Coastal birds

Have you ever wondered what species of bird you're watching at anchor? Genevieve Leaper helps to identify waders, herons, divers, seaduck and geese, plus the fish-eating sea eagle and osprey

Oystercatche
yachts in Can
harbour, Hebr

When I was a child, my family's boat lived on a mooring in Chichester harbour. At high tide we were surrounded by a huge expanse of water thronging with dinghies and windsurfers. As the tide went out our world shrank until there was barely swinging room in the narrow creek between the mudbanks. As the mud appeared – 1200 hectares of it in Chichester at low tide – so did the birds, a great variety of waders from stately curlew to diminutive dunlin.

Mud – glorious, glooey, glistening mud; we may see it as a nuisance when squelching through, dragging the dinghy back to the water after misjudging the tide, but to the birds it's a banquet table. The fine sediments that form in sheltered intertidal areas are full of food including tiny snails, cockles, mud shrimps, crabs, ragworms and lugworms. The UK's long and varied coastline has a lot of estuarine habitat – good for sailing and great for birds. Indeed our coasts are of international importance for many waders and waterbirds.

Growing up I took the multitude of waders for granted, not really appreciating how lucky we were to get close up views from the boat while most birders were peering through telescopes from a distance. The redshank is one of the commonest and most ubiquitous species, recognised by its long, orange bill and legs. But the patterns of its plumage are so subtle I'd never noticed how beautiful this familiar bird is until one weekend when we were anchored in our favourite haunt at Newtown on the Isle of Wight.

Wonderful waders

While enjoying a quiet early morning swim I came within a few feet of a redshank feeding at the shoreline, close enough to see the detail on every feather.

Most waders have similar mottled patterns as they nest on the ground and rely on sitting still and not being seen. Their eggs and young are also camouflaged, the chicks balls of fluff with disproportionately well-developed legs so they can scatter and hide if danger approaches.

Adults making a lot of noise or feigning a broken wing are trying to distract your attention from their vulnerable offspring so it is kindest to move away.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Genevieve Leaper has been sailing and bird-watching all her life. She worked for the Nature Conservancy Council for several years, carrying out seabird and cetacean surveys all round the UK. She now sails mostly around the west coast of Scotland and in Greece.

Waders can
found on exp
coasts and sh
inlets, on san
shingle beach
muddy harbo
you probably
purple sandp
for exposed r
place to anch

Several spe
coasts, oyste
nesting on th
lapwing prefe

A number o
from Arctic b
knot and san
migration, lik
smaller cous
term 'winter
– many turn
onwards so t
the sailing se
time to see le

Oystercatchers and yachts in Canna harbour, Hebrides

ABOVE Redshank *Tringa totanus* and Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*
RIGHT Black-tailed godwit *Limosa Limosa*

'We may see mud as a nuisance when dragging the dinghy back after misjudging the tide, but to the birds it's a banquet table'

Waders can be found on exposed coasts and sheltered inlets, on sand and shingle beaches as well as muddy harbours. One species you probably won't see from a yacht is purple sandpiper, given their preference for exposed rocky coasts – not the sort of place to anchor or sail close inshore.

Several species breed around British coasts, oystercatcher and ringed plover nesting on the beach while curlew and lapwing prefer nearby fields.

A number of other waders visit in winter from Arctic breeding grounds, such as knot and sanderling, or pass through on migration, like whimbrel – the curlew's smaller cousin – and greenshank. The term 'winter visitor' is a little misleading – many turn up on our shores from July onwards so there is plenty of overlap with the sailing season. Late summer is a good time to see less familiar birds and some will still be in their breeding plumage, generally more colourful than the greys and whites of winter. With juveniles and in-between plumages adding to the confusion, identification can be tricky.

Dunlin and golden plover have conspicuous black bellies in breeding plumage, which are lost in winter when they move to the coast after breeding in the Scottish and Scandinavian uplands.

Distinctive beaks

Even experienced birdwatchers often find waders a challenging group, but at least some of the common and widespread species are distinctive.

There is no mistaking the boldly marked black and white oystercatcher with its bright red bill. One of the most characteristic features is the beak.

Plovers have short beaks, others, like redshank and godwits have very long bills to probe deep in the mud.

The curlew has the longest bill – so long its tongue does not reach the end – with a distinctive downwards curve.

Unsurprisingly it's all about food and different feeding methods. The oystercatcher's long and sturdy bill can be used as either hammer or chisel to open shells – which are more likely to be cockles than oysters.

The turnstone is well named, though it's just as likely to be found rummaging under a tangle of seaweed with its a medium length, multi-purpose tool. Turnstones are not fussy eaters, they feed on anything from sandhoppers to carrion and have even been observed eating a bar of soap.

The elegant avocet sweeps its long, upcurved bill from side to side through muddy water, locating hidden prey by touch. Although the avocet is probably better known from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) logo than real life, Poole harbour is among the best places to look, being one of the main sites for wintering avocets.

Those beaks are more sophisticated tools than they might appear, equipped with mechanoreceptors in the tips which are sensitive to vibration and movement.

Waders have more of these receptors than most birds. All that repeated stabbing in wet sand or mud creates pressure waves, which are distorted by solid objects like a shell. The receptors in the bill sense these changes so the bird can detect prey even without touching it.

The waders have some of the most evocative of bird calls. Anyone who visits the coast has probably heard the two note flight call of the redshank. The lapwing is known to many as peewit from its call and the curlew is another that calls its name. The curlew also has a melodious bubbling song while the oystercatcher is less musical, with a voice to match its bold plumage – a loud, persistent piping.

Colonial herons

The largest of wading birds, although not related to the waders, are the herons. The familiar grey heron is found on rivers and lakes, as well as all round the coast.

Curlew ***Numenius arquata***

Photos by Genevieve Leaper

Oystercatcher and Redshank flock foraging on mudflats at sunset, Montrose Basin, Angus

'I've always had mixed feelings about the brent goose as the spectacular arrival of these Arctic breeders heralds the end of the sailing season'

Heron feeding tactics of waiting and watching are the exact opposite to the busy probing of waders, they can stand motionless for ages before stabbing at a fish. Herons are colonial and usually nest in trees but on tree-less Scottish islands they sometimes nest on low cliffs.

The little egret is a small heron with pure-white plumage. This elegant bird is a recent arrival, first breeding on Brownsea Island in 1996 and rapidly increasing in numbers in the south and east.

It is not just waders that appreciate the mud and shallow waters. Familiar wildfowl like the mute swan and mallard can be seen in harbours, swimming from boat to boat hoping for handouts. A number of ducks breed in freshwater habitats but are dependent on coastal waters outside the breeding season and some are truly marine. Grazers and dabblers are found in the shallows while diving ducks may be several miles out to sea.

Wigeon are pretty little ducks with pale foreheads. Our small breeding population, which nest inland, is augmented by migrants and they gather in flocks of thousands to graze on eelgrass and other grasses on mudflats and saltmarsh.

The little egret *Egretta garzetta* is a small heron with pure-white plumage

Shelduck are largely coastal year round, favouring muddy estuaries. Our largest duck is very distinctive with mainly white plumage set off by a dark green head and chestnut breast band. They are usually seen in pairs and unlike most ducks the sexes are similar. They nest in holes, particularly rabbit burrows, so it doesn't matter that the female is conspicuous.

Seaduck

The true seaduck are all diving ducks, such as the red-breasted merganser which breeds from Scotland to north Wales and is widespread around all coasts in winter.

Mergansers are fish eaters while eiders dive for shellfish, especially mussels. Eiders spend more time at sea than some so-called seabirds and can be found in sheltered estuaries or exposed rocky coasts. There are large colonies in eastern Scotland and also Walney island, Cumbria.

In Northumberland the eider was called 'cuddy duck' from an association with St Cuthbert. In April the males display in courtship flocks, throwing their heads back to call – a surprisingly unduck-like 'ooHoo-oo'. As in many ducks, the male is smart and colourful while the female is mottled brown – no prizes for guessing who does all the incubation duties. While the females are busy raising young, males moult into drab 'eclipse' plumage, which is almost all black in the eider. Nesting on the ground, eider ducks are vulnerable to predators. I'm sure I see more ducklings in Canna harbour since the rats were eradicated. I have found nests in sea caves while kayaking and once found a nest at the top of a 30m cliff – I could only wonder how she would get her ducklings to the water.

Greylag geese *Anser anser* in flight

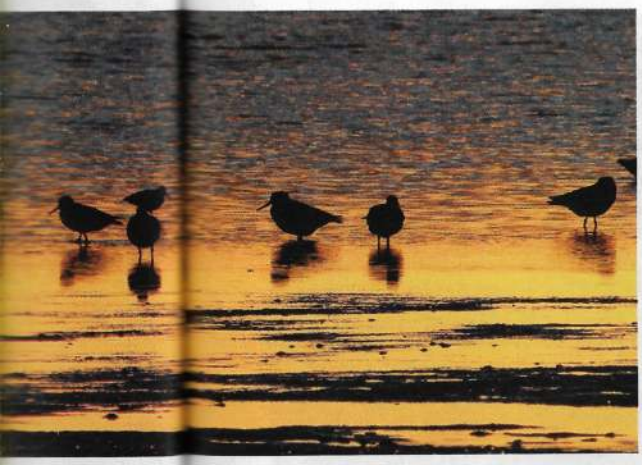
Ducks generally lay large numbers of eggs, as survival rates of young are not good, but if you see a huge brood of eider ducklings they probably belong to several females. There is safety in numbers from joining together in crèches.

As with waders, there is a greater variety of seaduck to be seen outside the breeding season, including goldeneye, scoters and the beautiful long-tailed duck. These are all diving birds which may be found well offshore, common scoter sometimes in flocks of thousands. The Moray Firth and Firth of Forth are very good for diversity of species.

Summer's end

One bird I always have mixed feelings about is the brent goose. A flock of geese wheeling down to land is among the loveliest of wildlife spectacles. But the arrival of these Arctic breeders in early October is an inescapable sign that summer is over and the sailing season coming to an end.

In Chichester harbour, as in most of Britain, we saw dark-bellied brent geese from Arctic Russia, while Irish sailors are more likely to see the light-bellied



Cut out and keep

sub-species from Canada. These days, living on the east coast of Scotland, it is pink-footed geese I hear arriving in autumn, while for others it might be barnacle or white-fronted geese that herald the change of seasons.

Native goose

Our only native breeding goose is the greylag. A pair of greylag leading a flotilla of goslings is a common sight from the south coast to northern Scotland in summer. In west Scotland they are native but populations elsewhere have established from released birds. The larger Canada goose was introduced from North America.

If you see a bird similar in shape to a cormorant, with a long body low in the water, but a bulkier head and neck, it might be a diver. As the name suggests they are good underwater swimmers, catching fish with a dagger-like beak.

Of our three species, the red-throated diver is by far the most numerous and widespread. Red-throated divers breed on freshwater lochs and lochans in northern and western Scotland but feed in coastal waters. On a summer evening, their mournful wailing call adds to the atmosphere of many a remote Scottish anchorage or you might hear a duck-like quacking as they fly overhead. For several years a pair frequented Canna harbour – which was a puzzle as there are no freshwater pools on the island.

For many sailors, the best chance to see divers is outside the breeding season when they are found around all UK coasts, often miles offshore. Unfortunately, they are all rather dull grey and white in winter plumage and difficult to tell apart. The shape of the head is one feature to look for.

Great Northern? was my favourite of Arthur Ransome's books; how I envied the Swallows and Amazons their Hebridean adventure involving rare birds and an old pilot cutter. Although the story isn't entirely far-fetched, the great northern diver does not nest in Scotland. However, in spring some wintering birds moult before leaving our shores for Iceland or North America.

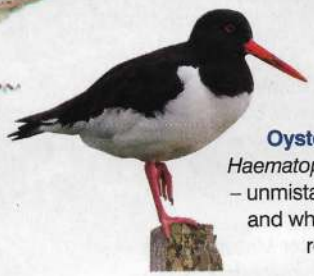
I first saw this very handsome bird in full breeding finery when leaving Loch

WADERS

Genevieve Leaper

AGAMI Photo Agency/Alamy

Curlew *Numenius arquata* – largest European wader. Brown with long legs and long down-curved bill



Mike Lane/Alamy

Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* – unmistakeable; black and white with long red bill

Ringed plover *Charadrius hiaticula* – small with short bill and black and white, banded face

Mike Lane/Alamy

Ed Brown Wildlife/Alamy

Our Wild Life Photography/Alamy

Redshank *Tringa totanus* – medium sized, long orange legs and bill. white trailing edge to wings in flight

Mike Lane/Alamy

Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* – small but robust with tortoiseshell plumage and orange legs

Roy Waller/Alamy

Phillip Cull/Alamy

Dunlin *Calidris alpina* – our most abundant shorebird is one of the smallest. In breeding plumage reddish brown back and black belly. Winter plumage grey and white

Arterra Picture Library/Alamy

Paul Miguel/Alamy

Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* – dark green back, black and white head with crest, rounded wings

John Eveson/Alamy

HERONS

Toby Houlton/Alamy

Little egret *Egretta garzetta* – a small white heron with black bill, black legs and yellow feet

Life on white/Alamy

Grey heron *Ardea cinerea* – a familiar large bird with long legs and long neck which is folded up in flight. Juveniles are dull grey without the black and white markings of the adult

Robin Chittenden/Alamy

DUCKS AND GEESE

Kit Day/Alamy

Eider *Somateria mollissima* – large, heavily built duck. Adult male black and white. Female mottled brown

Arterra Picture Library/Alamy

Brent goose *Branta bernicla* – a small, dark goose, similar to shelduck in size. More coastal than other geese that winter in Britain

Arterra Picture Library/Alamy

Common scoter *Melanitta nigra* – male black, female dark brown. may be found well offshore in very large flocks

Mike Lane/Alamy

Wigeon *Anas penelope* – smaller than mallard, a dabbling duck unlikely to be seen far from shore. Male has pale yellow forehead on brown head. Female duller brown

Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* – mainly white with dark green head, red bill and chestnut breast band. Often seen in pairs, male and female similar

Arterra Picture Library/Alamy

Red-breasted merganser *Mergus serrator* – long-bodied diving duck with long, thin bill. Male colourful with dark green head, female mainly grey with chestnut head. Often seen in pairs

DIVERS

Mike Lane/Alamy

Red-throated diver *Gavia stellata* – long body, head usually held with bill turned slightly upwards. In breeding plumage appears quite dark with grey head, much paler in winter

Steve Young/Alamy

Great northern diver *Gavia immer* – larger and more heavily built than red-throated diver with steep forehead and heavier bill. Distinctive black and white pattern with stripes and spots in breeding plumage

BIRDS OF PREY

Rebecca Cole/Alamy

White-tailed or Sea eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* – larger than golden eagle, which can also be seen on Scottish coasts. Huge rectangular wings more than 2m across. Only adults have the white tail, and also a pale head

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* – easily recognised at close quarters by white head with dark eye-stripe. Pale underneath. Similar size to herring gull but with longer, narrow wings and habit of hovering over water

Arterra Picture Library/Alamy

Cut out and keep

Ailort for an early season cruise. The Sound of Gigha is a hotspot, but keep an eye out anywhere on the west coast of Scotland in May.

Winter variety

Although there are many birds to see at all times of year, there is no doubt that winter is the best time for numbers and variety.

I discovered the riches of Chichester harbour out of season when I started windsurfing as a teenager. My brother and I decided that our new sport was a year-round activity and demanded weekends on Hayling Island long after the yacht was tucked away in the boatyard. The harbour was almost empty of boats but, along with the thousands of brent geese, there were flocks of waders, unfamiliar ducks, divers and grebes. The Solent harbours are small-scale compared to major estuaries like the Ribble, Morecambe Bay, Thames, Humber, Severn and Solway Firth. The Wash alone holds 400,000 waterbirds.

If your boat stays in the water, it's well worth getting out on those cold bright winter days. Or if you are working on the boat, taking binoculars down to the shore for a break might turn up a few surprises. When inland waters freeze, kingfishers move to the coast. That flash of brilliant blue is a cheering sight on a grey day.

Birds of prey

And we do have two fish-eating birds of prey. I enjoyed one of my most exciting birdwatching experiences in Chichester harbour when I was aged 11. My younger brother and I had just been allowed to sail our Mirror dinghy by ourselves for the first time. In late August, while making the most of our new-found freedom, we saw an unfamiliar, striking bird flying across the mudflats. We hurried back to the mooring to tell Mum we had seen an osprey. She didn't believe us; 'ospreys only live in Scotland'. So imagine our delight when the bird flew past a few boat lengths away, snatched a fish from the surface and settled on the boom of another moored yacht to eat its lunch. My mother was right that ospreys nest in Scotland (there are now also a few England and Wales) but they migrate to Africa for the winter and are not above stopping for a spot of fishing on the way. They mostly breed beside freshwater lochs but there are one or two coastal nests in southwest Scotland.

Eagle revival

Back then in the 1970s I would never have thought it possible to see the largest of European birds of prey – the white-tailed or sea eagle – on the Isle of Wight. When I was born, sea eagles had long been extinct in the UK. However, by the time I started sailing in Scotland, there was an expanding population on the west coast from the successful reintroduction on Rum. These days I would be disappointed to sail around the Hebrides and not see an eagle or two. While I know some good

Eider males and females on a wave-swept rock in Aberdeenshire, Scotland

'I was thrilled to watch an eagle circling overhead – though it was awkward trying to train the binoculars while steering and trimming the sails to a fluky wind'

places to look, I love it best when one appears unexpectedly. Last summer I was thrilled to watch an eagle circling overhead as we sailed through the narrows of Caol Rona in Inner Sound – though it was awkward trying to train the binoculars on the bird while steering and trimming the sails to a fluky wind!

And now sea eagles are being reintroduced to the Isle of Wight, with a number of juveniles released since 2019. It is an appropriate location as the last pair in England bred here on Culver Cliff in 1780. The osprey reintroduction to Poole harbour is also going well with a pair breeding last summer (2022) – though others have defected to Wales. It will take a while to establish a healthy breeding population but it is wonderful to think that ospreys and sea eagles may become familiar birds to the next generation.

Our impact

Sadly though, some of our common coastal birds may become less familiar. Our breeding wader populations have declined drastically. The UK holds nearly a quarter of the world curlew population, but we have lost two thirds of our curlews since I was a child. Numbers of wintering birds have also decreased.

There is a complicated mix of factors involved. Habitat is lost as shorelines are built up, including harbours and marinas. Dredging and anchoring damage underwater habitats. Our wonderful coasts are very popular for recreation, both ashore and afloat, which can lead to disturbance. Birds may lose valuable feeding time or waste energy flying when disturbed from high tide roosts. The good news is that sailing is generally a low disturbance activity. Birds tolerate a closer approach by boat than on foot and are more likely to be flushed by people walking on the shore, especially with dogs. Fast, noisy powerboats and jetskis are another matter and boat wash can also cause erosion.

The coast and estuaries suffer pollution from both land and sea. Nitrates from farmland are washed down rivers, oil spills from shipping and fishing debris are washed up on the shore. There is still raw sewage entering the sea and even treated waste water is contaminated with pharmaceutical products and other chemicals. Modern antifoulings are less toxic than TBT but copper biocides are not harmless. As if the ubiquitous microplastics weren't bad enough, there is the recent alarming discovery (PBO, September 2022) that sediments in Chichester harbour are contaminated with glass fibres from boatyards or disintegrating hulls. The extent of the problem is not yet known but the microscopic fibres found embedded in the flesh of snails and other invertebrates will surely have an impact throughout the foodchain.

Some are very big problems that require complex solutions. However, there are simple actions we can all take, like slowing down near shore to reduce wash and disturbance, taking care not to spill fuel and avoiding cleaning products containing phosphates, chlorine and bleach. The Green Blue website (**thegreenblue.org.uk**) has advice. Perhaps you could do a beach clean, and when going ashore in quieter places and remote islands be mindful of ground nesting birds, especially if you have a dog. Or row the dinghy rather than using the outboard every time? PBO

Greylag pair *Anser anser*, with goslings

RECOMMENDED READING

- ***Collins Bird Guide, The most complete guide to the birds of Britain and Europe***, Lars Svensson, Harper Collins
- ***British Bird Sounds on CD, The Definitive Audio Guide to Birds in Britain***, Ronald Kettle and Richard Ranft,
- **british-birdsongs.uk**
- **discoverwildlife.com/how-to/identify-wildlife/**
- ***Great Northern?*** Arthur Ransome
- **thegreenblue.org.uk**