

Wader Quest Articles



SUPPORTING SHOREBIRD CONSERVATION

Registered Charity (England and Wales)
1183748

Wader Quest Objectives:

To raise public awareness about, and to promote an understanding and appreciation of, waders or shorebirds (birds of the sub order Charadrii and to include the family Turnicidae, as defined by the Handbook of Birds of the World Volume 3 del Hoyo, Elliott and Sargatal eds 1996).

To raise funds, which, at the discretion of the Board of Trustees, is to be used to make small grants or carry out appeals for wader conservation projects worldwide.

To promote for the benefit of the public the conservation and protection of waders or shorebirds and improvements of their physical and natural habitats.

To advance the education of the public regarding the conservation and protection of waders or shorebirds and their natural habitats.

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An Inspiration of Waders - By Rick and Elis Simpson

What would you call a mixed or unidentified aggregation of wader species swirling in flight over your favourite mud flats? What collective noun could do justice to these spectacular formations of birds tied together by invisible threads wheeling, swishing and pirouetting over an estuary when they rise up with a thunderclap of simultaneous wing beats like dry leaves lifted from a woodland floor by a sudden rush of wind.



Once up they get into formation immediately and dash headlong, low over the water, as one. As you watch a wave action may then begin like a ribbon fluttering in the wind and myriad white dots merge into one living being, thousands upon thousands of birds and twice as many beating wings. Suddenly the squadron leader banks and a millisecond later the next follows suit, and the next, then the next as a ripple rolls down the hoard. The hitherto white birds, now dull, grey-brown, all but disappear against the low cloud on the horizon then, as if by magic, they just as suddenly reappear. They spiral upwards like laughter in an empty room in one homogeneous block. As they shoot skywards they form a towering biomass of life which suddenly collapses like a burst balloon full of water and they flow out across the surface of the sea forming a living stream. Next they turn through one hundred and eighty degrees and speed back towards the beach having taken on a tubular form; they perform a victory barrel roll like half of the double helix in the DNA belonging to some unimaginably immense being. They circle once, then again, gaining height in a blizzard of thrashing wings, flickering from dark to light like a fancy illuminated bill board in Times Square. The form morphs from globular mass to undulating string recalling a massive caterpillar traversing the estuary. They then ride up to form a dancing cobra whose head breathtakingly disappears down its own throat to form a darting arrow as though they have been shot from Cupid's bow towards the very heart of the estuary. At last the frantic thrashings segue seamlessly into a more tempered urgency. Quelling their fervour, like a cat that has lost interest in a new toy, the birds become more relaxed and form a gliding cloud over their chosen roost spot. Then, as with an unexpected April shower, it starts to rain waders as they tumble and whiffle out of the sky. Plunging vertically downward they pull up at the last moment to cruise in level flight over the heads of their fellow acrobats that had alighted moments before them. Finding a space they swell the front of the congregation as they land and settle slowly into a sizzling pancake of excited birds like the head of a living, breathing lava flow. Slowly they cool and became still and quiet once more, as though this miracle of natural finesse has never happened at all.

The tide now drops and the birds begin to leave and spread across the expanding mud as the sea inhales, sucking its lapping edge back towards its inner core. Suddenly, with the roar like a jet engine not ten feet above your head another phalanx of waders flies from their roost site to join the joyous celebration of life, to be lived for another day, out over the estuary.

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Even if you have experienced this many times before, each time it is different; an infinite number of shapes and forms painted like a living fresco in the vaulted ceiling of the cathedral skies above you. Just sitting there, in awe of this exuberant demonstration of the power and beauty bestowed upon the natural realm around us, it becomes clear that a world that did not contain such events would be an impoverished one indeed. Each of those birds will soon be risking everything to return to their breeding grounds to try, against the odds, to replace themselves before they die, simply to maintain their species.

So I ask again, what do you call this inspiring phenomenon? The most likely answer I would expect to hear would be 'a flock of waders' since there is, as yet, no specific collective noun for these mixed or unidentified massed ranks of birds. In our book *an inspiration of Waders* we show how waders have inspired so many things in human culture. We ourselves have been inspired to create Wader Quest. Others have been inspired in their own way to research and protect waders. We investigate how art, music and literature has dealt with waders and we discover some myths and legends that have arisen as a result of some facet of a wader's looks or sounds. We also look at some surprising well known events and products and their connection with waders. All in all this group of birds has been inspiring us since the dawn of humanity. Given all of this I put it to you that when you come across a multitude of them dashing as one, living being over the estuary, describing impossible turns and manoeuvres, flashing from dark to light as they go, referring to them as a flock is inadequate. That collective noun may be suitable for a bunch of random sheep on a hillside or an unruly gang of pigeons in a town square, but surely not noble or expressive enough for our majestic waders.

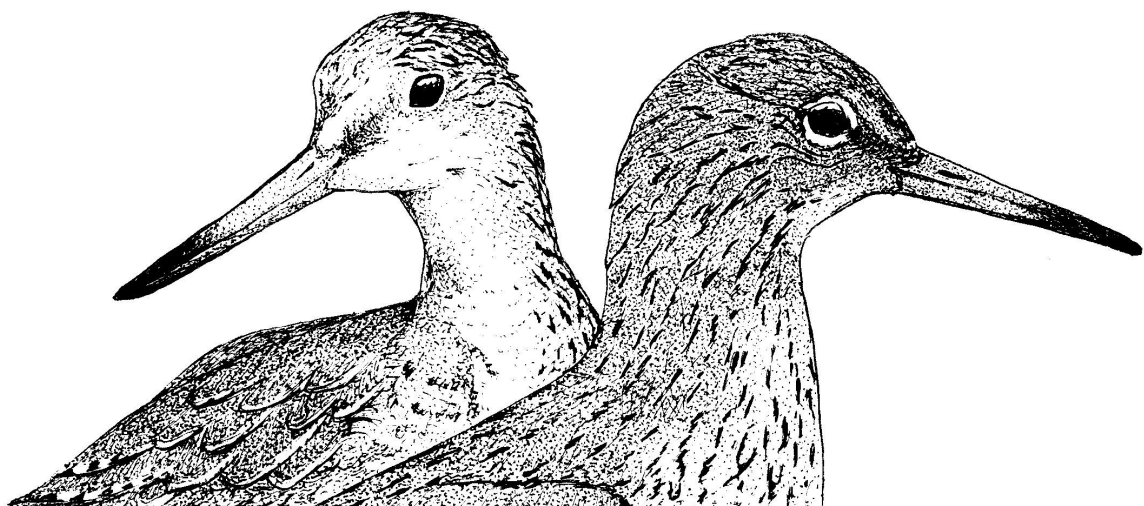
What about calling it 'a murmuration', usurping the collective noun for European starlings? That is overtly wrong. It would be no less wrong to usurp a noun that is used for other wader species, one that the individual species has inspired us to select, invent or adopt. Some of which are blindingly obvious, such as 'a pack of knots', some are rather insulting like 'a deceit of lapwings', others are entirely mystifying, witness 'an omniscience of godwits', while yet others are clearly tongue in cheek such as 'an incontinence of yellowlegs'. We have collective nouns for many things, but somehow, one of the most striking and spectacular of life's experiences with waders has hitherto gone unrecognised in this way.

Is this because we cannot be sure exactly what we are watching? What species make up these swirling gyrations? Often they may be just one species, maybe they are all knots, in which case we could call it 'a pack', but can we be sure when watching so many birds at once that they are all the same? It might be that those knots are actually dunlins, or knots and dunlins, in the thousands of beating wings some may actually be attached to godwits and plovers, be they common ringed or grey. Perhaps, unnoticed a few sanderling and ruddy turnstones are scooped up in the throng around the periphery or lost in the middle of the heaving mass of birds; now they defy our attempts to give them a name, and so it seems we have never tried; except, we understand, someone once referred to them as a wedge of waders, which is hardly descriptive of the flowing beauty of these gatherings.

Surely this is a phenomenon that deserves better? It is one of nature's most engaging and breath-taking experiences to sit beside an estuary and witness this tableau in motion.

An Inspiration of Waders is an entreaty to the world at large to give this amazing spectacle a name. What you can read within its pages is not designed nor intended to be a full coverage of how waders have inspired us over the years, these are just examples to emphasise the point. Together these snippets will, I hope, encouraged you to give greater recognition to this most wonderful group of eclectic birds and their flights of fantasy, one of the natural world's greatest phenomena.

So what are we to call this mixed or unidentified group of waders speeding above the ebbing and flowing estuary waters? May I humbly submit that such magical gatherings of the birds that have been inspiring us since we came down from the trees, should be respectfully and reverently referred to as... 'an inspiration of waders'. **I rest my case.**



Common Greenshank and Common Redshank, a painting of which inspired a young Rick- Rick Simpson

An Inspiration of Waders - By Rick and Elis Simpson

This article was adapted from [An Inspiration of Waders](#) by Rick and Elis Simpson ISBN 978-0-9955146-1-4 - First published 2018. Reprinted 2019. Available through the Wader Quest shop £8.50 +p&p.



An Inspiration of Waders
Twinkling gems over a falling tide
The foreword is by Keith Betton



Discover our cultural connection to waders and how they have inspired us.



BY RICK AND ELIS SIMPSON



Find out how waders have inspired careers, myths, legends, art, music, poetry, theatre, books, discovery and much more besides.



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