

**FIELD CRAFT**

Winter Waders

Taking the first ID steps

▲ You can narrow down wader ID using a bird's size and shape alone.

Su Gough, Training Manager, shares some of the secrets to identifying wading birds. She says "I've loved identifying birds from a very young age but as I grew up and started to venture further afield I encountered species I wasn't familiar with. Most were great fun to spot and learn how to identify but there were two groups I quietly ignored for years – warblers and waders – as I felt they were just too 'difficult'. Little by little I started adding these species to my repertoire and slowly grew in confidence. I realised that waders were not a group to fear and, as birds are so easily observed 'on the deck', if learning bird songs and calls is not your thing, here is a group you can tackle pretty successfully without!"

At this time of year there are just under 30 common waders in the country and none will be sporting their stunning summer finery; most will be shades of cryptic brown and grey. Where do you start? As always there are a series of key things to take into account, of which plumage detail is only one. Our first step is to reduce the number of potentials that we will have to consider to make the job of identification easier.

CLUES IN THE SURROUNDINGS

Really helpful things to think about include where you are. If you flush a brown wader from woodland, it is almost certainly a Woodcock rather than one of the snipes which will be found on grassland or marshes. If a bird is running

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▼ Left, the male Ruff in its distinctive breeding plumage. Right, the male in non-breeding plumage as more commonly seen in the UK.

The confusing case of Ruff

Ruff are frequently illustrated in their amazing summer plumage, but this is rarely seen in its full glory in the UK, and not at all in late summer and autumn when these birds are most likely to be encountered on freshwater pools moving through in number on passage. The problem arises in that there is great variability in the plumage, colours and size of individual Ruffs, with females (Reeves)

being somewhat smaller than the males, and details such as leg colour varying from dark, through greenish, yellow, to orange or even pink! More than any other, Ruff is probably the cause of misidentifications of 'rare waders'. How can we confidently identify such a variable bird? Experience and familiarity do help, but the key – as with so many – is a combination of features, starting with overall structure. Ignoring colours, we have a medium-sized elegant, if somewhat pot-bellied, wader with medium-length legs, mid-length subtly down-curved bill and, critically, an apparently too small head for the size of body. These features alone should be enough to clinch the ID. In autumn Ruff is a common bird, so if I am looking at a similar but unfamiliarly coloured wader, rather than getting excited about spotting a Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper or something even rarer, I should be asking myself "Why isn't this a Ruff?" first.



along the surf line, consider Sanderling, whereas a superficially similar looking bird sitting on wave-wracked rocky shores is more likely a Purple Sandpiper. A flock of waders with Lapwing in an arable field are most likely Golden Plover not Grey, which are found on the coast.

The species that are left may seem more daunting but we can help ourselves by realising that waders fall into a number of groups sharing similarities

Size is important. Is it small like a Dunlin, medium-sized like a Redshank or large like a Curlew? Compare any unknown bird back to these three familiar ones. If it is large it is only going to be one of four species: the two godwits, Whimbrel or Curlew itself. Even

when you do take colours and markings into account we can reduce the number of unknown species by firstly being aware of the really obvious species, such as Oystercatcher, Lapwing and Avocet.

The species that are left may seem more daunting but we can help ourselves by realising that waders fall into a number of groups sharing similarities. Curlew is a familiar species, but Whimbrel shares family features, such as the long, downward curved beak. With just two potential species you can now concentrate on the finer plumage and structural differences between them, with the use of books or BTO ID videos.

TIMING COUNTS

Getting to know waders' timings can also help point you to the most likely species. For example, a well-marked plover in November is only going to be a Ringed Plover as the similar Little Ringed Plover is a summer migrant.

We have already made significant progress on identifying this fascinating group of birds, and have barely mentioned colours and markings! We will be looking in more depth at the concepts described here, and how to focus on key plumage features in future articles. ■

Wader help

We already have nine 5-minute ID videos concentrating on separating waders to help you.

- ▶ Curlew/Whimbrel
- ▶ Shanks (Redshank, Greenshank and Spotted Redshank)
- ▶ Wood Sandpiper/Green Sandpiper
- ▶ Knot/Dunlin
- ▶ Grey Plover/Golden Plover
- ▶ Sanderling/Curlew Sandpiper (Dunlin)
- ▶ Snipe/Jack Snipe
- ▶ Ringed Plover/Little Ringed Plover
- ▶ Bar-tailed Godwit/Black-tailed Godwit

These all concentrate on the features you should be able to see in the field such as size, structure and habitat as well as plumage.

We will be producing more ID videos, but if there are any species you struggle to separate from others, please do let us know and we will add them to the list!

www.bto.org/bird-id