

Understanding Visible Migration – Part 3, Clive McKay

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Grey Wag tales

September 2014 has been dominated by an easterly air flow from the continent, with rarities such as Britain's 3rd Masked Shrike at Spurn catching the headlines. But on 19th September, the day before the shrike turned up, Andy Roadhouse on the Spurn website was not extolling the virtues of the 2 Grey-headed Wagtails, 2 Yellow-browed Warblers, 6 Red-breasted Flycatchers or the Great Grey Shrike – he was celebrating the breaking of the 56 year old record vismig count of 24 Grey Wagtails! Andy's notes for the day:

A record-breaking day at Spurn. The bird of the day was Grey Wagtail! One of the oldest day records at Spurn is for the Grey Wagtail, which stood at 24 set on 8th September 1958. For years keen vis-miggers at Spurn have come close to breaking the record on days with classic visible migration conditions - south-westerly winds in mid-September! So it was a surprise, in ENE winds and misty conditions that the record was obliterated today when 55 were recorded flying south. There have only been 18 ringed in total at Spurn prior to 2014, with no more than three in any one year. Today 16 were ringed! This raises the question of where did these birds come from? Usually they would be from breeding populations in northern Britain, and this is probably why the record has stood for so long, as most wagtails migrate through the centre or west of England with only small numbers down the east coast. However, with NE winds off high pressure over Scandinavia for the past couple of weeks, most birds at Spurn at the moment are probably from Scandinavia – as shown by the large numbers of drift migrants changing daily throughout September. There is no reason to think the wagtails were not also of Scandinavian origin. It wasn't just Grey Wagtails on the move, the best Meadow Pipit movement of the autumn shouldn't happen on ENE winds, but large numbers were coming in off the sea or from the north; many of the flava Wagtails looked like Grey-headed, with two very good candidates seen on the ground, many "alba" wagtails looked like Whites and there were also good numbers of Tree Pipits which are not normally associated with good Pipit movements in "normal" years.



One of a record 16 Grey Wagtails trapped at Spurn on 19th September 2014. Photo: Andy Roadhouse

This record count sums up this autumn's vismig to the end of September. Instead of the usual south westerly airflow pushing birds down the east side of the country – along the eastern flanks of the Pennines and Spurn, as discussed in my last article, this year it seems that the easterlies have pushed birds towards the centre and west of the country with high pipit and wagtail counts at west coast

sites such as Heysham and Walney (Lancs), Peterstone Gout (Gwent), and at inland sites such as Winter Hill (Lancs), and Black Bank and Berry Hill (both Staffs). This probably explains why the “big Mipit push” that often happens at Spurn between 9th-15th September, and has involved five counts of over 10,000 birds since 2008, just didn’t happen this autumn. Ironically, the highest count of “only” 3,647 occurred on 19th September, the same day as the 55 Grey Wagtails, strongly suggesting that these were also largely Scandinavian birds in unusually high numbers (it is thought that the regular big pushes through Spurn are comprised of British and/or Icelandic Mipits).

But I don’t think the Spurn regulars are complaining, as there were plenty of other birds about during the month! Some were sampled by the many folk who came along to the second Spurn Migration Festival between 4th-6th September – another great success with lots of birds and great talks by Pim Wolf from Holland and Mike Dilger from the BBC (the observatory’s new president). Mike’s impressions of birds of the South American rain forest have to be seen (and heard) to be believed!

The October change-over

As the autumn progresses, the nature of the migration changes. Many of our insectivorous pipits and wagtails are rapidly exiting out of the country for milder climes. A hard core of male Pied Wagtails and Meadow Pipits will probably hang on near their territories or move to local sewage farms or coasts, but the majority of first year birds will spend the winter along the coasts of southern England, France and Portugal. In contrast, all the swallows and martins leave the country, and this can result in some huge passages at south coast sites, with record counts of 50,000 House Martins at Sandwich Bay (Kent) and 45,000 Swallows at Durlston (Dorset) (see table below). Other birds which exit the country via the south coast are the Linnets and Goldfinch, with record counts of 10,000+ at Durlston and Dungeness (Kent) respectively. It’s easy to think that these birds are resident in the UK, but large numbers of these so-called “partial migrants” head off for pastures new each autumn.

***Record visible migration day counts of 10,000+ birds (land birds only)
on the Trektellen website, 2000-2013***

Species	Location	GB record day count	Date
Woodpigeon	Constitution Hill (Poole, Dorset)	161,257	07/11/2010
Starling	Hunstanton Cliffs (Norfolk, England)	89,748	31/10/2008
House Martin	Sandwich Bay Bird Obs (Kent, England)	50,000	23/09/2014
Swallow	Durlston NNR (Dorset, England)	45,000	16/09/2011
Redwing	The Pinnacle, Sandy (Beds, England)	33,770	13/10/2009
Fieldfare	Hunstanton Cliffs (Norfolk, England)	26,113	27/10/2009
Swift	Spurn Bird Observatory (E Yorks, England)	21,000	04/07/2009
Meadow Pipit	Spurn Bird Observatory (E Yorks, England)	20,200	13/09/2011
Chaffinch	Hunstanton Cliffs (Norfolk, England)	15,132	05/10/2010
Linnets	Durlston NNR (Dorset, England)	10,960	19/10/2012
Goldfinch	Dungeness Bird Obs (Kent, England)	10,000	28/10/2011



Migrating Starlings heading for Britain from the north coast of the Netherlands Photo: Eduard Opperman



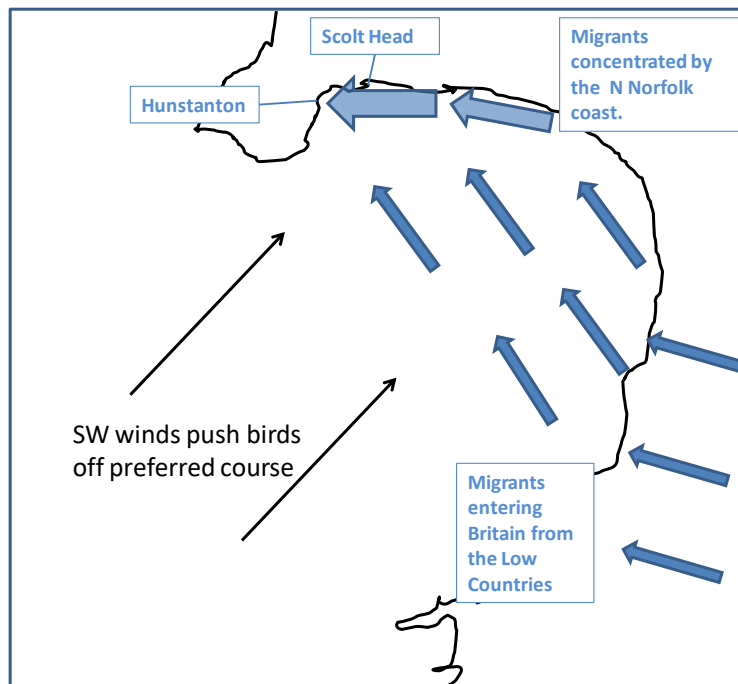
Starling – record GB count of 89,748 at Hunstanton Cliffs!

Photo: Eduard Opperman

But the other big players in October visible migration are the immigrants coming in from the continent – Starling, Fieldfare, Redwing and Chaffinch. It's ironic that some of the biggest passerine migrations we witness are of birds coming into the country rather than British birds leaving – I guess this shows what an attractive winter resort we provide! It's interesting to look at the locations where these birds are seen in largest numbers – Starling, Fieldfares and Chaffinch at Hunstanton on the

North Norfolk coast, and Redwings at Sandy, Bedfordshire. Why should the north Norfolk coast be so good? Not for the same reasons that this coast is famed for its falls of chats and warblers – which occur in easterly winds. The big visible migrations on this coast occur in south westerly winds. Why? The situation is similar to that described for Spurn in my last article, except that this time, the migrating birds are heading west or north west into England from the Low Countries. A south westerly wind pushes these birds northwards onto the north Norfolk coast – which acts as a leading line and barrier which the birds then follow westwards. Some probably depart from Scolt Head towards Gibraltar Point, but many continue west to Hunstanton where they have to decide whether to cross the Wash or turn southwards. It seems that many turn south for a short distance before they re-orientate, and this is what brings the birds into view for Gary Hibberd, Andy Brown *et al.* manning the Hunstanton watch point.

Concentration of diurnal migrants entering Britain from the Low Countries by south westerly winds along the north Norfolk coast



Why Sandy (Beds) holds the highest (33,770) and second highest (33,179) Redwing counts for the UK is harder to explain. The Pinnacle has no particular geographical features to concentrate migrants. However, over the years we have learnt that Redwings have an extraordinary capacity to “stick together” in narrow streams when on migration – often avoiding weather fronts and no doubt following each other’s “seeep” calls day or night. What ever the reason, in two different years this stream has passed over Sandy, and hats off to Steve Blain, Mark Thomas and the rest of the guys at the RSPB for picking up on two massive Redwing days. Has Bedfordshire ever laid claim to a better ornithological spectacle?



Redwing – huge numbers attracted to Sandy, Beds on migration! Photo: Eduard Opperman



**Fieldfare and Chaffinch: continental immigrants concentrated by the north Norfolk coastline
Photos: Eduard Opperman**

Vismig rares and records

Any visible migration watcher will tell you that standing atop some hill or viewpoint isn't the best place to be to see rarities. Several factors are probably involved – key to these is the fact that most visible migrants fly over once and only once – there are no second chances to confirm tentative identifications. But vismiggers have changed the status of many species such as Lapland Bunting, Snow Bunting, Rock Pipit and Richard's Pipit in inland counties across the country. Again, easterly winds are more likely to produce birds normally associated with the coast. On a memorable visit to Rod Moor in October 1997, one of the watch points near Sheffield pioneered by Keith Clarkson, he and I had an abysmal morning in terms of numbers of migrating birds, but fly over Lapland Bunting and Richard's Pipit brought an exciting flavour of "coastal bird observatory" to this moorland fringe

site. But that morning was the exception that proves the rule for inland sites – of the 56 UK records of Richard’s Pipit on Trektellen, all but two have been at coastal sites, with Scolt Head and Hunstanton (Norfolk) and Spurn (E Yorks) having the lion’s share.

However, scanning the skies and identifying everything that flies past inevitably produces its share of unusual sightings, and there’s always a thrill to see familiar birds such as tits, Dunnocks woodpeckers out of habitat on migration. This autumn two Dotterels have been spotted – one seen by Frank Steuck at Oldbury (Gloucs) on 25th September, followed 5 days later by one over Calderdale (W Yorks) seen by John Beaumont and Andy Cockcroft. Their brief account on Trektellen describes its occurrence nicely:

“A small flock of Golden plover flew south and were joined by a small wader from the west. The birds returned five minutes later, circling the reservoir twice... Dotterel in flight confirmed with pics.”

See if you can spot the Dotterel in John’s photo below, and then ask yourself “would I have picked this bird out from a flock of Goldies in flight?” I’m not sure that I would have...! As with all such sightings, maintaining focus and trying to identify every bird is the key to success. But when you’re on a busy migration watch with hundreds or, if you’re lucky, thousands of birds passing over each hour, oddities are bound to slip through unnoticed.



Dotterel with 9 Golden Plovers, Calderdale (W Yorks), 30th September 2014. Photo: John Beaumont

Feeling good...

In her song of the same title Nina Simone nicely captures the essence of getting out at dawn with all the anticipation of witnessing a good day's migration in front of you...

*Birds flyin' high, you know how I feel
Sun in the sky, you know how I feel
Breeze driftin' on by, you know how I feel
It's a new dawn, it's a new day....*

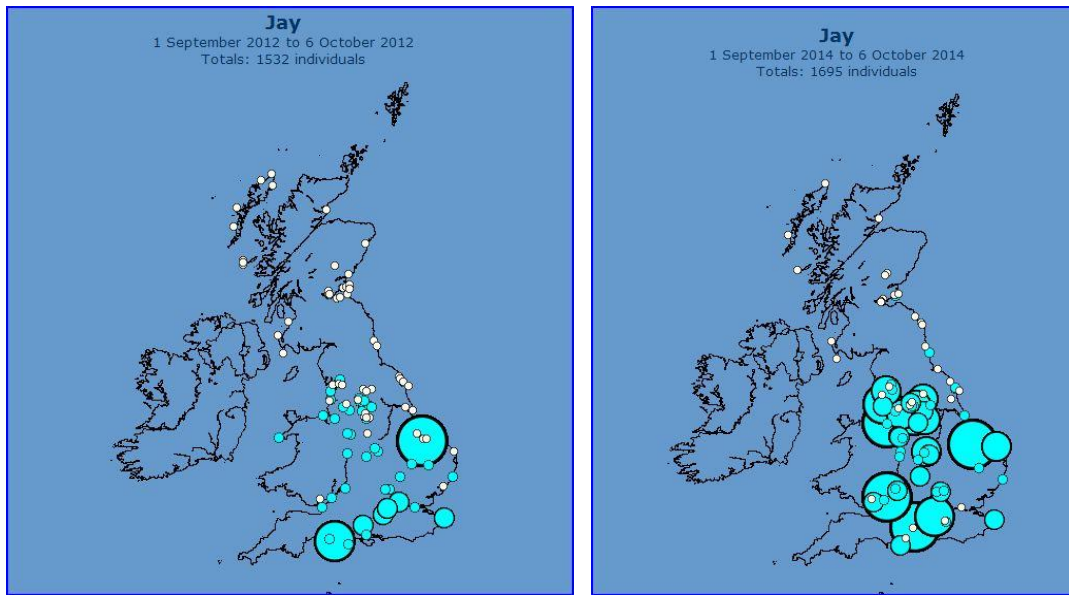
... OK, maybe she wasn't singing about visible migration watching, but the words fit nicely! I'm writing this on the evening of 4th October, and at dawn tomorrow I'll be checking out a new vismig site near my home on the southern edge of the Grampian Hills. It's more of a reconnaissance trip than anything else, but visiting a new site is always exciting - the imagination runs free, unhindered by reality, and at the moment I'm predicting why this is going to be THE place for migration within easy striking distance of home. I've done this many times before, and I still haven't found THE place, but maybe tomorrow? My problem locally is that although the southern edge of the Grampians forms a formidable barrier, its WSW-ENE orientation is in the wrong orientation to concentrate autumn migrants. However, it does work as a habitat leading line: incoming winter thrushes follow the farmland/moorland edge rather than heading into the mountains, and this leads them >WSW. Similarly, Woodpigeons follow the edge of the hills, seeming to prefer the mix of woodland and mixed farmland to the arable farmland lower down or the grouse moors higher up. Tomorrow's spot at Tullyfergus is a pinch point for both, its only problem being the predominance of woodland which restricts the view in certain directions.

The real challenge with inland sites is finding a spot that really concentrates the birds into a narrow enough funnel for them to be easily counted and identified. On the coast this is easy, but inland birds can choose a variety of options – following their preferred habitat, ducking out of strong cross-winds in certain valleys, or following different lines depending on the height of cloud or mist on any one day. This mix of factors really does make every day different, and you can never be sure what the 'morrow will bring. This is my tenth autumn in Angus, and I'm still putting the pieces of the jigsaw together to nail the best spots to watch from. My visit to Tullyfergus (now two days ago) was spoilt by claggy weather – so no birds moving, but I did find a good viewpoint once I'd found my way out of the obscuring trees, so hopefully “Tullyfergus, Perthshire” will be a regular feature on the pages of Trektellen before long! Watch this space.

Jays abounding

Autumn 2014 has seen large numbers of Jays on the move – totalling 1,695 individuals at vismig sites up to 6th October. This is one hundred more than had been seen by this date in the last big Jay year in 2012. But the maps below indicate very different patterns of occurrence in the two years. In 2012 the birds were highly concentrated to the SE of England, in particular Hunstanton – the classic GB site for picking up continental immigration – and there can be little doubt that the 2012 irruption was made up of continental immigrants.

Jays at UK vismig sites 1st Sep-6th October – 2012 (1,532 birds) and 2014 (1,695 birds)
(images: www.trektellen.org)



In contrast, the map for 2014 shows that birds are spread widely across the country. To my mind this suggests that we have an irruption of British birds heading to pastures new. Perhaps there has been a failure of the British acorn crop and this is “forcing” birds to move further afield than usual. We need to wait ‘til the end of the season to see how things pan out before making a final judgement on this.





Jays on the move, The Netherlands, October 2014
Photos: Eduard Opperman (top), Arjan Boele (bottom).

The final fling of the “Cushie Doos”

Readers may look at the table of record day counts and wonder at the species in pole position – the Woodpigeon! Surely some mistake? But no, the most numerous and perhaps most spectacular migration that can be witnessed in Britain is that of the humble “cushie doo” (as they’re called up here in NE Scotland). Their spectacular and most unlikely migration comes at the very end of the autumn, when frosty mornings are the norm and Bonfire Night preparations have all been made. As a teenager at secondary school in Sheffield, the final walk from bus stop to school on cold November mornings was often enlivened by the sight of flock after flock of Woodpigeons flying high over the Loxley and Rivelin valleys southwards. They didn’t really register – after all, they weren’t rare, but it was a regular phenomenon. These were Seb Coe’s favourite mornings as he timed himself on runs along the Rivelin Valley Road preparing for forthcoming Olympic feats (on the track in those days), but I guess he wasn’t looking upwards. Had he done so, he would have seen the woodpigeon’s version of the Olympics which occurs at this time every year. Keith Clarkson was the first to twig that this was a real migratory phenomenon and not just some bizarre roost flight, and that it happened every November over the foothills of the Pennines on the western edge of Sheffield,. His findings have since been replicated at sites across the length and breadth of the country from Lintrathen (Angus, Scotland) to the coasts of Hampshire, Dorset and Devon.

But there was always a nagging question – could these birds be continental immigrants – like our Fieldfares and Starlings? To me this always seemed unlikely. Firstly, the timing of Woodpigeon migration in Scandinavia and over the Low Countries is two weeks earlier than ours, and the largest

numbers passing through The Netherlands are well inland at the southern end of the country, in contrast to the winter thrushes and finches bound for Britain which are seen in large numbers pushing onto the coast as they make their way westwards. The site in Britain with the highest day count – 161,257 at Constitution Hill (Poole, Dorset) on 7th November 2010 watched by Mark Constantine of *The Sound Approach* fame, is also suspiciously close to the New Forest, where you could imagine large numbers of British Woodpigeons gathering in the autumn to feed on beech nuts and oak acorns before moving on.

The migration of Scandinavian Woodpigeons is linked to them exploiting beech and oak in the forests of the Pyrenees and NW Spain. Could a similar scenario apply within Britain but on a smaller scale? If so, you might predict that large numbers of Woodpigeons from central England and Wales ought to head south west to exploit the oak woods in the valleys of Wales and the Forest of Dean. By rights, these birds should eventually be concentrated along the south coast of Wales as they moved >SW through the country – like the pigeons in Dorset. But there seemed to be nobody looking. Then a few years ago I came across some notes on the Gwent Ornithological Society's newsgroup noting mysterious flocks of thousands of Woodpigeons moving >SW in early November over the valleys and the north shore of the Severn. Bingo! Thanks to the internet and e-mail I was soon in touch with Adrian Plant a vismigger, ringer and entomologist at the Museum of Wales in Cardiff. On 6th November 2011 Adrian counted 98,000 pigeons over his watch point at Peterstone Gout east of Cardiff. What a sight! Last year, after thinking about where the best woodland/hill edge habitats might act as a leading line for the birds, he moved to Pen-y-lan outside Newport which afforded panoramic views. On a frosty 10th November morning his plans bore fruit, with an astounding movement of 156,350 Woodpigeons passing over the valleys of south Wales, and with flock after flock stretching out over the Severn estuary. Matt Hobbs could see the same huge flocks from the English side of the Severn! Adrian's comments on Trektellen are a little under-stated:

"Passage along a broad front stretching at least between Pontypool and the middle of the Bristol Channel (20-25 km). Most birds >SW along the coastal plain or well out over the Channel. Others trending >W and tending to turn >SW. Others heading >S down the Usk Valley before turning >W or >SW. With only one observer, I probably missed many flocks!"



Adrian Plant at Peterstone Gout, Gwent. Photo: Adrian Plant

Quite a task for a single observer, and I guess he's a little peeved that he missed Mark Constantine's British record by a mere 7,000 birds. Oh well, there's always next year. The total number of autumn pigeons on the move in Britain on Trektellen has exceeded 1 million birds in three of the last five years. What will 2014 bring? There may still be time for you to get out and have a go at witnessing this spectacle yourself – head for the edges of wooded hills on the first frosty morning in November and look up! Don't assume that flocks of pigeons are simply locals leaving a roost.

POSTSCRIPT

Soon after I wrote this article, Matt Hobbs tried out a new Woodpigeon migration viewpoint in South Wales close to the English border on the north side of the Severn estuary (see Portskewett on Trektellen). He smashed the British day record for Woodpigeons with a staggering 202,000 birds (the highest migration count for any species in Britain!). Nearby at Peterstone Gout, Adrian recorded "only" 64,000 pigeons >SW. It seems likely that the wind direction (light northerly winds) was carrying the pigeons southwards away from the hills of S Wales and out over the Severn in Matt's direction.



Woodpigeons, Pen-y-lan (Gwent), 7 November 2011 Photo: Adrian Plant



***Woodpigeons over Pen-y-lan (Gwent) with the Severn estuary behind, 7 Nov 2011.
Photo: Adrian Plant***



Flocks of Woodpigeons stretching out over the Severn Estuary seen from Pen-y-lan, Gwent. The "smudges" on the photo (below the main flock and centre right) are very distant flocks.

Photo: Adrian Plant.

Good vismigging to all

If you want to get involved in visible migration, you can join the vismig newsgroup at <http://pets.groups.yahoo.com/group/vismig/> and check out recent visible migration counts and sightings at www.trektellen.org.

Acknowledgments

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