



Thorndon Birdlife

Dec 2022-Jan 2023

As we move into Autumn our satellite-tagged male Cuckoos are arriving at their wintering grounds in the tropical rainforests of equatorial Africa. Twelve birds set off from the UK earlier this year carrying a tag and five have so far perished along the way. One never made it out of Europe, three were lost to the Sahara and another has been lost since. Of the other seven, one is still in the Sahel, two are in Nigeria and the other four have already reached the Congo Basin where they are likely to spend the winter, good luck to them all.

One newly tagged Cuckoo this year is called **Ripple** and I think we will follow him for a year just to see how he does. Over the last few weeks Ripple has departed Burkina Faso and moved briefly into Niger before flying over Benin and into Nigeria. He is now in the far east of Nigeria with the latest update showing him on a heading for Gashaka-Gumti National Park, Nigeria's largest National Park and one of Africa's "Important Bird Areas" This is the first year Ripple has been tracked so it will be interesting to see where his wintering grounds are.

I have just received an update on Autumn migration with the headline "Here they come UK birdwatchers! Strong departure of birds on bird radar in the Wadden sea, all heading towards the UK" These were mainly Thrushes and Redwings and a few Redpolls flying through the night. The Wadden Sea stretches from Den Helder in the northwest of the Netherlands, past the great river estuaries of Germany to its northern boundary at Skallingen in Denmark, a total area of about 10,000 sq. miles.

The Lesser Redpoll (*acanthis cabaret*) is a small passerine bird in the finch family Fringillidae. It is the smallest, brownest and the most streaked of the redpolls and I have caught and ringed many in my garden. Many of this species migrate further south in winter, but the mild climate means that it can be found all year round in much of its range and may be joined by the other two redpoll species in the winter. The three species in question are Lesser Redpoll, Common Redpoll and Arctic Redpoll – and these can be tricky to distinguish, Lesser are by far the most frequently seen. Despite their name, commons (also known as Mealy Redpolls) are much scarcer in the UK, with numbers arriving in autumn and winter varying considerably between years. Most Common Redpolls are encountered in the east of the UK. Arctic Redpolls are sporadic visitors and are very rare in the UK. The Lesser Redpolls have a red forehead (from which the name 'redpoll' is derived and mature males have a red on the breast. During the breeding season, a peachy-red colour extends down the throat and neck of males, and to a lesser extent in females. Both sexes have black streaking on their backs and have a small black chin.

In Lesser Redpolls the colour of the back, flanks, wing-bars and cheeks are a rich to creamy brown, which gives this species a 'warm' appearance. Common Redpolls are slightly larger and have a 'colder' appearance, with their base-colour being whiter. Larger than Lesser Redpolls, Arctic Redpolls resemble frosty Common Redpolls and have dinkier beaks. The rump of an Arctic Redpoll tends to be un-streaked, unlike Lesser and Common Redpoll. There is a degree of variation in the appearance of all redpoll species and some birds remain unidentifiable even in the hand of a bird ringer. Lesser Redpolls that breed in the UK often stay here over winter although internal flights are common, with birds breeding in the north travelling south or south-east in pursuit of milder conditions. Some leave the country altogether during autumn, journeying south towards Belgium, France and Holland especially if high numbers or scarce food resources make life here too tough. Look out for this delightful bird which is now sweeping into the nation's gardens, including yours. This finch, which is much smaller than its cousins the Chaffinch, Greenfinch and Goldfinch, is making the most of modern garden bird foods, particularly Nyjer seed, so let's keep those garden bird feeders full.



Above: Two Lesser Redpolls caught and ringed (under Licence) in my garden.

Garden sightings: Quite a few Blackbirds, Mistle Thrush, Song Thrush, Buzzard, I've yet to see a Redwing but the orchard is full of apples waiting! And lots of Tits on the feeders.

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