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This is a short paper produced by Chris G Knox.

# Black-tailed Godwits Sub-Specific Identification & Status in the County

**BLACK-TAILED GODWITS**  
**SUB-SPECIFIC IDENTIFICATION & STATUS IN THE COUNTY**  
by Chris G. Knox



juvenile *islandica* Cresswell Pond August 2009

© Venetia Parkins

The Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* currently comprises of three subspecies, nominate *L. l. limosa*, the Asian race *L. l. melanuroides* and the Icelandic race *L. l. islandica*.

The nominate subspecies (*limosa*) breeds mainly in the Netherlands, but extends to central Europe to the river Yenisey in Russia. During winter this population migrates to southern Europe and sub-Saharan Africa aptly illustrated in 2009 when one of 15 fitted with transmitters had flown from the Netherlands to the West African state of Senegal within 72 hours - a distance of more than 4,600 kilometres

With breeding grounds scattered across Mongolia, north China, Siberia, and east Russian, the *melanuroides* population winters around the Indian Ocean and Australia; this subspecies has (thus far) not occurred in Britain. Icelandic Black-tailed Godwits (*islandica*) breed primarily in Iceland, with an outpost in the northern isles, and small numbers on the Faeroes and Lofoten islands. They do not breed until they are two years old and this race frequently over-summers as immatures and non-breeders throughout the UK. The winter range of this population extends from Britain and Ireland to the Iberian Peninsula and Morocco.

Globally, the Black-tailed Godwit has been classified as near-threatened mainly as a result of historical declines in its Continental European breeding grounds. Ninety percent of the North West European population breeds in the Netherlands but between 1975 and 2005 had decreased by 65% due to intensification of agriculture and subsequent loss of habitat. In central Asia the breeding population appears to be stable or fluctuating and in Iceland numbers are increasing although at 37,000-47,000 individuals this sub-population is only a small part of the global total (Birdlife International (2009) Species factsheet: *Limosa limosa*).

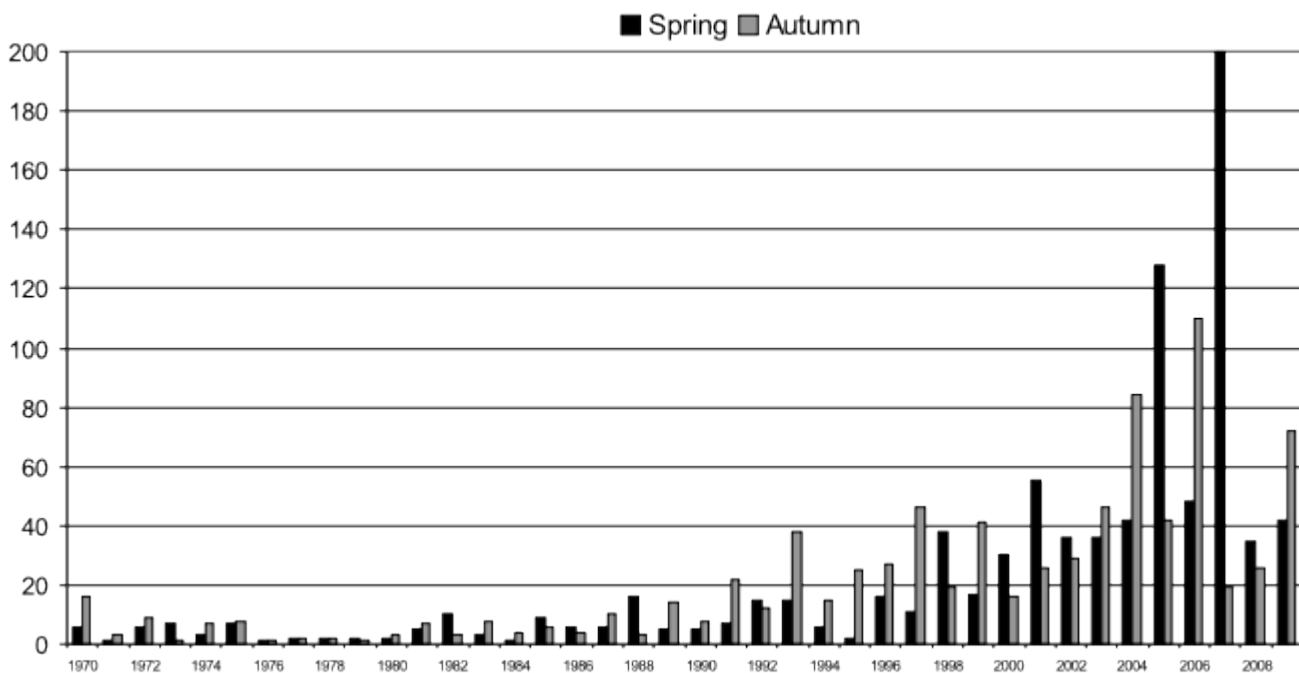
In the UK the species is Red Listed mainly because of a historical decline in breeding with nominate *limosa* now been confined to the East Anglian Fenlands and one or two other sites totalling some 62-63 pairs and a small population of 6-7 pairs of *islandica* confined to the Northern Isles (Holling, M et al. 2009. British Birds 102: 158-202).

The British population of *limosa* arrive back on breeding grounds by the end of March and have left for wintering grounds by the end of July; a single ringing recovery of an adult from Guinea-Bissau in November 1990 suggests that they winter south of the Sahara and to date there is no evidence of continental breeding *limosa* occurring on passage in Britain & Ireland (although see below re record from Tiree, Scotland). Confirmation that Black-tailed Godwits wintering in Britain & Ireland are of the *islandica* race is provided by the large number of recoveries and sightings of British-ringed birds in Iceland and of birds ringed in Iceland being subsequently recorded in Britain (The Migration Atlas pp323-325).



adult (centre) and four juvenile *islandica* Cresswell August 2009 © A. Gilbertson

Historically, Black-tailed Godwits were scarce birds in the county. Selby (1831) knew of only one record, Hancock (1874) a further four and Bolam (1912, 1932) could only account for an additional nine records. Most of these birds were autumn occurrences although a bird shot at Prestwick Carr sometime in 1831 was considered to be in full summer plumage. In recent decades, although undoubtedly increasing, the species remains an uncommon passage visitor that is rare in winter. The table below illustrates that peak passage counts during the 1970s & 1980s did not exceed 20. Throughout the 1990s counts increased (which mirrors the general increase in the *islandica* population during this decade) with the best being 46 in 1997. In the last few years the county has witnessed some very large counts culminating in a record of 200 in April 2007 while the autumn peak is 110 at East Chevington during July 2004. April continues to produce the largest flocks of Black-tailed Godwits which correlates well with the bulk of breeders arriving in Iceland between mid April - mid May. The second half of May and early June is considered late for *islandica* to be in England and it is thus presumed that these birds are non breeders. Wintering numbers remain small with a peak in January 2002 of 29 at the favoured Lindisfarne NNR.



**Spring & Autumn peak counts of 'Black-tailed Godwits' in Northumberland**  
 (Source: -Birds in Northumbria 1970-2008 & NTBC Monthly Bulletins 2009)

Research of the county annual reports *Birds in Northumbria* shows that it wasn't until 1996 that sub-specific identification of Black-tailed Godwit was first cited (two *islandica* on the Farnes: - *Birds in Northumbria* 1996) and since then reference to the races has been sporadic, mainly singling out *islandica* in flocks of spring passage birds. Reference to the nominate race *limosa* is rare: In May 1999 11 birds at Linton Pond and two at Holy Island were assigned to this race (*Birds in Northumbria* 1999) and in May 2000 it was noted that most birds recorded 'showed characters of the European race *limosa*' (*Birds in Northumbria* 2000).

Below is an overview of the sub-specific identification of Black-tailed Godwit.

### Adults

From spring through to early autumn most adult Black-tailed Godwits should be relatively easy to assign to race using a combination of size/structure, plumage characteristics and moult. In all plumages nominate *limosa* is bigger than *islandica* with a longer bill and legs; females of both races average longer-legged and -billed than males.

In spring, *islandica* appears more colourful and altogether brighter than adult *limosa*. As shown in the photographs below spring birds show a rich chestnut head, neck and upper chest, fairly extensive black-and chestnut patterned upperparts, tiger-striped tertials and, although variable, there is usually heavy barring on white or chestnut underparts. The bill has an extensive pinkish base which suggests that the yellow colouration is not acquired until birds reach the breeding grounds. Even adults in June (as shown below) can show a pinkish bill which may suggest that these late birds are non-breeders as the great majority of *islandica* have arrived on breeding grounds by mid May. These plumage characteristics also hold true for the first returning adult birds passing through the county from late June - August. Nominate *limosa* on the other hand completes its post-breeding moult earlier and essentially can look all grey by mid August.



three adult *islandica* Druridge Pools April 2002  
© Ian Fisher



adult *islandica* Holywell Pond April 1994  
© Ian Fisher



adult *islandica* Cley, Norfolk June 2005  
© Mike S Hodgson



adult *islandica* Hauxley NR May 2003  
© Mike S Hodgson



adult *islandica* Beehive Flash July 2006  
© Ian Fisher



adult *islandica* Budle Bay July 2003  
© Alan Gilbertson



adult male *limosa* East Anglia May 2004

© Dave Morris

Nominate *limosa* breeds on average one month before *islandica* which means they have less time to moult, as a consequence in spring *limosa* often show grey areas on the upperparts and grey between the black-barring of the underparts. The wing coverts on adult spring *limosa* often appear plain greyish lacking the patterned look of *islandica*. This results in nominate *limosa* looking less colourful and richer than *islandica*, with the head, neck and upper chest appearing a paler pinkish-orange and lacking the deep copper tones of *islandica*. In May 2001 during observations at Belmermeer in the Netherlands I wrote in my notebook of breeding *limosa* 'much more subdued and less bright than birds passing through Northumberland in spring' (*pers obs*). At all times *limosa* are structurally larger than *islandica* with a longer and broader-based bill, longer legs and wings which give the bird a rangier look. *limosa* in breeding plumage shows an orange-yellow base to the bill.



adult male *limosa* France March 2003 © Alan Fosse

### Juveniles.

Given their earlier breeding by the time the first juvenile *islandica* birds begin to arrive in Northumberland during August most *limosa* should already be moulting into first winter plumage. As adults in spring, juvenile *limosa* are generally a lot less colourful and a much plainer bird than juvenile *islandica*. Juvenile *limosa* have a very pale orange-buff wash on the neck and unlike most *islandica* this colour becomes vague or absent from the nape and flanks. In comparison most juvenile *islandica* possess an obvious orange wash to the breast and hindneck. The upperparts of juvenile *limosa* are much less patterned on the mantle, lacking the dark feather centres of *islandica* and generally looking much plainer, the wing coverts are less marked and the tertials and inner greater coverts lack the characteristic tiger stripes shown by *islandica*. The bill colour of both races is essentially pink for almost half its length though on average this is brightest on *islandica*. As adults, some juvenile *limosa* are structurally impressive with a deep base to very long bills.



juvenile *islandica* Cresswell Pond August 2009  
© Venetia Parkins



juvenile *islandica* Cresswell Pond Sept 2009  
© Mike S. Hodgson



juvenile *islandica* Cresswell Pond August 2004  
© Mike S. Hodgson



juvenile *islandica* Beehive Flash August 2009  
© Mike S. Hodgson



juvenile *limosa* Western France July 2006  
© Alan Fosse



juvenile *limosa* Suffolk August 2006  
© Brian Small



juvenile /1st W *limosa* Southwold, Suffolk August 2009  
© Brian Small



juvenile /1st W *limosa* Southwold, Suffolk August 2009

© Brian Small





juvenile/1st W *islandica* Shetland Sept 2008

© Colin Bradshaw

### First summer

It is not uncommon to observe 'grey' first-summer Black-tailed Godwits among colourful spring parties moving through the county. Structure aside, identification of 1st summer birds requires careful observation and knowledge of the moult strategies of the two races. The rule of *islandica* appearing the more colourful and brighter bird in adult and juvenile plumage is reversed in 1st summer when nominate *limosa* shows more colour and is more advanced in its moult of coverts and scapular feathers. This is clearly shown in the photograph below where *limosa* shows a pale pink / rose flush to the face, neck and upper chest and the moult of the wing coverts and scapulars are advanced when compared to the *islandica* which would be expected to moult through much later. The underparts of *limosa* can also be more boldly marked with black vertical bars, this feature clearly shown on the Tiree photograph below. *islandica* appears colder and an altogether greyer bird in 1st summer plumage with a lack of warmth to the face, neck and upper chest and almost uniform above. Note also on the *islandica* photographed at East Chevington the predominantly worn juvenile wing coverts with few if any new feathers



1st summer *limosa* Lesvos, Greece April 2009  
©Mike S. Hodgson



two 1st summer *islandica* East Chevington May 2003  
© A Gilbertson



1st summer *limosa* March 2002 France  
© Alan Fosse



1st summer *limosa* Tiree May 2009  
© John Bowler

### Winter

Assigning Black-tailed Godwit to race in adult winter plumage is near impossible and is essentially based on bill length and structure. It is however generally assumed from ringing recoveries that all wintering birds are of the *islandica* race, indeed in an East coast context, a study based on biometrics, bill length and ringing recoveries from the Eden estuary in eastern Scotland concluded that the 'bulk', if not all, of the wintering population at this site were of the *islandica* race (Ron Summers and Steve Moyes -1991).



presumed *islandica* Titchwell, Norfolk November 2006

© Colin Bradshaw

In conclusion, over the last few years or so I have (personally) tried to assign Black-tailed Godwits observed in the county to race, I've requested and scrutinised over 40 photographs of birds taken in the county at various seasons and this together with ringing data (details below) has led me to conclude that *islandica* is the default Black-tailed Godwit in Northumberland throughout the year and nominate *limosa* is very rare or remains unproven. This is indeed the situation throughout the U.K., with *limosa* remaining a very rare bird outside its limited breeding grounds apart from perhaps a small overspill in Norfolk/Suffolk each year.

To review past claims of *limosa* in the county given its conservation concern may be worthwhile, however, discussion with past members of the County Records Committee and *Birds in Northumbria* editors has highlighted that it was often (wrongly) assumed that *islandica* was the exception, and indeed most notes received assigning Black-tailed Godwits to race referred to *islandica* and not *limosa*.

The aim of this article has been to give an overview of identification to aid and encourage observers to try and assign the Black-tailed Godwits they observe in the county to a race and hopefully prove the 'true' status of nominate *limosa*. In recent years small numbers of *limosa* have begun to be coloured-ringed in England and a record of a leg flagged bird from Tiree in May 2009 (ringed in Holland) is currently in circulation by the Scottish Birds Records Committee (SBRC); this is likely to become the first Scottish record of *limosa*, thus they are certainly worth considering.

## Colour ringed Black-tailed Godwits observed at East Chevington early autumn 2005

Two birds ringed as adult males, one on autumn passage in England and the other on spring passage in SE Iceland were re-sighted in Northumberland in 2005 and their interesting re-sightings histories are shown below :-

Ringed 09/09/02 - Holbeach, Lincolnshire  
27/04/03 - Álftafjörður E Iceland  
30/04 - 05/05/03 - Álftafjörður E Iceland  
06/11/03 - Wexford Slobs, Eire  
04/01/04 - Wexford Slobs, Eire  
22/12/04 - Wexford Slobs, Eire  
27/06/05 - East Chevington, Northumberland

Ringed 03/05/03 - Álftafjörður E Iceland  
04/05/03 - Álftafjörður E Iceland  
05/05/03 - Álftafjörður E Iceland  
30/08/03 - Loire Estuary, W France  
28/10/03 - Ile de Ré, W-France  
07/03/04 - Pont de Noyal, Golfe du Morbihan, Vannes, Western France  
11/03/04 - Pont de Noyal, Golfe du Morbihan, Vannes, Western France  
14/03/04 - Saline du Petit Brouel, Sene, Golfe du Morbihan, Vannes, France  
13/07/05 - East Chevington, Northumberland

### Acknowledgements

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