

TRACKS & SIGNS

Colourful feathers: Jay wing feathers

Identification of individual feathers found on the ground can be a difficult and confusing art. However, some feathers are very distinctive. In coming months we will look at some more subtle feathers, but this month we will start off our feather odyssey with a look at one of the most prized feather groups of any British bird.

Jays are birds with an amazing feather coat of many colours, but it is their blue wing feathers which are undoubtedly the most beautiful (and easy to identify). The blue feathers form a patch at the front leading edge of the folded wing, more obvious in flight, which comprises the greater covers, the alula and primary coverts, all around the bend in the wing.

They vary in size (and, to an extent, pattern) depending on their position on the wing, but all share lovely iridescent electric blue and black stripes. Search for them on woodland floors. They are unmistakable.



Mike Read / Alamy

Calum Dickson / Alamy

FLPA / Alamy

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

LESSER REDPOLL

The Lesser Redpoll is a small, brown, streaky finch with a black bib and a red patch on its forehead. It is, of course, this red patch which gives the bird its redpoll name (poll being an older name for head). They are the smallest 'type' of the redpoll complex, and are mainly found in the UK and adjacent Western European areas.

Once upon a time, they were included with most others as the species Redpoll, within which they were regarded as a subspecies. But the species was 'split' relatively recently, so we now have Lesser Redpoll and Common Redpoll (this confusing name includes the Mealy Redpolls and Northwestern Redpolls). In addition, there are the Arctic Redpolls, which to add to the confusion, some regard as at least two taxa, Hornemann's (Arctic) Redpoll and Coues's (Arctic) Redpoll.



BUNTING IN NUMBERS

860

Girl Bunting territories, all in Devon and Cornwall



250K

Pairs of Reed Buntings in the UK

2

700K

Yellowhammer territories in UK

Number of accepted UK records of Indigo bunting

19

Length in cm of a large Corn Bunting



FIELD CRAFT

FROZEN FARM FLOCKS

In winter, many of our small, seed-eating birds flock together to forage on the ground. Often, they will seek out stubble fields or other arable farmland where there is still a supply of fallen seed of various types. In times of deep freeze, as are common in February, large flocks may gather. These may include some unexpected gatherings of, for instance, Sky Larks or Corn Buntings. But, the usual contenders will be Linnets and Chaffinches. Don't be surprised if they are joined by Reed Buntings, Yellowhammers, Greenfinches, Goldfinches and perhaps Bramblings.



Linnet

dpa picture alliance / Alamy

NEWTOWN

SITE STATS

Waders and wildfowl on a tranquil estuary setting



TOP TIP
Lug your scope – this is a 'you never know' place, and you'll regret leaving it behind

GRID REF: SZ 422 904
POSTCODE: PO30 4PB
HOW TO GET THERE: You need a motor car and if arriving for a week's birdwatching from the mainland – and why not – approach from the Lymington to Yarmouth Wightlink Ferry route. You'll be able to drive through the New Forest on the way! Newtown is well brown signed north off the A3054 to Newport.
PARKING: Free at the Town Hall Information centre or on lanes away from field entrances.
TERRAIN: tarmac lanes and potentially muddy public paths. All level.
ACCESSIBILITY: Excellent as the walk could be split into tiny strolls. Much of it is suitable for wheelchairs too although some off-tarmac areas would be a 'heave'.
PUBLIC TRANSPORT: Buses could drop you on the A3054 and that would only add a mile at each end of the walk.
FACILITIES: Bring a snack, no shops for quite a distance, pub of repute in Shalfleet, toilets in the National Trust car park.
WEBSITE: iowbirds.awardspace.com
MAP: OS Explorer OL29, OS Landranger 196.

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THE SALTMARSH HERE is probably the most interesting part, but local birdwatchers either dip in or out of that or, like me, they go for a walk.

Low tide is best here, as the wading birds afford good views and can be numerous both in quantity and in type. Thirteen or 14 different species is not difficult to obtain here in season. Walking the muddy path alongside the tapering estuary after parking may produce several wader species, Little Egret and a raptor or

two while the hedges beside the path up to the town hall are good for passerines.

Taking the road right allows a pleasant walk through small meadows with interesting flora and birds, like Song and Mistle Thrush, three species of tit, Jay, finches including Linnet and the two bigger woodpeckers.

Walter's copse is reached and takes you to a lovely spot to scan Clamerkin lake. It's not a lake but an arm of the Newtown River. Waders are more distant on the saltmarsh but a Kingfisher is likely. Retracing by lane to the 'village' a shorter yet more productive walk heads north to where a large hide overlooks Clamerkin and the coastal scene. A walk around some pools over a wooden bridge rewards with close views of waders at low tide and Meadow and Rock Pipit, too.

ALASTAIR RILEY



Kingfisher



Rock Pipit

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KEY SITES

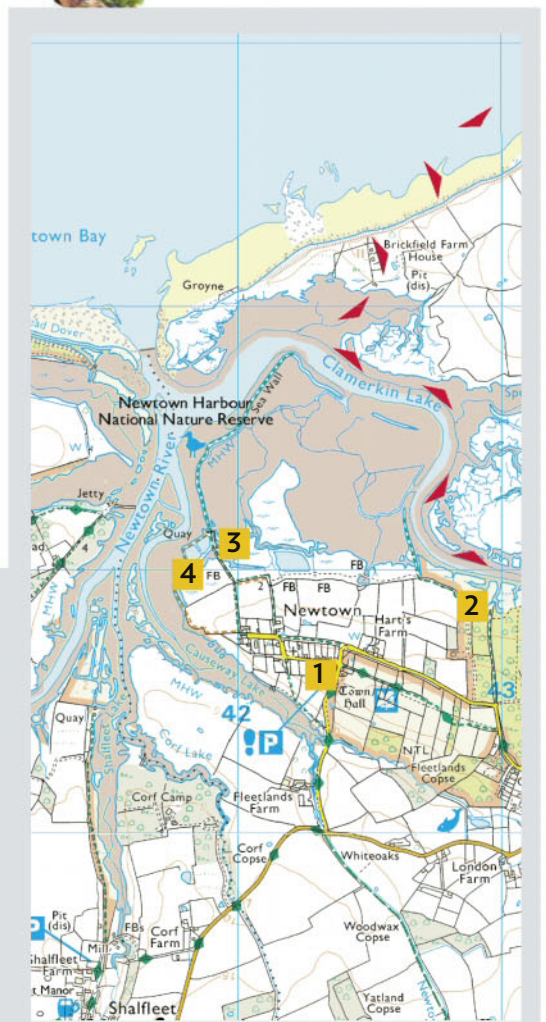
1 Park at SZ 422 904 and scan the creek at low tide. Curlew, Black-tailed Godwit, Redshank and Little Egret here and maybe from October Lapwing and Golden Plover too, sometimes on the backdrop meadows. Gulls will include Mediterranean.

2 Pass through the village checking every hedge line, warblers cling on here and I saw 4 species in the last week of October. The small meadows at SZ 428 907 are always interesting even if the wood is less so. Attain the lookout area SZ 430 910 to set up your scope. Shelduck, Brent Geese,

Kingfisher, egrets and in winter grebes, merganser, maybe a harrier.

3 retrace into and past the village for a different look over the saltmarsh either from the hide at 421 911 or from beside the black shed where low tide reveals a small productive spit with Turnstone, Greenshank, occasional Ruff and Little Stint, pipits and wagtails.

4 Return to your car by walking around the two enclosed saline lakes and keep looking over the Newtown river estuary.



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