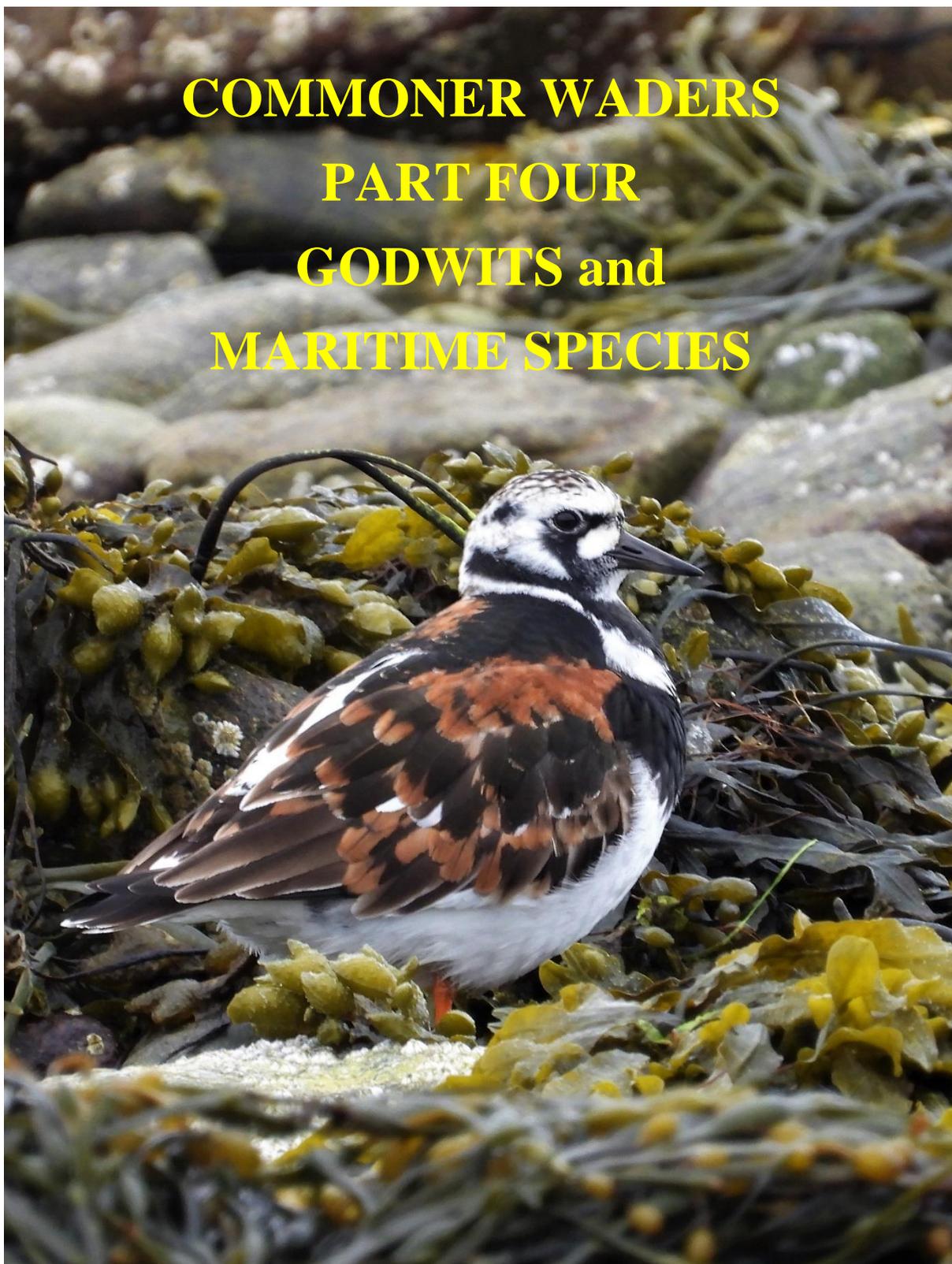


COMMONER WADERS
PART FOUR
GODWITS and
MARITIME SPECIES



Steve Holmes

The UK can boast of an impressive list of 78 species of wader, though only 18 breed. Of the remainder, more than 40 are very rare migrants and thus fall outside our scope here. Personally, I've seen 59 in UK and on a World basis, I'm actually only 'missing' two, which are both now considered extinct (Eskimo Curlew for certain and Slender-billed Curlew almost certainly, though one reported in France in 2020). Species such as **Oystercatcher** and **Avocet** are not included since they have absolutely no confusion species and 'commoner' equates to common hereabouts.

Whilst all the ID help anyone might need is widely available in books and the Internet, what follows is invariably written in 'plain', hopefully easy to understand language, with minimal use of any technical, possibly confusing body part terms.

Black-tailed Godwit: Year round breeding resident but relatively common winter resident, when flocks can exceed 1,000 in places. Just as likely inland as on the coast.

Gregarious, large, long-legged wader. Legs **black**, 'knee joint' at their **mid-point**. Long, invariably straight, mostly **orange or pink bill**. Marked difference between breeding and non-breeding (including when juvenile) plumage; the situation is further clouded through the presence of two subspecies, both of which can attain summer plumage before departing. Red listed "**Limosa**" from Europe and the amber listed Icelandic form "**Islandica**". Juvenile *limosa* is dark above with a **pale orange head throat and breast**. In adults, both subspecies show bold patterned upperparts with rusty head, neck and breast down to the legs. *Islandica* is **overall darker orange below**, which can lead to confusion with Bar-tailed Godwit but for the **bill shape and leg structure** and the presence of **barred flanks**.

In flight, **obvious white wingbar**, broadening towards wing-tip. **White rump, black tail and dark back**. Groups fly in close formation, executing tight manoeuvres as one. Call is a monotonous chatter, especially when in groups.

Bar-tailed Godwit: Amber listed winter visitor from Siberia, relatively common in some areas, such as the Dee Estuary and north Wirral shore. **Rare** inland.

Slightly smaller than Black-tailed, possibly down to the legs, which are **dark/black** with the **knee joint above half way**. Bill as long, **clearly upturned, blackish** in summer plumage but at other times resembles Black-tailed. Adult summer plumage dealt with above but winter birds are wholly different, appearing **frosty greys above, white below**. Some adults will already be like this when they arrive in September, others will be retaining some or all of their summer plumage. Infuriatingly, shows more black feathering at the back end so the unwary may think Black-tailed before looking at the bill.

In flight, **unmarked wings**. **White rump** extends in a **triangular shape well up the back**. Tail **barred brown and white**. Can thus be confused with Curlew at distance but bill will assist in separation. Not often heard but is a repeated "**kik-ik-ik**".

Knot: Our estuaries are one of the UKs strongholds, where they can be **quite common**, if not so common as 20-30 years ago. **Very uncommon inland**.

Medium sized. Certainly larger than both Dunlin and Sanderling with which they regularly associate. Adult plumage is attained in some birds before they depart away in late spring, when the throat, breast and belly to the legs varies between **brick-red** in some individuals to **peachy orange** in others, possibly age related. Shortish, stocky **black bill** and **green-olive legs**. Adult upperparts are **plain mid-grey**, pale **whitish below**. Juveniles however quite stunning, particularly the upperparts where most of the

feathering is **pale grey**, fringed with **darker grey AND white**. See photo, right of four juveniles. Underparts (belly) regularly shows a pale **peach-coloured hue**.

In flight, massed ranks produce a Dunlin/Starling murmuration effect where the plain grey upperparts contrast with white underneath to produce a stunning spectacle. Wings show a **clear bar, thickening towards the wingtip** and a contrasting **paler grey rump**.

Call is a single “**wet**” though if hundreds of bird are in choral mode its multiples of the same!

Sanderling: Nothing like as common as Dunlin or Knot and **most migrants pass through** our area on their way elsewhere. Prefers sandy beaches; inland records **very rare**.

Small, but still larger than Dunlin. As with Knot, returning birds in spring (early May) will be showing dark orange head and upper breast of summer plumage, when the whole upperparts are a combination of **black, orange and white**. Underparts **white in all ages**. Legs **black**. Winter adults are pale grey above with white edged feathers; **dark eye stands out** well. Juveniles more like a chess board above, with **dark to black centred, white edged feathering**. Some degree of a **dark shoulder** too as seen in the photo to the right.

In flight, prominent **white wing-bar** on otherwise quite dark wings. Rump **dark grey**, white-sided. Head is the palest part of all, moreso from October when the dark headed juveniles will have moulted to become whiter.

Call is a tuneless “**twik**”

Watching feeding Sanderling is something recommended, as they follow even the smallest wavelets out, have a few moments prodding around, before being obliged to sprint away from the next incoming wave. Should said wave be larger than anticipated then the rate of running retreat increases to suit! Rarely flies to escape getting wet. At low water regularly attends the tide-line, hunting for invertebrates there.



Turnstone: Approximately twice as common as Sanderling, though still unusual hereabouts away from the north Wirral shore and Hilbre islands hence **rare** inland. A bird of **rocky shores, and islets**, where they can do as their name suggests.

A relatively small yet stocky wader who's main plumages phases (breeding/non-breeding/juvenile) are so **radically different** as to suggest two species. An adult as shown on the front cover is a spectacular looking bird with the combination of **orange, black and white** upperparts unique. Upper breast **black**. **Bill shortish, triangular shaped. Underparts pure white at all ages.** Males not safely distinguished from females despite overall similar appearance due to moult-related variations. Non-breeding adults and young birds superficially the same, though adult upperparts show more suffused white areas.

Unmistakable in flight, being either the colour combination of adults mentioned above or through being dark overall with **white obvious wing-bars, back, shoulders and tail base**. Typically flies low over the water at which time calling is frequent, a repeated "**chik-chik**" which can become a continuous trill. Mixes with other species, including Purple Sandpiper, which, even in a combined flock are readily separable since Purple Sandpipers are relatively plain above.

Purple Sandpiper: Scarce winter visitor that has bred in Scotland on very rare occasions. Included here due to the small populations regular on Hilbre and the north Wirral coasts (though conceivably they are one and the same). **Shares the same habitats as Turnstone** but less likely to be seen away from them. Inland records are thus **very rare**.

Small (same size as Turnstone) dull-looking **squat** wader, dark greys and browns above appearing uniform at distance. Plain **mid grey-brown head; shortish tapering bill** with an **orange-yellow base**. Legs **short**, variably **yellow-ochre to dull orange** in colour. **Some grey streaking** on otherwise **all white underparts**. First winters show **paler fringes to wing coverts** than adults. Breeding plumage rarely (if ever?) seen hereabouts that its omitted here.

In flight, overall appearance is dark, with **conspicuous whitish wing-bar** and **black rump**. Similar to Turnstone, **flies low over water**. Call said to be a weak "wit" – something I've not knowingly heard.