

# British Summer-Visiting Breeding Waders

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Eurasian Stone Curlew with chick © Ian Grier under licence



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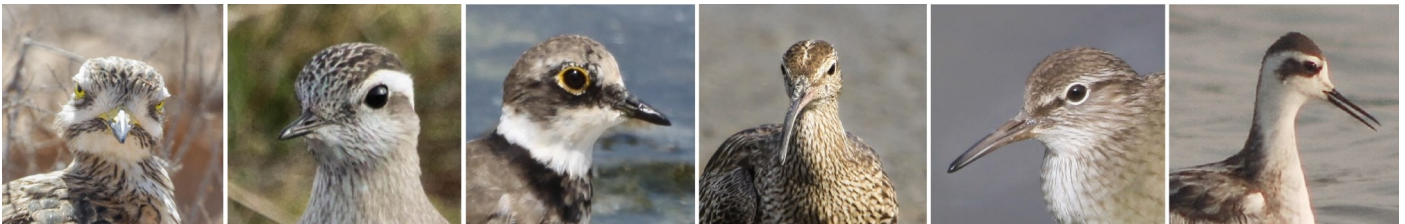


There are 78 species of waders on the British list (78 BOU categories ABC), the majority are rare vagrants (45), others passage migrants (6), a number are with us all year as residents (13), although some of those like Black-tailed Godwits *Limosa limosa* involve different subspecies at different times of year. Some species only stay with us for the winter (8), although some non-breeding birds do remain for the summer.

However there is a small select band of species (6), the subject of this article, that breed here but then leave these shores completely during the winter.

### These species are;

- Eurasian Stone Curlew *Burhinus oedichnemus* U conservation status **AMBER**
- Eurasian Dotterel *Charadrius morinellus*: UK conservation status **RED**
- Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* UK conservation status **GREEN**
- Eurasian Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* UK conservation status **RED**
- Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* UK conservation status **AMBER**
- Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus* UK conservation status **RED**



All photos © Elis Simpson except Red-necked Phalarope © Julian Bhalerao

### Eurasian Stone Curlew — *Burhinus oedichnemus*

*Burhinus* - Greek: *bous* ox; *rhis*, *rhinos* nose

*Oedichnemus* - Greek: *oidos*, *oideos* swelling *kneme* leg — therefore a bull-hosed swollen, hardly flattering.

Gaelic name : *Crotach cloch* (Irish)

Welsh name: *Rhedwr y Moelydd* Hill Runner

This perceived swelling of the leg has given rise to an alternative name for this family of birds, i.e. thick-knees, although anatomically speaking the swelling is not actually the equivalent of a knee, but of an ankle and none of us like to be told we have thick ankles.

In the C18th the bird was known as a Thick-kneed Bustard., or the Great Plover. Another old name for it was Norfolk Plover as its stronghold was in the Brecks on the Norfolk / Suffolk Borders and some referred to it as the wailing heath chicken due to its eerie call. But this bird is not a bustard, nor a plover, nor indeed a chicken and, in actual fact, it is also not even a curlew despite getting that part of its name due to the resemblance of the calls between the two species. In Africa birds of this family are often called dikkops, which comes from the Afrikaans and means thick-head referring to its heavy head (see left hand photo above).



Stone-Curlew's 'thick-knee' © Elis Simpson

Although more widespread in the past than it is today its habitat preferences meant that its range was always rather restricted. British breeding birds are at the northern edge of the species' range and it has declined as a breeding bird in Britain. Its presence here now in the Norfolk's Brecks and also on the Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire is almost entirely due to habitat management that enables the species to breed in reasonable numbers.

Stone-Curlews disappeared from the northern part of their British range in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire by 1930, and from Dorset at the beginning of this century. The species now only nests



occasionally outside its strongholds of Norfolk/Suffolk and Wiltshire, in Sussex and Cambridgeshire arriving to all areas in late March or early April.

Between 1945 and 1985 the population contracted by around 85% and at that time the population was estimated at between 130 and 160 pairs.

The two main factors causing this decline were the loss of their semi-natural habitat and the increased mechanisation of farming, which meant that their nests were being destroyed.

Work to preserve the Stone-Curlew started in earnest and by 2000 there were some 200 pairs. This grew steadily until around 2013 when maybe as many as 450 or more pairs were breeding. However a cold spell in 2013 brought the numbers back down by as much as 20% again and the latest estimate in 2016 suggests there may be as many as between 320 and 350 pairs still.

Effective nest protection and land management reduced the numbers of birds being killed on arable land and the population began to bounce back. However, it is suggested that without intervention, the population would decline each year by three to four per cent. But if enough birds can be encouraged to nest in safe areas, the population could remain stable without help. The population on the Suffolk coast has risen from just a single pair to 15 pairs in just over 20 years, helped by semi-natural habitat creation.

The specific habitat that this bird requires in the UK is dry, open, flat or rolling areas which are chalky or stony with short grass, heathlands and well drained arable farmland (see photo above). Recently they have been seen to associate with pig farms in the Brecks.

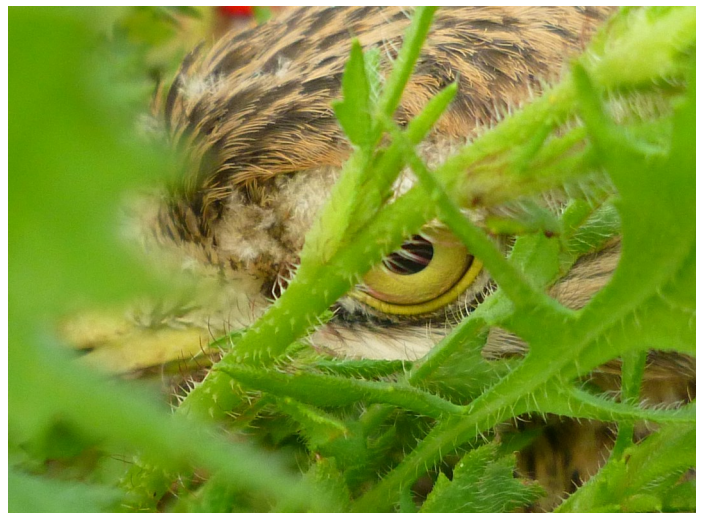
Not only are these birds particular about where they breed they are extremely site faithful. Males will usually return to under 15km from where they themselves hatched. Eric Hosking commented after photographing a pair on two consecutive years that he could have left his hide up in the same position over the winter and still have successfully photographed the nest the on the second year.

Hosking also observed some interesting behavioural activity. On 15 occasions he noted the exchange of a stone when nest incubating duties were swapped. On one occasion the female offered a stone to the male and it was refused so she put it in the nest. He also noted that once the chicks had hatched the adults carry the egg shells from the nest, trample them and then eat them.

Stone-Curlews are secretive birds and rely on camouflage to keep them safe as well as being



Typical breeding habitat with eggs and nest in the foreground at the bottom of the picture. Note that the area surrounding the semi-natural habitat is arable land. The farmer is allowing parts of his land to remain suitable for the Stone-Curlews to breed © Keith Betton under licence (UL)



Secretive Stone-Curlew © Keith Betton (UL)



Motionless chick relying on camouflage © Allan Archer (UL)

largely nocturnal. Adult birds are easily disturbed by human presence and will slink off in a crouched manner long before we get close to them. Chicks hide by lying flat and motionless on the ground. The main threat of predation of chicks and eggs comes from foxes. Thankfully the days of these birds being





Eurasian Stone-Curlew nest © Allan Archer (UL)

hunted or shot for sport and collections is long gone, but to give you an idea of what a threat those things were in the past here is a passage from the Rev C. A. Johns' book *British Birds and their Haunts* 1893.

*'In the chalky plains of La Marne in France they are very numerous; and here, by the aid of a light cart, fowlers in quest of them have little difficulty in shooting large numbers, the birds being less afraid of the approach of a horse than of a human being. But, when obtained they are of little value, as their flesh is barely eatable.'*

If these birds were so unpalatable, what then was the point of killing them in such large numbers?

Post breeding flocks of adults and juveniles occur before migration, which takes place between September and in some cases as late as November. Very occasionally a bird may winter but as they are susceptible to cold they may not survive. A few used to winter in Cornwall according to Macgillivray in his *History of British Birds* 1837 but by 1893 the Rev Johns no longer mentions Cornwall in his species account.

They migrate to Southern Europe and Africa to pass the winter. More southerly populations are largely resident and indeed this is the only *Burhinus* species that regularly migrates.

The large eyes of the bird give away the fact that they are crepuscular and nocturnal, the large size enabling them to feed even when it is dark. The yellow colour of the eye lead people from Ancient Greece, right up until the Middle Ages, to believe that the gaze of this bird upon you, or you upon it, if you were suffering from jaundice, would have a certain curative effect. As a result some people kept these birds in captivity just for this purpose. This was not however a benevolent activity, you would have to pay for the privilege of being stared at in your sick bed by a Stone-Curlew.



Eurasian Stone Curlew © Ian Grier (UL)

### **Eurasian Dotterel — *Charadrius morinellus***

*Charadrius* - Late Latin *Charadrius* yellowish bird mentioned in the Vulgate Bible (late C4th). This was derived from the Greek; *kharadrios* unidentified plain-coloured nocturnal bird that lived in ravines and river valleys. Was said to cure jaundice; interestingly this could have referred to the Eurasian Stone-Curlew (see above) rather than the ringed plovers it is attached to today.

*morinellus* - A diminutive from Greek: *moros* foolish.

Gaelic name: *Amadan-Mòintich*

Welsh name: *Hutan y Mynydd* - *Hutan* = oaf; *Mynydd* = mountain therefore mountain oaf.

Collective noun; trip.

The scientific naming of this bird is a possible misnomer and, like the Stone-Curlew a bit of an insult. The English name comes from the old English Dote or Dottard referring to a simpleton or a foolish person. For a full entreaty on the naming of this species see Wader Quest article [16.-Dotterel-Whats-in-a-name..pdf \(waderquest.net\)](https://waderquest.net/16-Dotterel-Whats-in-a-name..pdf). There is though, at least one voice that offers less insulting suggestion, and that is of W. J. Gordon in his book *Our country's Birds* where he claims, 'call dot or dote which gives it its name.'



Eurasian Dotterel with chicks © Vojtěch Kubelka (UL)

There are a few alternative names such as



Land Dotterel (the Ruddy Turnstone being the Sea Dotterel), Moss Fool (from the Gaelic *Amadan-Mòintich*) Ash Dotterel, Daft Dotterel and Mical Dotterel plus some alternate spellings of Dotterel; Dotrel, Dottrel and Dotteral.

Eurasian Dotterels currently only regularly breed in Britain in the Scottish highlands where the habitat is suitable for their needs. It is not however the altitude that is important, but the tundra-like conditions that prevail in those places. Further north in their breeding range, around Norway for example, they can be found nesting at sea level since the habitat is again tundra-like and therefore, agreeable to them.



Eurasian Dotterel in typical breeding habitat © Vojtěch Kubelka (UL)

In the past these birds regularly bred in the uplands of Cumbria (formerly Cumberland and Westmoreland) and possibly elsewhere on high ground in northern England, but those populations have since become extinct or, at best, highly irregular as breeding sites for this species; although they are seen in these places still during spring migration. In his book *The Dotterel* 1973 Desmond Nethersole-Thompson estimates 50-70 pairs bred in England up to 1860 but by 1885 observers were stating that numbers had declined considerably and by 1927 Dotterels ceased to breed regularly in England.

What has caused this extinction has been discussed widely and it is likely that in the case of the dotterels' demise many factors were at play.



Eurasian Dotterel © Phillip Edwards

The population was probably never large and the slaughter and plundering must have had a detrimental effect. Dotterels were persecuted by collectors in Britain especially in England, because of their rarity, but Nethersole-Thompson doubts that this alone was responsible for their extirpation. He cites continued persecution by anglers for their feathers to make fishing flies; increased disturbance on the breeding grounds by tourists; trampling by sheep and an increase in natural predators. But it was not just in Britain that the Dotterel was persecuted as Nethersole-Thompson demonstrates: *'On fells in Scandinavia, Lapps took hundreds in hare traps, and in 1884 gunners shot over ten thousand on the Jylland*

*heaths. All over Europe dotterels made money. In November 1873, hundreds were 'exposed for sale' at Valletta Market in Malta.'* All of this means fewer birds were arriving in Britain each year and those few that did were quickly taken. Breeding is the road to survival for a species, and clearly here the success rate required to maintain a population was not being attained. Nethersole-Thompson summed it up thus; *'In the nineteenth century no one really knows how many thousands of dotterels were turned to coin in the hands of the bird stuffers, poulterers, tackle-dealers and their agents. The poor mossfool was just one of the many casualties in and age of ostentatious consumption... They shot them for the table or stripped their feathers for dry flies. They skinned their small corpses and mounted them in glass cases. They robbed their nests, blew their eggs and displayed them in cabinets.'*

He also offers another possible culprit, and well ahead of his time, the fact that the warming of the climate throughout the C20th (bear in mind this is written in 1973 some 50 years ago), may be shifting the population north and England is at its southern edge, making the climate on the northern English fells *'marginal and sub-optimal'* whereas Scottish arctic-like conditions remained favourable. He concludes; *'By the end of the [nineteenth] century only a handful continued to run over the English fells, but in northern Europe and the Scottish Highlands dotterels still survived.'*

The species did rather better in Britain during the 1970s with the period 1969—1995 showing a

moderate increase. In the Cumbrian Fells during the the 70's John Callion, who spent many hours looking for Dotterel nests in the area reports that there was a definite increase with nests found annually , butt that since then the breeding has becoming irregular again.

The earliest authenticated Scottish nest and eggs is credited to H. W. Feilden and J.A. Harvie-Brown in 16th June 1873. The first definite nest and eggs in England were taken on Siddaw, Cumberland 1784, although the earliest account of them nesting in England was in 1838 by T. C. Heysham.

The Dotterels arrive in Britain in April or May and depart in August. On their arrival they are often seen at suitable points across the country, but on leaving again they are less regularly seen on migration as they fly beyond Britain before making their first stop.

Sexual dimorphism can be displayed in size or plumage among birds. It is usual for the males to be larger and more colourful as it is normally they who display to attract females and maintain territories. However in some species, especially among waders, the females can tend to be larger and in some cases, the Eurasian Dotterel being one of them, they are also the more striking and colourful sex within the species. This is due to the fact that the breeding strategy of the Dotterel is unusual as they have polyandrous habits. That is to say that the females will mate with more than a single male and seldom have anything at all to do with raising the chicks.



Eurasian Dotterel chick © Vojtěch Kubelka (UL)



Male Eurasian Dotterel on the nest © Vojtěch Kubelka (UL)

The eggs are laid over a few days and at that time the female takes a turn at incubating the first egg. The male will usually start to brood alone after the second egg has been laid. Amazingly it has been recorded that some females will mate and lay eggs in Scotland with one or more partners and then move to Scandinavia and repeat the process there. The males are left responsible for the incubation and rearing of the chicks. When the eggs hatch the male will remove the shell from the nest but soon afterwards he, along with his brood, usually three, will depart and not return to the nest.

### **Little Ringed Plover — *Charadrius dubius***

*Charadrius* - see under Eurasian Dotterel

*dubius* - Latin: *dubius* doubtful, dubious.

Gaelic name : *Trilleachan-tràghad-beag*

Welsh name: *Cwtiad Torchog Bach*

Collective noun (plovers); Congregation, wing

The scientific name of this bird appears to be a little strange but it stems from the fact that they are hard to separate from Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*. In 1776 a chap by the name of Sonnerat spoke of the bird, which in his native French he called '*Petit Pluvier á collier de l'isle de Luçon.*' He considered this bird so hard to sperate from Common Ringed Plover that he doubted its specific status, believing that it was climate which had slightly altered the plumage to suit the warmer conditions. It was Scolpoli who first described the species four years later in 1780 following Sonnerat's idea .

If a species is subsequently split into subspecies, the original specific name is repeated and that



subspecies is known as the nominate subspecies. All other subspecies have a new trinomial added. It is often the case that European species, which later have subspecies attached to them, become the nominate race. It is the case with the Little Ringed Plover however, that the nominate *dubius* occurs in the Philippines to New Guinea and is non migratory. The subspecies that occurs in Britain is *C. d. curonicus*, the subspecific name referring to the region known as Curonia which is in the western part of Latvia called Courland or Kurland.



Little Ringed Plover © Elis Simpson

Unlike the previous two species the numbers since it first bred in Britain have increased from a single pair in 1938 to around 1,200—1,300 pairs. The annual trends produced by Wetland Bird Survey show a marked increase during the 1990, with a stabilisation after that and a peak in 2015. Between then and 2018 the survey numbers have shown a decline.

It was the destruction caused during the Second World War that brought about the change in fortunes for the species in Britain as a breeding bird. After the war construction was rampant and gravel was needed for both building and road laying. Gravel pits sprung up everywhere and inadvertently created perfect breeding habitat for these birds. Slowly they spread north across the UK. By 1964 there were 200 pairs, they reached Scotland in 1968 and by 1973 there were an estimated 450-500 pairs.

So momentous was the colonisation that Kenneth Allsop wrote a popular story about a pair in a book called *Adventure Lit Their Star*.



Little-ringed Plover chick © Elis Simpson

It is not just gravel pits that have attracted these birds. The photo at the top of this page was taken in the car park at the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust centre at Welney in Cambridgeshire. They obviously found the stony car park ideal. The photo to the left shows one of the chicks from that nest.

To put some perspective to this, before breeding at Tring Reservoirs in Hertfordshire, the *Handbook of British Birds* Volume 4 (1940) described the species as a very rare vagrant. It then went on to list the acceptable records, other than the breeding pair in 1938; they list just 14 records involving 16 individuals. The most recent, before the

breeding record, had been 16 years earlier in 1922. One point to ponder is that, based on the old adage that 'what is hit is history, what is missed is mystery', all of the above records were of birds 'obtained', 'taken' or 'shot'. One wonders if, had they been allowed to live, particularly the 1864 record of two together in Middlesex, although that was in August, whether these birds may have gone on to breed at an earlier date than the Tring birds. If the majority of birds that risked putting their head above the parapet in order to colonise new areas were shot, the chances of them meeting and breeding were small. In 1940-43 there were four records involving five birds but no proved breeding, then, in 1944, there were three pairs proven to have bred. Remarkably one of those pairs nested in exactly the same location as the first pair in 1938 at Tring. It was reasoned that as a period of six years has passed since the original nesting it was unlikely that this pair were the original pair and, as the previous chicks were ringed from the first nest, it could be proven that neither bird was one of those.

## Common Sandpiper — *Actitis hypoleucos*

*Actitis* - Greek: *aktites* coast dweller.

*hypoleucos* - Greek: *hupo* beneath *leukos* white.

Gaelic name : *Trilleachan-tràghad-beag* or *Trileachan-traighe / traighich Fidhleir-bòrd-an-locha*

Welsh name: *Pibydd y Dorlan*

Summer Snipe Sand lark, willy wicket or Kittie-needie after call

Naming a bird common something-or-other makes it sound rather mundane and boring, but the Common Sandpiper is far from being either. It is a perky and energetic little bird which is always a pleasure to watch. Mind you not everyone shares this view. In his book *Quest for Birds* 1934 W. K. Richmond had this to say about them. *'They always give the impression of being rather stupid and brainless creatures—an impression which is strengthened by their weak , glancing flight and shrill, apparently meaningless, pipings'* Not a fan then.

It is also by no means as common as it used to be. In the last 20 odd years they have declined by 26% and over the last 30 years by 50%, with the biggest losses being in England.

However it is still moderately common along upland rivers, streams and lakes, where it bobs along the waterside, usually out of the water and feeding by sight on insects. They arrive on our shores from late March to early May and depart again from June to early October. A few individuals remain on the south coast throughout the winter. On migration they travel overland by night, and so can turn up almost anywhere that there is a small body of water, even temporarily flooded areas, and they will also be found at the coasts and in marshland during that time.



Common Sandpiper © Elis Simpson

Our birds will winter in Africa, mostly south of the Sahara in West Africa. Other populations from further east get as far as southern Africa and some of those birds, the less fit and first year birds may well remain in Africa during their first year. This led some, in the past, to speculate that a small population remained to breed in the southern wintering grounds.

At first glance it may not look like an obvious long distance migrant as in flight, as described by Richmond, it appears to be weak. Common Sandpipers have very shallow wing-beats, with the downstroke seldom going below the horizontal. It has a rapid, stiff-winged flight low over the water, flicking its wings and then gliding for a distance. This adaptation allowing the bird to fly low over the water has enabled them to develop an escape mechanism unusual among waders. If they are threatened by aerial attack they will plunge dive into the water and can remain there, maybe even swimming underwater for some distance, to evade capture. Young birds that are as yet unable to fly will also seek out water to escape in the same way.



Common Sandpiper © Elis Simpson



This less than robust flying action means that their migration is a series of short or medium length hops rather than long, non-stop marathons. Flights are usually calculated to have the assistance of tail winds. Studies involving the tracking of birds using geolocators demonstrated that British breeding birds move south to fatten up for migration within Britain, then make perhaps two stops before reaching West Africa.

When breeding they usually lay four eggs but the simple idea of a pair being monogamous is not always the case. In Scotland it was found that one fifth of females will mate with more than one male, if they are around, and there was a case where a male



Common Sandpiper © Elis Simpson



Common Sandpiper nest and eggs © Phil Holland (UL)

was found to have raised four young, none of which were genetically attached to him.

The number of breeding Common Sandpipers in Britain may have been affected by the increased popularity of angling, with increased numbers of people lining the banks of rivers and lakes, currently the population in Britain is estimated to be around 13,000 pairs.



Common Sandpiper chicks © Phil Holland (UL)

It cannot be denied that one of the most distinctive features of the common sandpiper, and the one for which it is perhaps best known, is its restless habits and its teetering; the pulsating lifting and lowering of the back end of its body. An explanation for this behaviour is hard to come by but it has been suggested that it has something to do with imitating the rhythmical swash of waves on a shoreline. Whether or not this is the case, whatever the reason for this rhythmic action it has gained the bird a rather unfortunate name on the small island of Nukumanu in Papua New Guinea.

A gentleman by the name of Don W. Hadden was collecting the local names of the bird species of the North Solomon Islands while making lists of the birds for each he visited. On Nukumanu he discovered a local name for the common sandpiper which, whenever uttered, made the men folk fall about laughing and on one occasion leading them to eject a small boy from their presence. When Hadden later showed this name to a lady she was utterly shocked and insisted he erase it forthwith, but no-one offered an explanation as to why. He later discovered that this name meant '*the bird that walks a little then copulates*' referring to the pumping motion that the bird makes. I rather suspect that the word copulate has replaced a somewhat more colourful one with the same meaning.



Common Sandpiper chick © Phil Holland



### Eurasian Whimbrel — *Numenius phaeopus*

*Numenius* - Greek: *noumenia* new moon *neos* new or young *mene* moon. But note: *Numenius* is often stated as meaning 'new moon'; however a new moon is the stage of the lunar cycle when there is no light area visible, it appears all dark. *Neos* though can be translated as new or young and the young moon is when the first slither of brightness can be seen as a narrow waxing crescent and that is when it most resembles the bill of the curlews and whimbrels where members of this family get their generic name.

*phaeopus* - Medieval Latin: derived from the Greek *phaios* dusky, brown, grey *poios* foot.

Gaelic name : *Trilleachan-tràghad-beag* / *Eun-Bealltainn Eiu-Bealltainn* / *Leth-yhuilbneach*

Welsh name: *Cwtiad Torchog Bach* / *Coeg ylfmlii* / *Coegylnir*



Eurasian Whimbrel © Elis Simpson

The arrival of this bird on our shores is popularly associated with the month of May, the vernacular name of May Bird is evidence of this, and this is also reflected in the Celtic name *Eun- or Eiu-Bealltainn*; the Celtic Beltrane spring festival is usually held on the 1st of May. Whaup is the vernacular name of the Curlew in Scotland and the close relationship between the Curlew and the Whimbrel is manifested in the latter being known as Tang Whaup or Peerie Whaup. In the same way in England was called the Jack or Half Curlew, jack meaning small in this case and half also referring to the comparative sizes of the two birds, in much the same way that Snipe and Jack Snipe are thus named.

Some vernacular names are the result of describing the birds call, such as Jitterel or Titterel. The last vernacular name we have found is Seven-whistler, which, although it sounds as if it refers directly to the call, it is actually associated with a myth.

There exists an old superstition concerning the Seven Whistlers, which were supposed to be a portent of impending doom. The story goes that six of the Seven Whistlers travel endlessly across the night skies looking for the seventh. The legend continues that if the six should ever find the seventh whistler then the world would come to an end. Whimbrels often call at night, especially on migration so they inevitably became associated with the Seven Whistlers.

Whimbrels were first recorded in Britain in Anglo-Saxon times, although fossil evidence shows that they were certainly here sometime between 10 -120 thousand years ago. For most of Britain they are passage migrants in spring, between early April and early May, and autumn, late June to late October, with a few overwintering. The British



Eurasian Whimbrel nest with hatching eggs © Vojtěch Kubelka (UL)



breeding range of these birds is restricted nowadays mainly to Shetland. However in the past they were more widely distributed across the Scottish Islands, including the Orkneys and the Hebrides, and were irregularly found to breed on the mainland. One exceptional record is of them breeding on the islands of *Ynesoedd Gwylan* off the Llŷn Peninsula in Wales in 1999 and 2000.

On migration they travel overland, mainly at night, they have even been heard passing over central London.

The last official survey of this species in Britain was carried out in 2009 when it was found that between 290 and 310 pairs were thought to be breeding. There is however a national survey planned for later this year, so it will be interesting to see how they are faring these days.

Despite their close affinity, it is unusual to see Whimbrels and Curlews together. Whimbrels are not known to seek out the company of their larger relatives. An event that Elis and I witnessed on Hilbre Island in the Dee Estuary may offer an explanation. The day saw us watching a small group of Whimbrel, three in all. (Thankfully not seven although we did come across seven together in Fuerteventura and lived to tell the tale!) A Curlew alighted near to them and immediately headed for the nearest Whimbrel, which it stalked and harassed until the Whimbrel got fed up and was forced to fly off down the rocky beach to escape the Curlew's attentions. The Curlew then turned its focus to the next Whimbrel resulting in the same thing happening with the Whimbrel joining its companion further along the rocks. Finally the Curlew saw off the last Whimbrel in the same manner. Once rid of the Whimbrels the Curlew settled down to feed. If this is typical then it is not hard to see why the Whimbrels would eschew the company of Curlews.



Eurasian Whimbrel © Elis Simpson



Seven Whimbrels? © Elis Simpson

## Red-necked Phalarope — *Phalaropus lobatus*

*Phalaropus* - Greek: *phalaris* coot *pous* foot.

*lobatus* - Modern Latin: *lobatus* derived from Late Latin *lobus* lobe, which derived from the Greek *lobos* lobe.

Gaelic name : *Deargan-allt*

Welsh name: *Pibydd côch llydan-droed / Llydandroed Gyddfgoch*

Collective nouns: swirl, twirl, whirl, whirligig, cell, dopping.

As in the scientific species name *lobatus*, some of this bird's vernacular names are related to the coot-like lobes on the foot; Coot-footed Tringa, Lobefoot, Halfweb. Others refer to its breeding range, which is far to the north like Northern Phalarope, Hyperborean Phalarope. Phalaropes in general have collected a number of collective nouns that refer to their famous habit of picking rapidly at the surface of the water as they spin. Although this spinning is often referred to it is actually not all that common.



Red-necked Phalarope © Phillip Edwards

Phalaropes are much more likely to be seen swimming along picking at

the surface of the water dipping their head from side to side. This has perhaps earned them the dopping of phalaropes collective noun, coming from dipping, describing their head movements. This action has also resulted in the Icelandic colloquial name of 'Writing Birds'.

One of the remarkable things about both the Grey and Red-necked Phalaropes is their wintering away from land at sea resulting in them sometimes being referred to as Sea-Snipes. Being a bird that is away from land for long periods it is obviously important that they can swim well. The lobes on the foot being an obvious adaption to this lifestyle and their plumage is thick, like the that of ducks and gulls, making them both buoyant and waterproof.

One of the collective nouns, a cell, may derive from the fact that flocks of these birds can be encountered, often in huge numbers, miles out to sea. There they gather to feed on plankton brought to the surface by upwelling from the depths caused by a convergence of currents. They have thus been associated with whales becoming known as Whale-birds to the whalers who thought that encountering a flock of phalaropes was a good sign that whales may be in the area. It is likely that the whales and the phalaropes feed on the same food sources, hence appearing at the same place at the same time. Some birds have been seen to land on the whales' backs when they are at the surface.



Red-necked Phalaropes © Phillip Edwards



On migration Phalaropes can be found along coasts and sometimes inland, particularly in bad weather. Sometimes when storms rage at sea they will seek the shelter of land to sit out the storms.

The Red-necked Phalarope is indeed a bird of the north during its breeding season and these days it mainly breeds as far north as you can get in Britain, on the Shetland Isles, although a few can be found scattered on other Scottish islands, the Scottish mainland and in Ireland. These birds are at the southern edge of the breeding range for the species. It was



Red-necked Phalarope nest © Vojtěch Kubelka (UL)

formerly more widespread and was once numerous on Orkney. William Bullock, a collector wrote that he found them very common in marshes of Sanday and Westray in the breeding season and that it was so extremely tame that he shot nine without moving from one spot, they not being scared by the gunshot.

The BTO estimate that there are around 64 males (2013-2017) in the whole of the Britain. The population trend is though increasing as the 2007-2011 Bird Atlas suggested 19-27 males in 2010, but it remains on the RED list for the UK due to its extremely small population.

Like the Dotterel phalaropes exhibit a reversal from the norm of males being more brightly coloured than the females and, also like the Dotterel, the females can be polyandrous if the population is big enough, with 10% of them thought to exhibit this behaviour. Females will fight to hold territory and some of those fights can be quite protracted, even lasting all day. Males, when defending the nest or young have been observed doing a broken wing display to lure would-be predators away from the nest site or chicks.

Females will arrive in the breeding areas first and do not assist with the incubation or rearing of the chicks; only the males possess a brood patch. This system of breeding is thought to maximise egg production, which is important since the Arctic summer is short.

Once the breeding season is complete the birds then head south. Traditionally it has been supposed, and ringing recoveries of Scandinavian birds have supported this, that all the northern European birds fly south and end up in the Indian Ocean or the Arabian Sea. However, a recent study involved putting geolocators on 10 Red-necked Phalaropes in Shetland. Overall the study was not terribly successful since only one of the geolocators was retrieved but what that one tracker revealed was astonishing.



Migration Route of the male Red-necked Phalarope Shetland to the Pacific Ocean © Adrian Riegen

Instead of heading south and east as expected, this male left Shetland on the 1st of August and headed west, crossing the Atlantic in six days. Unlike many other migratory birds of course phalaropes can always stop for a rest on the sea. The bird then slowly headed south along the Atlantic coast of North America and into the Caribbean. By this time it was early September. A little over a month later he was in the Pacific Ocean somewhere between the Galapagos Islands and Ecuador. There he spent the following five months feeding on plankton brought to the surface by the upwelling of the Humboldt Current, in a place where it has already been established that many of North America's phalaropes spend their non-breeding months.

The return journey took a similar route but was accomplished in a much shorter time (although the battery ran out before it arrived) demonstrating how much more urgent the



Male Red-necked Phalarope on the nest © Vojtěch Kubelka (UL)

migration north is due to the imperative to breed, when compared to the more languid southerly post breeding flights. The total journey was around 22,000 km which is considerably longer than the supposed route to the Arabian Sea and it might go some way to explaining where the large numbers of Red-necked Phalaropes that migrate south along the east coast of North America end up.

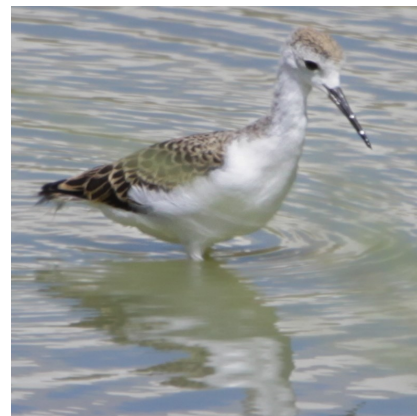
Further research will be interesting, to see if this was a one off or the norm for the Shetland breeders which would make them part of the North American population rather than the Scandinavian

population.

### Additional species

In addition to the above mentioned species the Black-winged Stilt could almost be considered a summer visiting breeding wader. Although it is not yet a regular breeder, following the pattern of the Little, Great and Cattle Egrets it is surely not likely to be long before this species becomes a regular breeding visitor adorning our summer experiences with waders.

Between 1983 and 2016 there had been 22 breeding attempts of which only three were successful, However in 2017 it was a bumper year with 13 chicks fledged in Britain, all I southern England not unexpectedly. However this was not the forerunner of a mass colonisation as had been hoped. In 2020 there was only one successful breeding attempt where three chicks were raised.



Young Black-winged Stilt © Elis Simpson

Another species that could be considered a summer visitor is the Black-tailed Godwit Although the species is a resident in that it occurs here all year round, there are two subspecies involved and the nominate subspecies *Limosa limosa limosa* is the one that breeds here. The other subspecies is *L. l. islandica*, which breeds in Iceland, although some pairs have taken to breeding on Faeroes and Northern Isles of Scotland.

Historically the *limosa* subspecies was a common breeding bird in England across the fens from southern Yorkshire to Cambridgeshire and Norfolk. However the draining of the fens rendered them more and more scarce, and the rarer they became the more sought after by collectors they were. The last known eggs were



Black-tailed Godwit © Elis Simpson

collected in 1847 although it may have bred in 1857. A breeding attempt in the 1930s was unsuccessful but the species returned to breed regularly in 1952. Numbers slowly increased, with 11 pairs in 1961, to 65 pairs in 1973. However over the next decade numbers halved due to wet springs causing breeding areas to be flooded. The BTO estimate around 53 pairs currently.



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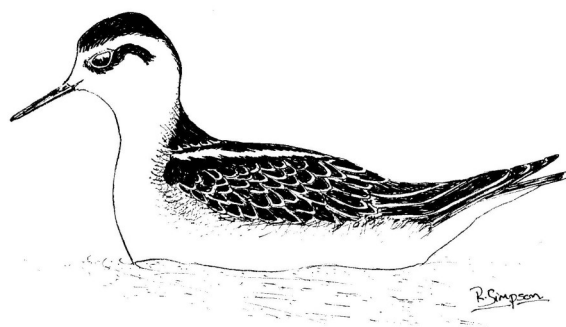
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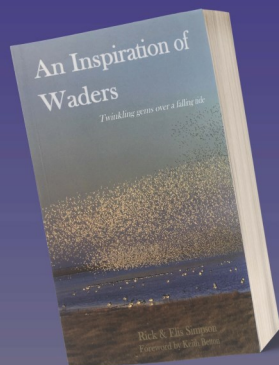
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# An Inspiration of Waders

A Wader Quest Publishing book  
by Rick and Elis Simpson

## An Inspiration of Waders



*Twinkling gems over a falling tide*

The foreword is by Keith Betton



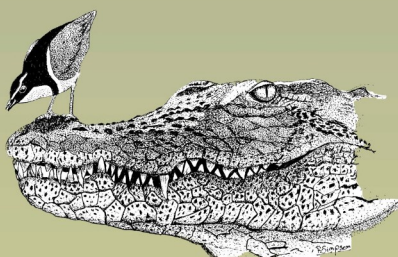
Discover our cultural connection to waders and how they have inspired us.



BY RICK AND ELIS SIMPSON



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



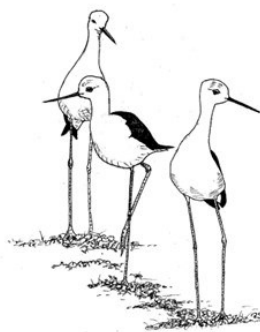
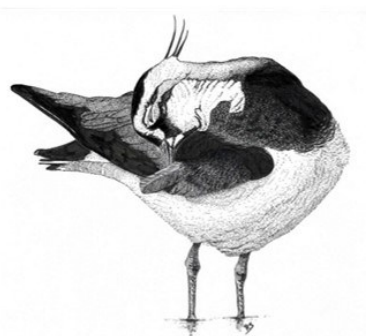
WADER QUEST PUBLISHING

All profits will go to Wader Quest



# New Wader Quest book - *A Quest for Waders* by Rick and Elis Simpson

A new book from Wader Quest Publishing by Rick and Elis Simpson. This book chronicles the journeys they made to see waders around the world, and the parallel journey of Wader Quest from fundraiser to Registered Charity - all proceeds go to Wader Quest.



## Foreword by Dominic Couzens

*'This is a cracking read whether you're a waderphile or not. Ticking, dipping, ducking, diving, it's all here as Rick and Elis go through their version of a mid-life crisis to set up Wader Quest. A must-read for all birders.'*

- Iolo Williams: Naturalist and T. V. presenter.

*'Rick and Elis' enthusiasm ripples through this book. what they have achieved, bringing waders to the forefront of peoples minds alongside their conservation is second to none. A brilliant read which, like their beloved waders, will have you probing deeper into this amazing family.'*

- Tim Appleton MBE: Founder of Birdfair Rutland Water and Creator of Rutland Water Nature Reserve.

*'I was hooked by the prologue. The tragedy of extinction was brought home to me on seeing, in Morocco in 1990, three of the last few slender-billed curlews to exist. Thanks to the commitment of conservation organisations from around the world and support of people like Rick and Elis the spoon-billed sandpiper has a fighting chance of making it.'*

- Debbie Pain: Conservationist and scientist.

*'Waders are one of the most threatened groups of birds, with several species on the brink of extinction and many more suffering serious declines. This makes Rick and Elis Simpson's Wader Quest - a charity dedicated to protecting waders and highlighting their plight - important and necessary. This fascinating book tells the story of how the organisation grew from their quest to see all the world's waders, before it was too late.'*

- Rebecca Armstrong: Editor of Birdwatch magazine.

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*'This book is all of the things that the reviews on the back cover [above], and the excellent Foreword by Dominic Couzens, promise.'* - Mike and Rose Clear.