



January is the best month to see the peak numbers of overwintering wildfowl and waders, especially in Britain's estuaries. Waders migrate here, building up in numbers here by mid-December and stay through January into February.

Duck increasingly arrive through the late autumn, on through December to be at their peak now, before numbers start dropping as some begin to leave in February onwards.

With geese, those from Greenland and Iceland arrive first in September and October, but those from Russia reach their peak numbers from Christmas into the early part of January when in most years they are moved onto the UK by bad weather conditions in Europe.

To stand in the early morning on the shores of the Wash well wrapped up against the chill air, and to hear the constant conversations of pink-footed geese is wonderful. When they lift off the distant estuary mud and take to the air in their thousands, flying low overhead to go a little inland to graze, it is unbelievably exhilarating. These massed take-offs dictated by the rising tide is one of the really fantastic avian spectacles at this time of year that take place in Britain.

In England big numbers of pink-footed geese can also be found in Morecombe Bay, but their main mid-winter stronghold is in central and southern Scotland.

Our smallest goose, the Brent, overwinters as 2 races, the Dark-bellied that visit the south-east and the pale-bellied stay in the north-east of England. During our winter around half of the world's population of dark-bellied Brents can be found in the estuaries of south-east England, from the Wash to the Solent, particularly around Essex.

When the Brents arrive in the autumn they feed especially on eelgrass on the estuarine mud, but from December they transfer to feed on grass and cereal shoots over the sea walls.

One duck species that grazes on grass like geese is the wigeon. Like the Brents, the traditional diet of wigeon was eelgrass on estuarine mudflats, but they have moved more to grass and sprouting winter wheat. They can be found mainly in feeding flocks around the coast but also at the side of many inland water areas. The males have a distinctive cream-crown on their chestnut head atop a pink chest and grey body. Wigeon are present all year, but their numbers are dramatically higher over midwinter.

A far less colourful duck that prefers freshwater, even when near the coast, is the gadwall. It has the same grey body as the wigeon without the bright head, but it does have a speculum of brown, black and white. The speculum is the secondary wing feathers from the wing's trailing edge, and as female duck of many species are drab (so that they are less visible when nesting) it is the colours of the speculum that can allow identification. In the case the gadwall it is useful for identifying the species even in the drab male.

Whilst few gadwall migrate to Britain, the large colourful shelduck (white, chestnut and black body) arrive in large numbers on our coast for the winter, as do the small equally colourful teal (male with chestnut and green head).

As the tide creeps up towards the shoreline, it gathers up the mixed flocks of feeding waders.

For many newcomers to trying to identify coastal waders the commonest overheard comment is that they are all grey and similar! In reality you can quite quickly get your eye in (especially if you invest in binoculars and spotter-scope), but it helps to look for the obvious ones first! Black and white waders with bright red bills are oystercatchers. The very large waders with rounded, curved-down bills are likely to be curlew, while at the other extreme our most abundant small wader seen in flocks is the grey and white dunlin. You are more likely to see dunlin than anything else, so it helps to recognise their very slightly down-turned black bills.

As you step back from the coastal edge you will notice those valiant early flowering lambs-tail like catkins of hazel in hedgerows and coppiced woodland. Perhaps it is their remarkable appearance catching the light when much else looks bleak that made our ancestors consider it a magical plant.

At their feet may be found the equally remarkable snowdrop, that appears so fragile, yet its suspended-lantern shape protects its pollen from the worst of the weather.



Snowdrop