

Continental Black-tailed Godwit at College Lake – the first confirmed record for Buckinghamshire

By Lee G R Evans



Juvenile Continental Black-tailed Godwit, College Lake, Bucks, 11th July 2004 (Dave Bilcock)

Although a single Black-tailed Godwit had been reportedly present at College Lake, near Tring (Bucks) since Thursday 8th July 2004, it was not until Ben Miller saw it on Saturday 10th that news of its presence was widely learnt. Ben quickly realised that it was a juvenile and subsequently 'phoned in his sighting to Rare Bird Alert.

Chris Batty immediately realised that 10th July was exceptionally early for a juvenile Icelandic Black-tailed Godwit (IBTG) *Limosa limosa islandica* and followed up Ben's call in the hope that he may have obtained some images. At the same time he discussed the sighting with LGRE. Ben had left his camera behind but fortunately Mike Collard had arrived and he did get some record images. The bird was showing very well feeding on the edge of the main pool and could be very well observed from the reserve's Fitter Hide.

Within a couple of hours, Mike had got home and forwarded the images to CB. Although only of record quality, they were enough for Chris to exclaim that the bird was a clear *limosa*. He 'phoned LGRE back to confirm the identity and within 20 minutes he was in the hide enjoying excellent views of what was almost certainly the first confirmed record of **Continental Black-tailed Godwit** *Limosa limosa limosa* in Buckinghamshire. The bird showed well until at least 8.00pm and was still present on 11th. Dave Bilcock visited during the morning and obtained an excellent selection of images (see within).

The bird was extremely pale on the breast, being a pale orange-buff, with the warmth on the bird being restricted to the neck and unlike most *islandica*, did not extend on to the breast, lower breast, hindneck or flanks. Furthermore, structurally, the legs were extremely long and thin and the bill long and slightly more orange-pink on the basal third. Most juvenile *islandica* possess a characteristic rich orange-cinnamon wash to the breast and hindneck.



Juvenile Continental Black-tailed Godwit, College Lake, Bucks, 11th July 2004 (Dave Bilcock)
Note the overall plainness of the upper wing coverts and the lack of 'tiger-striping' on the tertials often shown by islandica. Also, the blotching on the mantle is much less marked.

In Britain, the first juvenile IBTG (*islandica*) start appearing in mid July (rarely from the first week of July and predominantly from 29th July), with the main surge moving down from mid August. By this time, groups of birds can be found from Lancashire and Northumberland south to Kent and Hampshire and west to County Wexford in Ireland. CBTG (*limosa*) on the other hand breed in small numbers in Britain (2 pairs in Lancashire and up to 30 pairs on the Nene Washes in Cambridgeshire) and in moderate numbers in Holland, Belgium and Germany and fledge up to three weeks earlier than the more northerly nesting *islandica*. Thus, being such an early date for a juvenile, the bird at College Lake was always going to be a good contender for *limosa* regardless of appearance.



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To appreciate the differences between juvenile *limosa* and *islandica* it is necessary to compare photographs of similarly aged birds at the same time of year. As *islandica* fledge some three weeks later on average, Chris Batty's images of juvenile *islandica* feeding on the Wyre Estuary (Lancs) on 18th August 2002 are an ideal comparison.

The plate below instantly portrays the difference in intensity of the breast and hindneck saturation. Juvenile IBTG is very rich in colour – a very bright cinnamon orange. Furthermore, note the very bold black centres to the mantle feathers, scapulars and upperwing coverts. The bills are also extensively bright pink to almost half the length.



Juvenile Icelandic Black-tailed Godwits, Wyre Estuary Lancs, 18th August 2004 (Chris Batty)



Juvenile Icelandic Black-tailed Godwits, Wyre Estuary Lancs, 18th August 2004 (Chris Batty)
These two images above show the more intricate differences in feather detail between the two forms. As shown above, many islandica show bright internal markings in the tertials, particularly towards the tips. On juvenile limosa these appear plainer. Note also the prominent dark centre to each mantle, scapular and upper wing covert.



Juvenile Icelandic Black-tailed Godwit, Wyre Estuary Lancs, 18th August 2002 (Chris Batty)
A further image showing the rich cinnamon neck and breast colouration of *islandica*. Note also how it extends on to the lower sides of the breast as well as on to the fore-flanks; this area is always whitish on *limosa*. Some of this cinnamon feathering can also be seen in the mantle and scapular feathers.



Juvenile Continental Black-tailed Godwit, Cley NWT, Norfolk, 11th August 2002 (Chris Batty)
Note the overall plainness of this individual, the lack of any rich cinnamon tones to the breast and neck-sides and the lack of bold patterning on the wing-coverts and mantle. The bill is long.

Cautionary Note: The Wash Wader Ringing Group kindly pointed out that adult *islandica* also have bright orange bills in mid summer and have variable amounts of breast barring – from virtually nothing to very heavy barring (*per* Kevin Sayer)

This colour distinction on the breast and necks of juveniles holds true for adults too. In fact, adult IBTG has much heavier patterned upperparts and more heavily barred underparts, as well as on average a much shorter bill. Adult male IBTG has ferruginous, burnt sierra or deep rufous-cinnamon underparts whilst the equivalent CBTG is more rose beige.

In spring and summer, adult *islandica* can safely be distinguished if the bill is shorter than 84 mm (males) or 101 mm (females), the tarsus is shorter than 71 mm (males) or 78 mm (females), the head, neck and upper breast are saturated bright rusty-rufous, at least 70% of the body-feathering is in summer plumage and the upper breast is unbarred rufous and the fore-flank barred black and rufous. These were the assumptions and conclusions made by Cees Roselaar and Gerrit Gerritsen after a study of specimens in the Netherlands.

These same two authors also conclude additional differences between adults. Much of the difference between the two races in extent of rufous colouration and amount of black barring can be explained by the extent of the moult into summer plumage. In *islandica*, the pre-breeding moult includes the whole head and neck, virtually the whole body and often a number of tertials, resulting in extensively black-and-rufous patterned upperparts and tertials and extensive black barring on white or rufous ground on underparts. In *limosa*, at least some and often many feathers of winter plumage are retained in summer plumage, showing as grey patches on upperparts and as a mixture of uniform white or pale grey between the black-barréd feathers of the underparts. The reason for this difference is likely to be that *islandica* breeds approximately one month later than *limosa*, allowing *islandica* much more time to moult.



Male Continental Black-tailed Godwit, Nene Washes, Cambridgeshire, June 2003
(Alan Clewes)



Male and female Continental Black-tailed Godwit, Nene Washes, Cambridgeshire, June 2003 (Alan Clewes)

Key identification features: long bill extensively orange at base; paler orange-cinnamon breast and neck intensity and less prominent barring on underparts.



Icelandic Black-tailed Godwit, Farmoor Reservoir, Oxfordshire, May 2002 (Nic Hallam)

A very interesting individual indeed, easily mistaken for nominate. However, as Ian Lewington kindly points out, it has transverse black and orange bands across the scapular feathers (these being predominantly dark in limosa with smaller more buff notches), the deep cinnamon-orange neck and breast are clear of barring unlike limosa which are generally less coloured and have barring extending on to the lower breast and the head pattern is 'burnt-out' by the saturation of the orange pigmentation, whereas in limosa the head pattern is more contrasting.

Icelandic Black-tailed Godwits: a selection of images taken by Sue Tranter.



This individual exhibits a full suite of *islandica* features: the relatively shorter bill, distinctly pale pink in colour, deep rufous head, neck and breast and heavily patterned upperparts. The stripey tertial feathers are also clearly obvious.





Note the patterning of the tertials and upperwing feathers of this individual.

IBTG breeds in very small numbers in Britain (1-2 pairs infrequently on Shetland and Orkney) and occasionally in NW Norway with the bulk of the population in Iceland and winters from the Ythan Estuary (Aberdeenshire), Eden Estuary (Fife), Montrose Basin LNR (Angus) and the Solway Firth (Dumfries & Galloway) south to the Wash (Norfolk) and South Coast (Kent west to Devon) and in Western France and south to Spain and Portugal. CBTG breeds across western Eurasia, principally in the Netherlands (50,000 pairs in 1999), Denmark, Germany and the former USSR and winters in large numbers in Africa, south of the Sahara, and also in Iberia.

Evans, L.G.R, July 2004, *Continental Black-tailed Godwit at College Lake – the first confirmed record for Buckinghamshire. Rare Birds Weekly: July 2004.*