

Review of the Week: 18 December 2023-1 January 2024

In the first Review of the Week of 2024, we'd like to wish all BirdGuides readers a Happy New Year – may it be an enjoyable and bird-filled time for all of you. As festive fortnights go, 2023 proved an especially stormy one, and as such the sightings page felt pretty quiet at times as howling winds and torrential rain curtailed birding efforts over Christmas. However, New Year's Day is always a big day in the birding calendar and the 2024 edition of the busiest yet for BirdGuides – an incredible 850 reports were sent by the sightings team during the day.

Despite the often awful weather conditions, the past two weeks has seen a significant shift in the distribution of **Waxwing** around Britain at least. Birders in southern counties might have been starting to wonder if the birds would ever reach them – but reach them they did. Quite what generated it is a bit of a mystery, but there was a clear southward push in the days leading up to Christmas and good-sized flocks were noted in several south-coast counties. It's really only Dorset, Devon and Cornwall – as well as parts of south-west Wales and southern Ireland – that have not yet fully prospered from this winter's arrival. At times, Waxwings were making up a quarter of the daily output on the sightings page, which demonstrates the species' prominence (and perhaps the lack of other birds to look at too!).



Waxwing, Islandmagee, Antrim (Ian Dickey).



Waxwing, Ilkeston, Derbyshire (Glyn Sellors).

There were one or two good finds made during the fortnight. An **American Robin** in an undisclosed Caithness garden on 20th unfortunately proved a very brief visitor. A **Dark-eyed Junco** in Co Wicklow was similarly untwitchable, for news only came to light on 19th that it had been seen two weeks previously and not since.

But, rarity wise, it was probably the male **Baikal Teal** at Greylake RSPB, Somerset, that was the most significant find in Britain. This species has gone from extreme rarity to a semi-expected near-annual winter visitor in recent years, and indeed the Somerset bird is presumably the same individual seen at the same site in winter 2021-22, its absence last winter likely explained by Welsh sightings between January and March 2023.

Baikal Teal, Greylake RSPB, Somerset & Bristol (David Chislett).

In a similar vein, the appearance of a male **Ferruginous Duck** at Thorpe Park, Surrey, for a day in mid-December presumably related to the bird's present there in winter 2021-22, although this time it wasn't so obliging and wasn't seen again by the end of the year. At least one **Ferruginous** continued in the Norfolk Broads and a male at Idle Valley NR, Nottinghamshire, was reliable from Boxing Day onwards.

It was a good two weeks for **Lesser Scaup** all told, with no fewer than 12 at large across Britain, including a new drake in Orkney and the flock of five in north Devon. A single male was in Ireland, at Knockaderry Lake, Co Wexford. After several bountiful winters, it's turning out to be rather more mediocre for **Ring-necked Duck** this year, although totals of 19 in Britain and 10 in Ireland were reasonable enough. The Essex **Canvasback** hung around at Abberton Reservoir throughout, giving very decent views at times. Abberton also held up to three **Smew**, with a total of 58 birds nationwide including a peak of 12 at Eyebrook Reservoir, Leicestershire.

Lesser Scaup (right) with two Greater Scaup, Bosherton Lily Ponds, Pembrokeshire (Richard Stonier).

Five **American Wigeon** were seen during the fortnight, including a new male at Newshot Island, Clyde, on 28-29th. In fact, Scotland had three of the five, with the exceptions being continuing males in Northumberland and Cambridgeshire. **Green-winged Teal** just about made it into double figures in Britain, with 11 recorded between Highland and Cornwall, and only two were reported from Ireland. It has hardly been conducive to searching for rare seaduck in the incessant storms, so it was no real surprise that the two **Surf Scoter** at Carrick Roads, Cornwall, were the only members of their species regularly reported, with one seen off Ferry Ness, Lothian, on 1st.

First-winter **Red-breasted Geese** remained with Dark-bellied Brent Geese in North Norfolk and Essex, while adults continued with Barnacle Geese in Northumberland and on Islay, Argyll. The adult, possibly of suspicious origin, hung around at Martin Mere WWT, Lancashire. The only other **Cackling Goose** aside regular birds in Co Sligo and Co Mayo was one with Canada Geese at Lunt Meadows, Lancashire. **Black Brant** were seen in Dorset, the Isle of Wight, Kent and Essex. Two or three **Snow Geese** roamed Scotland. In a poor year for grey geese, the number of **Tundra Bean Geese** on offer nationally could be counted on one hand.



Red-breasted Goose, Holt, Norfolk (Matthew Mellor).

It's also been a pitiful winter so far for white-winged gulls, and while the slight increase to approximately 40 **Iceland**, 30 **Glaucous** and two **Kumlien's Gulls** was welcome, a nationwide influx doesn't feel imminent. One or two adult **Ring-billed Gulls** were in Cornwall and the regularly returning adult was at Strathclyde Loch, Clyde; only three adults (one in Co Dublin and two in Co Cork) could be found in Ireland. The Mount's Bay area of Cornwall also hosted up to two first-winter **Bonaparte's Gulls**, with two (an adult and a first-winter) on offer in Co Antrim. The **Azores Gull** was back in Co Mayo on 23rd after its visit to Killybegs earlier in the month.

Iceland Gull, North Shields, Northumberland (Fozzy).

Three **Lesser Yellowlegs** remained present and correct, with birds in East Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and Suffolk all on show. In East Sussex, the **Long-billed Dowitcher** was reported regularly from Cuckmere Haven, as was the regular **Kentish Plover** at Burnham-on-Sea, Somerset. A juvenile **American Golden Plover** was a surprise New Year's Eve find at Wexford Wildfowl Reserve.

Lesser Yellowlegs, Frampton Marsh RSPB, Lincolnshire (Tony Davison).

The **Double-crested Cormorant** at Doon Lough, Co Leitrim, extended its already lengthy stay in the area, but it's notable that there haven't been any reports of the Galway Bay **Forster's Tern** this winter – the first time it hasn't been seen in the area since 2003, presumably indicating that this long-lived celebrity has shuffled off its mortal coil.

Norfolk's returning **Pallid Harrier** continued along the north coast near Warham Greens throughout the fortnight, while the juvenile proved mobile around Burry Inlet, Glamorgan. In Co Wexford, the **Northern Harrier** was reported twice – once at Tacumshin and once at South Slob. The only confirmed **Rough-legged Buzzard** of the festive period was one at Rosedale Abbey, North Yorkshire, on Boxing Day.

Pallid Harrier, Llanelli Wetland Centre WWT, Carmarthen (David Ord).

One of the most popular birds of the Christmas break was the male **Black-throated Thrush** at Tophill Low NR, East Yorkshire, which was reported most days and gave decent views at times. An extraordinary nine **Little Buntings** were seen together on the outskirts of Penzance, Cornwall, on 21st, with smaller numbers either side of that day – this discovery must represent one of the stories of the winter. A **Pallas's Warbler** at Warham Greens, Norfolk, was a surprise on 18th, lingering to Boxing Day at least. Only five wintering **Yellow-browed Warblers** were seen, all along the south coast between West Sussex and the Isles of Scilly.

Black-throated Thrush, Tophill Low NR, East Yorkshire (Mike Barth).

Seven **Great Grey Shrikes** included the Lincolnshire bird being pinned down and another found at Budby Common in neighbouring Nottinghamshire on 31st. A possible **Coues's Arctic Redpoll** was seen again at Fontburn Reservoir, Northumberland, but it was a little surprising there were no others reported given the high incidence of **Mealy Redpolls** this winter.

Great Grey Shrike, Doddington, Lincolnshire (Paul Daubney).

A male **Eurasian Penduline Tit** at Lough Beg BWI NR, Co Cork, signalled that at least some of the group seen last winter had returned. **Shore Larks** were seen at only three sites, with regularly reported birds in Norfolk and Northumberland. A **Hoopoe** was noted at Caerwys, Flintshire, on 28th, with the Derbyshire bird seen again at Swadlincote on 22nd.

Western Palearctic

Cape Verde continued its good form with a fine **Abyssinian Roller** discovered on Sal on 31st, with the **White-faced Whistling Duck** also still hanging around there. In the Canary Islands, two **Sudan Golden Sparrows** were seen on Gran Canaria and a **Magnificent Frigatebird** was photographed north of Lanzarote on 21st.

Abyssinian Roller, Santa Maria, Sal (Uwe Thom).

In Portugal, a first-winter **American Herring Gull** was a nice find in the Algarve at Vilamoura on 29th. Nearby, four **Rustic Buntings** were photographed at Quinta da Vala on 27th – part of a significant number found in southern Iberia so far this winter, with at least five in neighbouring Spain at La Janda, Andalucia, where there were also 15+ **Little Buntings**. Meanwhile, Spain's second **White-throated Sparrow** was near Barcelona at Sant Cugat del Vallès on 28th.

France's first **House Bunting** was a shock discovery in Grenobles – if accepted as wild, it'll be the most northerly record yet of a species which has recently bred in Spain for the first time. The pair of **Ross's Geese** hung on in Belgium, where a male **Baikal Teal** was found near Oudenburg.

In Denmark, the **Northern Harrier** stuck around at Frøstrup, as did the **Pacific Diver** at Hantsholm and the **Stejneger's Scoter** off Zealand. Lastly, Israel's first **Pacific Diver** was a shock discovery at Eilat in the final days of 2023.

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