 2003

## **ISLAY TRIP REPORT: 28TH – 31ST January 2003**

The Lords of the Isles called Islay 'The Jewel of the Hebrides' [it is diamond-shaped] because of its extraordinary greenness and fertility. Jura, meaning 'Deer Island' is a close neighbour and its rugged wilderness contrasts markedly. Both islands benefit from the warming effect of the Gulf Stream. Islay has an astonishing mosaic of scenery and habitats, from lush woodland to the bleak grandeur of heather covered hills, from golden beaches to stark sea cliffs.

Islay is also an island steeped in history. The place names of Islay [and Jura] constitute a record of human settlement on the islands over thousands of years. Generation of settlers and conquerors have left their mark, from the Iron Age through the Vikings, the Lords of the Isles, the feuding clans, the Clearances, down to the two World Wars. In Kildalton and Oa, all this can be traced on the ground in the shape of standing stones, forts and castles from pre-history to the mediaeval ruined chapels, deserted villages and latter-day monuments, all in settings of natural splendour and each fascinating in its own right.

Then there are three world renowned distilleries Laphroaig, Lagavulin and Ardbeg, [you may take a guided stagger round the

seven extant working distilleries] and an internationally known golf course. More restful non-birding pursuits could include watching tartan cloth weaving at the Islay Woollen Mill - suppliers of tartan to Prince Charles and Hollywood films such as "Braveheart".

Islay also possesses an abundance of wildlife including two species of seal, otter, three species of deer, golden eagle, chough and from October, throughout the winter months up until early April, thousands of geese, mostly Barnacle Geese, [c25,000] with good numbers of Greenland White-fronted Geese [c10,000]. Indeed Islay holds the largest flocks in Britain of Barnacle and Greenland White-fronted Geese and is also the British stronghold of Chough. In recent years, several forms of presumed vagrant Small Canada Geese have also been recorded.

Although Malcolm Ogilvie's book 'The Birds of Islay' is getting a bit out of date now, the descriptions of where to go remain accurate. Malcolm is always interested in bird lists from visiting birders and he told me 'There are relatively few of us on the island so visitors make a big contribution to my annual bird report. It doesn't matter how mundane the observation. All are welcome, even of the really common species.'

### Islay Diary - Monday 27th January

At 10.45 p.m. we set off for the A66 and then the A74 [M]. We followed the motorway and eventually joined the M73 for a short distance and then the M8. Crossing over the Erskine Bridge we finally joined the A82. It was a long drive for Chris and our route along the A82 [then the A83 from Tarbet] took in the night-shrouded bonny banks of Loch Lochmond, across the Rest-and-be-Thankful, then through Inveraray and Lochgilhead towards Tarbert on Loch Fyne. The distance from Glasgow is about 100 miles. The usual ferry route to Islay is from Kennacraig on West Loch Tarbert, about five miles south of Tarbert on the Kintyre peninsula. There is no village at Kennacraig; it is merely the name for the rocky islet on which the ferry terminal has been constructed.

### Islay Diary - Tuesday 28th January

In no time at all we were boarding the Caledonian Macbrayne ferry M.V. 'The Isles of Arran'. After the car was secured, Chris and I headed for the upper deck. The ferry left on time and we soon commenced scanning over a stormy sea in very windy and cold conditions, as we headed on down West Loch Tarbet.

Several Great Northern Divers helped to kick-start our trip list. Half an hour later, the island of Gigha came into view. Don and Ted had retired to the comfort and warmth of the restaurant and eventually we joined them. Returning on deck, we could soon make out Islay, whilst the impressive Madonna-like Paps of Jura – conical quartzite peaks visible over a wide arc of south-west Scotland, dominated the starboard side. The crossing took the usual two hours but it would be another four hours before we landed on Islay.

The captain announced that due to the very strong northerly winds he was unable to dock at Port Askaig, which is situated on the north-east coast of the island halfway up the Sound of Islay, the sea passage between Islay and Jura. In due course he made another attempt only to abort it when we were no more than a hundred feet away. Not until 2.16 p.m. following a third attempt, did we successfully dock. Incidentally Port Askaig has one small shop, one hotel and not much else.

As our ferry went hither and thither up and down the Sound of Islay, we had continued to bird watch, seeing Ravens and Hooded Crows. We had also noticed a flock of Greenland White-fronted Geese in a particular field and we made a bee-line for this particular area. Taking a minor road off the A846 signed to Ardnahoe, we stopped and birded as we went along. There were small parties of Greenland White-fronted Geese just about everywhere. We found our field with about seventy Greenlanders and just one Barnacle Goose. Retracing our steps we turned back onto the A846. Just past Keills we had more Greenlanders and Barnacles, with our first sizeable flock of the latter species at Auchnaclach.

Our first Common Buzzards appeared – three of them, near to Woodend, where well over a hundred Greenlanders were present. Between the road and the Standing Stone at Mullach Dubh [NR 402 642] there were hundreds of Barnacles – we counted c850. With them was our first presumed vagrant Small Canada Goose, a Lesser Canada Goose parvipes.

Delighted to have scored so quickly, we carried on to Bridgend, turning onto a minor road which led to Ballitarsin, then Neriby, before ending up in Bowmore. En route we noted many more Barnacles and Greenland White-fronts as well as two Pale-bellied Brent Geese, more Common Buzzards and several each of Raven and Hooded Crow.

Bowmore is Islay's administrative capital. The main street of Bowmore runs from the harbour to the famous 'Round Church' [no corners for the Devil to hide in] at the top of the hill. This interesting parish church was built in 1767 by the then principal Laird of Islay. Our route took us from Bowmore back to Bridgend where we turned onto the A847, As we travelled along Loch Indaal, reasonable numbers of Eurasian Wigeon, Shelduck and Curlew were strung out.

At Twr there was a sizeable flock of Barnacle Geese and one juvenile Whooper Swan. We then turned onto a minor road and drove past Borichill Mor to Coullabus. After having left the A847 we counted over a thousand Greenland White-fronts scattered

about in various fields as well as almost seven hundred Barnacles and three Greylag Geese. We birded until darkness fell and then we made our way to the Ballygrant Inn, our base for the next three nights.

The Ballygrant Inn and Restaurant is a comfortable and friendly hostelry run by David and Ruby Graham. It is situated close to the village of Ballygrant, some three miles from Port Askaig ferry terminal, just off the main road and set in its own 2.5 acres of ground. The Inn offers friendly, relaxed and courteous service, with cosy rooms and log burning stoves in the lounge and bar. It is fully licensed and has a well-stocked bar serving a wide range of malt whiskies including all of Islay's finest [most of which we sampled]. There are a few bedrooms on the first floor all with en-suite shower and wash-basin facilities and a hospitality tray with tea and coffee-making facilities, fresh milk and home-baked cakes.

### Islay Diary - Wednesday 29th January

Everyone rose on time and enjoyed a hearty Scottish breakfast, eating far more than they did back home. After waddling back to our respective rooms ['huggy' thermals and a generous three-course breakfast are an unfortunate combination] we headed for the field festooned with optical aids and written information about geese. Although it was quite windy and cold during our stay [sometimes as low as minus four degrees centigrade], we were to experience only very occasional wintry squalls, and these whilst we were sat in the comfort of Chris's car.

We had more or less planned each day's route to maximise our chances of seeing the Small Canada Geese and the other geese on offer, as well as large raptors and that fine member of the corvid family – chough. There was a cold NNW wind blowing today, about force 5/6. Our first port-of-call was a few miles down the A846 at Kilmeny, where good numbers of both Barnacle and Greenland White-fronted Geese were already grazing in the fields. Also noted were five Red-legged Partridge. We stopped along the main road in the Eorrabus area before turning onto a track which led to Scarrabus. Within seconds of stopping in the Eorrabus area, we found a Richardson's Canada Goose *hutchinsii* with one hundred and sixty Barnacles [NR 362 644] whilst nearby were over a hundred Greenland White-fronts and several Ravens. The geese suddenly took flight for no apparent reason, dividing into several skeins. We had remained in the car - as we did for about 85% of the time during our trip – it is the only way to see the geese. Along the track to Scarrabus there were good numbers of Barnacles [1230] and Greenland White-fronts [400].

Carrying on to Bridgend, we turned onto the A847, searching through over a thousand Barnacles between Twr and Rubha Ban but seeing nothing of interest with them. Then we carried on along a minor road past the Blackpark and Erasaid areas. The fields round and about all contained small numbers of Barnacles and Greenlanders and we noted our first genuine Rock Doves. The road we were on – the B8017, eventually takes you right across the Gruinart Flats [the pastures to the south of Loch Gruinart]. At the western end of the road is the RSPB's farm, Aoradh Farm, with a visitor's centre in the yard. There were good numbers of geese on both sides of the road and scattered as far as the eye could see. Over Druim na h-Erasaid, to the west, a fine second-calendar year Golden Eagle put on a masterly aerial display and even perched up for us.

Driving along the Gruinart Flats, we counted well over a thousand Barnacles with much smaller numbers of Greenland Whitefronts, no doubt all grazing the best grass they could find. Near to Aoradh Farm, there were three thousand more Barnacles, almost one hundred Greenland White-fronts and four Common Buzzards. A few dozen Golden Plover were also noted along with good numbers of Curlews. The Loch Gruinart Visitors Centre was empty. A plaque stated it had been officially opened by Barbara S. Young, Chief Executive of the RSPB on the 27th October 1992. We briefly looked out from an elevated watch point inside the Centre, before heading off in the general direction of Ardnave three miles distant. For the best part the day was bright and sunny and would remain so.

In the fields around Kilnave there were good numbers of geese, mostly Barnacles. There is a roofless chapel at Kilnave, built in the 12th century, set in a magnificent scenic location. There is also an Early Christian free-standing weather-worn stone cross, conserved several years ago, which may date back to AD750. Many of the surrounding fields held both Barnacles and Greenland Whitefronts, but we failed to see any Small Canada Geese or the somewhat elusive Red-breasted Goose, which according to Malcolm Ogilvie had been frequenting the general area a few days before our arrival. A stonechat – the first of several, was a welcome addition to our trip list.

At Ardnave, both main species of geese were well represented and a fine blue male Merlin flashed past us and then perched up. The road petered out beside Ardnave Loch, where there were two adult Whoopers, one Mute Swan, Goldeneye and Tufted Duck. Ardnave Loch is surrounded for the best part by shell sand. Best of all were some five Chough that gave superlative views in bright sunshine, calling occasionally - a wonderful sound.

Heading back the way we had come, we drove down a small track at Garra Eallabus that ended at what appeared to be an unoccupied holiday cottage. Carefully searching through some two thousand Barnacle Geese, we came across one Pale-bellied Brent Goose but no Small Canadas. An impressive albeit distant female Peregrine flew over Loch Gruinart.

Moving on to the Gruinart Farm area, still bathed in bright sunshine, we stopped to casually look through a field of mixed geese. Within seconds we had found the Red-breasted Goose [NR 280 683] much to the overt delight of everyone. Is there a finer sight in

the goose world than a tiny Red-breast positively glowing in direct sunlight? Suddenly an otter was spotted bounding along the edge of Loch Gruinart. On the Loch were many Eurasian Wigeon and Teal, as well as a few Mallard, Gadwall and Red-breasted Mergansers. Over the Loch, a tight knot of ... knots wheeled about.

After a hasty toilet stop at the still-empty Visitors Centre, another Golden Eagle, this time an adult, was watched and admired. Our pre-arranged route would now take us along the B8017 to the Loch Gorm area and off we set, checking all geese flocks as we went along. Loch Gorm is much the largest loch on the island but being both large and exposed, it is by no means the best for birds. The fields around the Loch traditionally hold good numbers of geese, particularly Greenland White-fronts, with Sunderland and Rockside on the south side particularly favoured.

We turned on to the B8018 and at approximately NR 245 650, we noted a large flock of fifteen hundred Barnacles. Among them was a Cackling Canada Goose minima which we proceeded to drink in upwards of half-an-hour. What a little stunner! Also present in the area were small numbers of Greenland White-fronted Geese, and singleton Woodcock, Sparrowhawk and Stonechat. Hooded Crows were just about everywhere. We drove to another vantage point nearby and obtained closer views of the Cackler. Then a familiar call sent our collective eyes upwards. There in view were four more Choughs.

We were not done yet. We drove along to the Coull farm area, where a Todd's Canada Goose – interior, had been in residence for several months, consorting with Greenland White-fronted Geese. Checking through the first sizeable flock of Greenlanders, about two hundred all told, we soon picked out the Todd's [NR 208 645]. We also picked out a Pink-footed Goose, while three Common Buzzards wheeled overhead. To round off the day, yet another five vociferous Choughs were seen.

As dusk inexorably crept in, a car full of deliriously happy birders returned to the Ballygrant Inn for some sustenance and a small infusion of the amber nectar.

#### **Islay Diary - Thursday 30th January**

Today our main target bird was the adult Lesser Snow Goose – a blue morph, as well as a Richardson's Canada Goose for Chris and Ted. It was another bitterly cold and windy day, but our thermals and various unfashionable head gear were holding up admirably.

Around the Ballygrant area, we soon day-ticked Sparrowhawk, three Ravens and four Rock Doves. Then we motored on to the Eorrabus area, hoping that the Richardson's would be in situ. Alas it was not and over 350 Barnacles and 70 Greenland White-fronts for once provided scant consolation. Turning onto the track to Scarrabus we searched though some thousand Barnacles and over two hundred Greenlanders, but of a vagrant Small Canada Goose there was no sign. Our Rock Dove numbers were dramatically increased by a flock of at least thirty birds.

We returned along the track and headed off along a minor road to Loch Skerrols, one of Islay's principal fishing lochs. This is a sizeable body of water and well sheltered by trees. We passed the Loch which was on our right and beyond it discovered another flock of over a thousand Barnacles and 280 Greenland White-fronted Geese. Within a minute or two's searching, we had found a different Richardson's Canada Goose [NR 345 633]. Great views were had by all and Ted and Chris looked like two cats each with a giant-sized carton of double cream. Now there was just one specific target left!

We headed in a SE direction along the A846, passing through Bowmore and stopping at Bridge House where a welcome celebratory coffee/tea break was engineered by Ted and Don. Whilst there we counted over three hundred Barnacles, thirty Greenlanders, no less than thirty-six Rock Doves and at least sixty Chaffinches in one loose flock. Collared Doves made it onto our list for the first time whilst Common Buzzards and Ravens occasionally loitered overhead. Continuing on the A846, we eventually came to Port Ellen, which lies at the eastern side of a large bay, and where it was anticipated, we would depart the island the following day. As the A846 runs east, the topography is dominated by a series of rocky ridges running parallel to the coast and clothed in scrub. The latter is rocky and interrupted by a series of small bays and endless nooks and crannies. The first three have distilleries on their shores and we gazed glassy-eyed as we passed by the world-famous distilleries of Laphraoig, Lagavulin and Ardbeg.

The road continued to follow the rocky coast. Just past Kildalton castle, at Loch a' Chnuic we spotted one Great Northern Diver, three Red-breasted Mergansers as well as several Shags and Common Seals. A few miles further on, we logged more Common Seals, two Common Buzzards, a Sparrowhawk and five more Red-breasted Mergansers. Best of all though were two adult Golden Eagles, a male and a female, over Diollard nam Fiadh. They gave wonderful and prolonged views with the bright winter sun burnishing their golden heads.

At Chris's suggestion, we introduced some culture into our itinerary, stopping at Kildalton Chapel, a late medieval roofless ruin. We wandered around taking in the history of the Chapel which was almost tangible. Several ancient stone-effigy grave-slabs littered the small churchyard. Kildalton High Cross is the only surviving complete Celtic High Cross in Scotland. It was carved about AD800, probably by a sculptor from Iona, from a single slab of local blue stone [epidiorite containing granules of felspar].

The biblical scene on the east face includes the Virgin and the Child, and David killing a lion while on the west face are animals and carved bosses. We were all suitably impressed and pleased that we had visited the area. Across from the Chapel, a Red Deer nervously watched us, a Common Buzzard mewed overhead whilst a Common Kestrel hovered in the strong wind. It remained another glorious sunny if windy day, doing justice to stone edifice, mammal and birds.

We continued on for another mile and a half to Claggan Bay, where a long shingle strand curves round a shallow bay. Inland the landscape is dominated by Beinn Bheigier, Islay's highest hill, rising rather gently to 1610 feet. The northern and southern arms of the bay were guarded by Iron Age vitrified forts of similar design. For vitrification to occur, the stone rubble of the wall core has to have been heated to a very high temperature, sufficient actually to melt the stone and cause it to fuse into a distinctive glassy mass. The causes and origins of vitrified forts have been the subject of controversy. It was thought initially to be a construction technique, designed to improve the defences of a site, however, most of today's researchers conclude that vitrified walls are the result either of the carelessness of the inhabitants or the aggression of attackers. Claggan Bay was quickly scanned and Hooded Crows, Common Buzzards, Red-breasted Mergansers and Shags were but list repeats. However, a solitary seedy-looking Puffin was a new species for the trip. We put on our behavioural hats to watch a Raven repeatedly dropping shellfish onto the rocks.

Driving back the way we had come, we briefly halted to look at seventeen Red Deer. There were some wonderful specimens on view including at least one 12 pointer or Royal. Conversely, there was one stag with only one antler which, Chris informed us, would be doomed [per John Laurie] when the rutting season got underway.

On the outward journey, we had noticed a handful of Greenland White-fronted Geese landing out of sight. Although there was a rough track which suggested access to the general area, we decided to continue on back along the road, looking for a right-hand turn. Another brief look at Loch a' Chnuic produced the first Little Grebe of our trip, as well as three Shelduck.

Just past the Laphroaig Distillery, we turned right and travelled north for about half a mile along a track to Kilbride Farm. We soon came across over a mixed flock of geese comprising some forty Barnacles, and, more importantly, over a hundred Greenland White-fronted Geese. It was with Greenlanders that the Lesser Snow Goose had been seen. Within seconds of the car stopping, the Lesser Snow Goose, an adult blue morph, had been duly logged [NR 383 460]. We had achieved a clean sweep and everyone had seen everything! On an adjacent, apparently unnamed lochan, into which the Kilbride River flowed, were five Whooper Swans as well as Goldeneye and Teal, whilst the ever-present Common Buzzards patrolled overhead.

Chris was keen to take us to the Mull of Oa and we turned back onto the A846, travelled through Port Ellen and onto a single track narrow road that ran west almost bisecting The Oa peninsula. This road took us through a mixture of farmland, rough pasture, forestry and moorland. We discovered an almost deserted wilderness that was once home to four hundred people. Most of the local population apparently ended up in Canada, assisted in their emigration by their well-meaning but ultimately uncomprehending laird, and were replaced by sheep and shepherds. Other parts of Islay also suffered dramatic depopulation. Whilst the population of Islay is something in the region of 4,000, it is thought to have perhaps peaked at around 10,000 in the middle of the 19th century. After a mile or two, the road divided and we took the spur leading to Kintra Farm to the north. It proved to be a good choice, for we saw four more Choughs to add to the list. In the distance we could just make out the American Monument commemorating the 266 Americans drowned when HMS Tuscania was torpedoed seven miles off the coast on 5th February 1918.

Knowing that another Todd's Canada Goose had been seen quite recently along the road leading to the Machrie Hotel, we headed off to join the A846 once more, brimming full of optimism. Travelling north-west we noticed a huge number of predominantly Barnacle Geese – possible five thousand or so, but there was no way to access the fields they were in and they were too far away even to 'scope. We had to 'write them off' which was a great pity, for there was every chance that a Small Canada Goose may have been with such a large flock. Venturing down the track to the Machrie Hotel, where apart from the usual Hooded Crows and Common Buzzard, there were just eighty Greenland White-fronts and four Barnacles.

Continuing on through Bridgend, we took the A847 which swept round the north edge of Loch Indaal. Onwards ever onwards, we came across two thousand Barnacles in the general area of Twr – Carnain - Rubha Ban. We swept round the bay, taking in Port Charlotte. At Nerabus we saw about one hundred Greenland White-fronts in two flocks and stopped briefly to check out a large flock of finches. The flock comprised at least forty Twite, about sixty Linnets, with a few Greenfinches thrown in for good measure. A few miles further on, at Wester Ellister, there were three hundred and fifty Barnacles and a handful of Greenlanders. We passed through Portnahaven at the southern end of the Rinns [or Rhinns?] peninsula. There is no distillery at Portnahaven so the main road- a twisty single-track with passing places - has not been improved.

We headed north, although there was not a great deal of light left now. A few Barnacles and six hundred and fifty Greenland White-fronts littered a small field at Kilchiaran, whilst a Sparrowhawk wasted little time in appearing and then disappearing. From Kilchiaran we headed basically south-east, collective eyes peeled for a late-returning hen harrier. Turning back onto the A847, we passed through Port Charlotte, just outside of which were over 2500 Barnacles along with a dozen or so Greenland

White-fronts.

Finally, we turned onto a minor road which led to Aoradh, the RSPB's farm. In the distance on Gruinart Flats, we counted over 3500 Barnacles and at least 300 Greenland White-fronted Geese. Two Common Buzzards bade us farewell as dusk was now almost upon us. Our last sighting of the day was of three distant Roe Deer. What a trip! Chris had really done us proud, driving us around the whole island, forever stopping and starting and safely pulling in where he could.

Back at the Ballygrant Inn, we quickly sorted ourselves out and then descended into the bar for the last time. After our evening meal – made to individual orders placed the night before and enhanced by superb home-made mince pies [after a hint dropped by yours truly] we set our sights on one final fling on the sporting front.

Tonight the Swarovski Twins ['out of our field of view or suffer the consequences'] would take on the Saga Louts [also known as the Raucous Brothers] at snooker, or something resembling that ancient game. The three challenge matches proved to be a crucible of entertainment of the highest value. For most of the time all four combatants were doubled up, crying torrents of tears and quite unable to mishandle their cues. Never have so many white balls been potted by so few.

The tranquility of Islay attracted George Orwell [travelling under his own name of Eric Blair]. Now why should I mention him you may wonder? Well, he spent between 1946 and 1949 working on his new novel which was eventually published under the title '1984': his vision of the future. If you add up the numerals 1, 9, 8 and 4, they add up to 22. Well, the point is that no-one managed a break as high as that during our stay, and it had nothing to do with the effects of the amber nectar!

It proved to be fitting end to our nights on Goose Island. Individual memories would be legion. Don's wonderful demonstration of the Deaf and Dumb language always had us in fits of laughter. The snooker match of course would be consigned to history. It had been such a happy trip.

#### **Islay Diary - Friday 31st January**

This morning we said goodbye to our hosts and left at 8.41 a.m. It was the first windless day we had experienced - a clear case of Sod's Law. We were so early that few of the Barnacles had left their communal roost sites. However the Greenland White-fronts littered the various fields but of course they do not roost communally like the Barneys.

We were still short of Hen Harrier and Chris announced that we had literally five minutes birding at our disposal before he would have to drive to the ferry terminal at Port Ellen. He turned off the A846 onto the B8016 that led to Leorin – another Small Canada Goose location - the high road to Mulindry.

At the eleventh hour it all came good when we spotted a ringtail some distance away, nearer in fact to the A846 that we had just left. Our list was now well and truly complete. Additional 'also rans' included three Common Buzzards, several Ravens and Hooded Crows and small numbers of Barnacle and Greenland White-fronted Geese. In the harbour at Port Ellen were eight Red-breasted Mergansers, several Eiders, five Goldeneye including two resplendent males, two Shelducks, one Grey Heron and many Shags.

The ferry set off back to Kinnacraig on time and woven around repeated eating and drinking activities, we managed to log all three common diver species, many Black Guillemots as well as the odd Guillemot and Razorbill, a solitary distant Gannet and three Harbour Porpoises.

Don and I were hopeful that both Ted and Chris [yes, Chris also managed to take some footage of several of the birds we saw, as well as doing all the driving and no little spotting] would have some footage of moments to treasure. Our collective fingers were well and truly crossed. Our long return journey went supremely smoothly despite the odd heavy snow flurry.

Whilst there is considerable freedom to wander at will on Islay, and in common with most of the rest of Scotland, there are no signposted footpaths [though there are a number of rights of way] it should not be forgotten that every part of the island is owned by someone and much of the land is tenanted by a farmer or crofter. Owners obviously reserve the right to deny access at any time, perhaps to protect their farming interests or sporting ones. Courtesy and common sense must prevail at all times.

Given that geese litter just about every landscape, the natural reaction of birders may be to stop suddenly without due regard for other road users. Having said that Chris was and is the most considerate of drivers. There are many safe places overlooking most good birding places, as well as a fair number of laybys and other pull-ins. Again, courtesy and common sense must prevail.

Islay is a beautiful place with stunning landscapes, seascapes and clean air. We were quite content to be cut off from the rest of the world amid such spectacular scenery. Whilst the single individually distinctive malt whiskys are something very special – each has its own advocates and detractors, it is undoubtedly the spectacle of thousands of geese – just about everywhere – that will remain with us for a very long time. Islay certainly worked its magic on us.

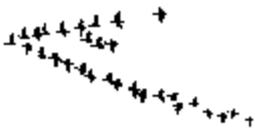
### Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we must thank Chris Batty for his information and over fifty e-mailed images of Small Canada Geese which he saw on Islay last November. Malcolm Ogilvie furnished us with up-to-date information with respect to the geese's whereabouts, particularly the Red-Breasted Goose. During our pre-trip preparations, Chris McCarty helped to paint a vivid picture of what birding is like on Islay.

My three splendid colleagues, Chris Bielby, Ted Parker and Don Page came up trumps and to reiterate, a very happy time was had by all. A special word of thanks must however go to Chris who not only masterminded the whole trip but drove us safely around Islay and there and back again.

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February 2003

### VAGRANT CANADA GEESE



The irregular "V" formation of migrating Canada Geese

Canada geese are the most widely distributed and phenotypically (visible characteristics of the birds) variable species of bird in North America. I am given to understand that breeding populations now exist in every province and territory of Canada and in 49 of the 50 United States. Fairly recent genetic studies of Canada geese support the existence of two major groups that last shared a common ancestor about 1 million years ago. The large-bodied group (*B.c. canadensis, interior, maxima, moffitti, fulva, occidentalis*) is mainly continental in distribution, while the small-bodied group (*hutchinsii, taverneri, minima, leucopareia*) breeds in coastal Alaska and Arctic Canada [Rusch *et al.*]

From about 1956, the population of most forms of Canada Goose has continued to increase and with such an increase in population, it has become inevitable that once isolated populations have merged. This has led to much interbreeding and the emergence of numerous intergrades that are virtually impossible to assign to any particular race. Researchers in locations such as Hudson Bay have had difficulty in separating many of the individuals returning to breed and this problem has been highlighted by the appearance of indeterminate birds in many of the known wintering haunts in California and Texas.

Not only are the differences between the various forms complicated by the fact that intergrade zones exist between many of them, there is generally a cline of increasing colour saturation towards the west of the range and an increase in size towards the south. The smallest forms are therefore in the high Arctic and the paler-breasted populations in the east. Despite such a confused taxonomy, with the spectre of presumed areas of intergradation between the various forms plaguing the Canada Goose complex, eleven distinct forms of Canada Goose are generally recognised [Delacour 1954; Bellrose 1976].

On this side of the Atlantic, the very mention of 'Small Canada Geese' is often met with scepticism or at best pessimism and no-one would argue against the fact that the identification of Canada Goose forms is still very much in its infancy and according to some, very much in the embryonic stage!

Notwithstanding the foregoing, and perhaps serving only to highlight the optimism of British goose-watchers, at least four of these forms are considered to have occurred as vagrants to the British Isles: *interior, parvipes, taverneri* and *hutchinsii*.

The first irrefutable proof that Canada Geese do occur as genuine vagrants to the British Isles occurred when a neck-collared individual – originally trapped in Maryland, U.S.A., in February 1992 – was present with Greylag Geese in Aberdeenshire from November 1992 until it was shot in Perthshire in February 1993. That vagrant, one of a pair, was identified as *parvipes*. The autumn of 2001 saw no less than ten vagrant Canada Geese arrive in Britain and Ireland, with at least seven individuals being found on the hallowed ground of Islay, Argyll, among the Barnacle Geese carrier species.

The identification of individuals in a vagrant context may at best be difficult and at worst virtually impossible, such difficulties being compounded by the hybridisation between forms reported on the breeding grounds in North America. As an example, the continued observations of one Canada Goose with Barnacle Geese, at Kilnave, Islay, in November and December 2001, did not result in a positive identification.

So, is there really little point in birders on this side of the Atlantic attempting to make a definite identification on a handful of lost vagrants? Surely observers should never be deterred from critically reappraising perceived characters, for in that way some progress may eventually be made as it undoubtedly has in the field identification of other species such as Blyth's reed warbler. Anyway, to pitch things at their lowest, no small degree of winter enjoyment can often be had by searching through multitudes of geese flocks hoping to come across a lost wanderer.

Todd's Canada Goose *Branta canadensis interior* is a large bird, with a very long neck, a long, shallow bill and usually a pale brown breast, although generally darker in tone than Atlantic. According to *Delacour*, four distinct populations of *interior* exist, with birds in the west and east of the range differing markedly. This is the commonest large Canada Goose in northeastern North America, where its distribution has recently expanded from eastern Hudson Bay to Greenland.

Lesser Canada Goose *Branta canadensis parvipes* is a medium-sized, round-headed, long-bodied and medium-billed Canada. Although just slightly larger than Pink-footed Goose, individuals tend to have proportionately short and thin necks and often show a subtle dark patch on the fore-flanks.

Taverner's Canada Goose *Branta canadensis taverneri* whilst typically variable in size, tends to be smaller than Lesser, with a more compact head and bill. It averages darker on the underparts, and generally has a broad dark line running along the throat and dividing the chin strap (though it has not been proven that this feature does not occur in at least some *parvipes*). This form is said to intergrade extensively with *parvipes* and breeds from the Mackenzie River westwards. It winters on the western seaboard south to California and is perhaps the least likely to occur as a natural vagrant. A *taverneri* was identified in Ireland in 2000 and has been suspected to have stayed for a proportion of each winter on Islay before moving on with Barnacle Geese to northwest Ireland.

Richardson's Canada Goose *Branta canadensis hutchinsii* is a relatively small and dumpy goose, with a square-looking head and a short bill. The neck is relatively thick and straight and it often appears rather short-legged in appearance. It is not necessarily a particularly pale-breasted form (*contra* earlier literature). The form *hutchinsii* is a long distance migrant [it breeds on islands in Arctic Canada and winters as far south as the Gulf of Mexico] and is the smallest form of Canada Goose that occurs regularly as a vagrant to Britain.

Cackling Canada Goose, the form *minima*, despite being largely confined to the western seaboard of North America, is a long distance migrant. It is also the commonest small form in captivity.

To bring matters right up-to-date, on the 12th October 2002, I travelled to Caerlaverock WWT hoping to see one or both of the two reported *hutchinsii*. Eventually I located and closely watched a Small Canada Goose, which, I became pretty confident, showed the published characters of Taverner's Canada Goose and appeared not to be a Richardson's as previously labelled. I immediately alerted the Caerlaverock WWT staff to the fact.

Eventually, three images of 'the' Small Canada Goose, taken in September by 'finder' Tom Cameron, were posted on the internet courtesy of Tristan Reid. He had apparently observed the goose on the 18<sup>th</sup> October and 'was fairly confident it was *taverneri* or at least showed strong characters of that form.' The brief text accompanying one of the images invited birders to e-mail him with their comments. This I chose to do.

Several days prior to this I had e-mailed Chris Batty with my general thoughts as to the possible identity of the Small Canada Goose. Chris replied that he strongly suspected it to be *taverneri* and then, finally, having looked at the three published images, he confirmed by e-mail that, in his opinion, the bird was a Taverner's Canada Goose. A few days later a member of the WWT staff at Caerlaverock telephoned me and stated that 'they' were inclining to the view that the bird in question was a Taverner's.

I understand that the Canada Goose account in the new 'Birds of North America' [due to be published before Christmas] is held out to be the definitive American statement. This work has been issued as a series of individual species accounts, not in any particular order. The way the taxonomic issues are dealt with may be the benchmark for the future, but until then, a bout of nettle-grasping...

The following table seeks to highlight perceived plumage and structural differences of so-called classic [extreme?] examples and whilst plumage details and/or colouration can prove to be useful, for example, under optimum field conditions, *minima* is said to often exhibit smooth, waxy-looking and lilac-tinged body plumage, it is *structure* that is of primary importance.

For example, whilst observations in poor light of a suspected Taverner's may produce a shadow-effect which may lead an observer to believe a black gular line – [a feature difficult to discern at a distance] is present when it is not, its long-bodied appearance will remain a constant positive feature. Incidentally, a broad gular line is a character strongly indicative of the western forms of Canada Goose, not just *taverneri*!

Posture too may also be of importance: several Cleveland birders saw a presumed Todd's Canada Goose with Pink-footed Geese

in Norfolk during the winter of 2001/2002 that sometimes showed an apparently short neck [when relaxed, a posture adopted for much of the time] however close observation showed the base of the black neck-sock to spill onto the upper-breast. However, when alert, this 'slack' disappeared as the neck was extended. Perhaps the way the neck is held whilst a goose is grazing may produce the most reliable assessment?

Todd's is the largest form, [with some individuals approaching the size of nominate *canadensis*] then Lesser, then Taverner's, then Richardson's with finally Cackling the smallest form.

Plumage and Structural Characters	Todd's Canada Goose <i>Branta canadensis interior</i>	Lesser Canada Goose <i>Branta canadensis parvipes</i>	Taverner's Canada Goose <i>Branta canadensis taverneri</i>	Richardson's Canada Goose <i>Branta canadensis hutchinsii</i>	Cackling Canada Goose <i>Branta canadensis minima</i>
Size	A large goose, some almost as big as nominate <i>canadensis</i>	Variable with some not much larger than Pink-footed Goose	Smaller and darker than <i>parvipes</i>	Small. Closest to Barnacle Goose	Very small
Structure	A substantial goose with a long body	Evenly- and well proportioned	Long-bodied, not compact nor dumpy	Closest to Barnacle Goose. Dumpy	Relatively long-winged for size
Carriage	Has a lumbering appearance			Characteristically low-slung with short legs seemingly set a little too far back along the body	
Head		Rounded. Lacks steep forehead of <i>taverneri</i>	Squarer-headed than <i>parvipes</i>	Characteristic square-headed appearance with a steep forehead	
Throat & Neck	Neck very long and thin and seemingly 'awkward'	Neck fairly short, thin and may appear kinked. Shorter than <i>interior</i>	Broad dark gular line running along throat and dividing the white chin-straps producing a chubby-cheeked appearance	Neck short and thick much thicker shorter and straighter than <i>parvipes</i>	Extremely short. Black neck 'sock' has dark bib below. Commonly shows a broad black gular line diving the chin-strap into two cheek patches producing a chubby-cheeked appearance
Chinstrap				Broad	
Upperparts	When fresh the pale mantle fringes are much narrower than those of <i>canadensis</i>		Darker overall than <i>parvipes</i>	Regularly shows an overall silvery appearance. Much paler than <i>minima</i>	Broad pale terminal and contrasting dark subterminal fringes to mantle feathers and coverts
Breast	Typically pale brown	Variable, from medium-brown to much paler.	Relatively uniform warm dark	Not always white. A uniform buff brown-toned	Normally an appreciably darker breast

		May show a white collar but this feature of little consequence	brown	breast often coupled with a variable pale line at the base of the neck sock is normal	than <i>hutchinsii</i> but some are paler
Underparts	Some show darker more uniform underparts	Never as dark as <i>taverneri</i> . Has subtle dark patch on fore-flanks.	Darker overall than <i>parvipes</i>	Regularly shows an overall silvery appearance. Much paler than <i>minima</i>	Typically darkest of the small Canada Geese. Usually rich chocolate-brown but sometimes more cinnamon or buffish-brown
Bill	Long and shallow	Neat and well-proportioned, being neither short and stubby nor long and shallow [similar in proportions to nominate <i>canadensis</i> ]. Lacks the more compact bill of <i>taverneri</i>	Relatively short and compact. Smaller-billed than <i>parvipes</i>	Medium length. More compact and shorter than <i>parvipes</i>	Tiny, compact. Much smaller bill than any of the other forms
Legs				Relatively short	Relatively long-legged for size

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I must place on record my thanks to Chris Batty for managing to find the time to read through a first draft of this short article, despite a hectic work schedule and the pulling-power of a Grey-cheeked Thrush on Gugh bar, Isles of Scilly.

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## BIRD NOTES

### Aggressive Behaviour in Red Grouse

On 28<sup>th</sup> December 2002, I was walking along a track on Barden moor in Wharfedale, North Yorkshire. It was midday, and a Red Grouse was calling nearby in the heather. Suddenly it appeared in the open 10 metres away and with head and neck upright, and red wattle distended, it proceeded to make low pitched crowing calls, such as a nasal ‘tuow’. they appeared to be directed at me. Gradually it made its way towards me and when about 2 metres away made several lunges at me with drooped wings, just stopping

short of my legs. I turned to walk away and immediately felt a blow on the back of my neck. I turned to face the bird again, and this time it came so close to my feet I could have picked it up. Again it struck me on the neck as I walked away.

I then proceeded to walk about 30 metres down the track, thinking that I had emerged from its territory when I received another light blow on the back of the neck, following which the bird disappeared. The whole episode lasted 15 minutes, during which I could not believe what was going on. However, I felt very privileged to have been part of the performance.

I was wearing a red scarf around my neck and a maroon coloured hood which protected my ears. It is just possible that this combination caused it to direct its aggression mainly towards the scarf at the back of my neck. I am aware that amongst game birds Capercaillie are known to be aggressive towards humans, but did not know it extended to Red Grouse. It was an incredible experience.

Arnold Illingworth

## PEOPLE NOTES

### **Never the Twain Shall Meet – Until Now**

Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> January dawned bright and clear in St. Albans. About 9am two Waxwings were reported in Potter's Bar and having thought about it for half an hour I decided to drive over and try my luck. On arrival I located the road in question only to discover that the Waxwings had departed some 30 minutes earlier. Several people were wandering up and down the pavement trying to look into the back gardens of the houses.

Recognising one of the ladies as someone I had spoken to outside the 'In Focus' shop in London Colney two days previously, I joined up with her and we proceeded to patrol the area together. We introduced ourselves and the lady turned out to be a Mrs. Wendy Hatton, also a resident of St. Albans, although we live on opposite sides of the city. In the course of our perambulations I happened to mention that I had seen my first Waxwings in Albert Park, Middlesbrough in January 1944, whilst sailing my model yacht in the yachting pool which then existed in the Park. 'Good Lord!' she said, 'that's before I was born'. She asked me if I came from that part of the world and when I said I did, she asked me if I was a member of the Teesmouth Bird Club. I said I was, and she said she was too. She then enquired if I knew Richard Turner, Chris Sharp, and John Dunnett. Having established that I did, she told me she had been a member for about ten years, in the course of which she had asked the secretary whether she was the furthest flung member, but had been given to understand that the Club had one in Canada. I advised her that this individual now lived in Skegness and that as far as I was aware she and I were now the most distant members.

This incident set me wondering how many other members the Club has who live away from Teesside, but living in the same area. Perhaps I should set a branch in St. Albans?

Philip Stead