

NETHERLANDS

WINTERING LESSER WHITE-FRONTED GEESE

28th - 30th December 2016

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I. INTRODUCTION

This was a short and very rewarding trip to enjoy the bounty of the winter goose spectacle as well as a wintering 1st-year male Pine Bunting and the superb bonus of a wild Bufflehead. Ironically, I failed to see two of the 'plastic' species, Black Swan and Bar-headed Goose, neither of which are as easy as I had thought, but this was more than compensated for by the sight of wild, wintering Lesser White-fronted Geese – a species I've wanted to see since my early days visiting and scanning the goose flocks at my local Slimbridge in the winter months. The Netherlands is a joy to bird in. The superb national birding website – Waarneming.nl – is in my view well ahead of our own news services in terms of its clarity and use of GPS. It is a superb tool for keeping on top of birds. Birders are friendly and helpful, roads are excellent and the lovely older farmlands of Texel still exhibit one of the best sharing arrangements between birds and farmland now visible in western Europe.

II. SPECIES NOTES

Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus*

This superb pocket goose, breeding from Scandinavia eastwards into Russia, is extremely difficult to encounter on its breeding grounds, where it is both shy and vulnerable to disturbance, and therefore finding birds on their wintering grounds in Europe is the best way to enjoy the species. There seems to be some lack of clarity as to the 'origins' of the geese in the Netherlands and it's worth setting this straight. The population that winter in the Netherlands is from a wild, source population in Sweden. The situation is well-reviewed by Kees Koffijberg & Erik van Winden (www.sovon.nl). Whilst the Swedish population has been bolstered by a small number of releases, which have rewilded into the existing population, this renders the majority of the geese 'originally' wild, for those who worry about these distinctions, and the rest of the same level of wildness as a Scottish white-tailed eagle. In addition, a slightly larger number of birds winter in the Netherlands than are known to breed in Sweden, and these are believed to be of rewilded Finnish and North Norwegian stock. The migratory route between Scandinavia and the Netherlands has apparently been established for centuries, probably far longer, and therefore the majority of any wintering flock in the country can be deemed truly 'wild'.

In recent winters, a clear pattern has become established by birds arriving in the Netherlands, with activity focusing on just two major sites which are, largely, used in chronological succession. On arrival from late November and into the first week of January, the prime wintering site is the **Oudeland van Strijen** in Zuid-Holland. Meaning 'Old country of Strijen', it consists of a small number of very large, undrained fields of rough pasture, an ancient farmland habitat that has been little-modified. In this regard, you need to be extremely specific when searching for the birds, as they do not venture into typical 'green' fields synonymous with modern agriculture. The prime site for observation is at the south-west corner of the site. Park at Walewag (51.749875, 4.530918) and carefully scan the fields *north* of here (focused on 51.751445, 4.532180). The entire flock is genuinely tight-knit but can vanish into the hollows of the field entirely. Fog is a big issue here too. If you fail here, drive very slowly along the single track Vlamsewag, due north (51.755966, 4.527766). If no luck, continue to the crossroads, circuit the site, and repeat as before. It took me 2 days to see the birds, but I was rewarded with stunning scope views of 23 birds, in one flock, on 29 December, in the south-west corner, from Walewag, as described above, when the fog lifted.

By early January, the birds are starting to move towards Pettenpolder. This is a larger site but also easier to observe, with slightly raised roads and flatter fields making observation of whatever birds are present easier. During my visit, I scrutinised many Eurasian White-fronted Goose flocks without one bird, but was subsequently told the entire flock (41 in 2016) was at Oudeland. To explore Petten, do the following. At Camperduin, drive as far north as the southern end of De Putten and take the road, Camperwag, inland (52.731886, 4.644442). Follow this road as it winds north, with the prime area to explore being the fields inland from de Putten (from: 52.739550, 4.653210). Head slowly north then loop back inland east. The wider area can hold birds but these old, wet fields are the focal point. By following this strategy, it should be possible to locate wild Lesser White-fronted Geese in the Netherlands. They are absolutely worth the effort and cracking birds.

Tundra Bean Goose *Anser serrirostris*

The island of Texel is home to an amazing number and diversity of wild geese, with every species except the LWFG represented in winter, including a small number of Red-breasted Geese. Of some note, at least from a British perspective, was a flock of no fewer than 50 in a field along 'Postweg' on North Texel (53.124086, 4.830481). Taiga was also present during my stay. 5 birds were also noted at Petten (see above).

Black Brant *Branta (bernica) nigricans*

This extremely smart and distinctive goose had eluded me on several Norfolk winter trips, and indeed has excellent credentials as a species in its own right, with distinct plumage and geographical status: the late Martin Garner certainly made an excellent case for this. In any case, I was very glad to finally enjoy superb views of a bird, standing out a mile (albeit at close range) in the winter sunshine, feeding with Dark-bellied Brents at Der Cocksdoorp on Texel (53.074883, 4.869514). Birds winter annually on the island.

Snow Goose *Anser caerulescens*

A white-phase bird was reported regularly throughout the winter at the Anthoniepolder in Zuid-Holland (51.792948, 4.538579) and sure enough I found the bird there feeding with Barnacle Geese. Whilst there was no firm indication this bird was of feral origin, I was rather unsettled later in the day, just a few kilometres away, to find five more 'tame' snow geese on their own, in a similar habitat. Eventually I removed this bird from my own life list, and subsequently saw a very wild, very wary blue-phase bird on the Moray Coast in Scotland. There is no doubt that wild snow geese probably do reach the Netherlands, but the Netherlands has quite a serious infestation of feral geese and it's worth being aware of this during the winter months.

Bufflehead *Bucephala albeola*

This extremely smart American vagrant gave superb views with Tufted Ducks in the suburban setting of the Gaatken-Plas (51.846210, 4.493778) in the south of Rotterdam. The bird has been considered by the Dutch Rarities Committee and deemed to be wild, and has returned for two successive winters, only, to the same area. There is quite a lot of hiding room here and when not visible from here, it was often being located, on some days, in the wider channel to the south (viewed from 51.842363, 4.497081).

Alexandrine Parakeet *Psittacula eupatria*

Having embarrassed myself by failing to locate either black swan or bar-headed goose, the slightly rarer of the 'plastic' species showed well in its favoured haunt of the Voldelpark, in Amsterdam. Rather prettily, it was snowing at the time, and the sight of a clearly freezing parakeet, with its gaudy colours, in the Dutch winter lent a surreal twist to the viewing. It is probably best to park in one of the small roads off the S106, such as Frederiksstraat (52.357539, 4.859504). Follow the canal path west and into the main park (52.355707, 4.856278). Listen for the calls and explore this area and you should not go wrong. 2-3 other Amsterdam parks, probably more by now, hold the species but Voldelpark is the most reliable.

Pine Bunting *Emberiza leucocephalos*

Pine Buntings are found with regular regularity in winter in the Netherlands and, associating with 'carrier' flocks of yellowhammers, can often remain at a single site for good periods of time. This was my first priority on arrival in the Netherlands and the bird was located in the stubble fields at Den Hoorn, Texel (53.020950, 4.737119). The bird was extremely flighty on arrival, taking 3.5 hours to find, but eventually showed extremely well feeding at the edge of a stubble field. The whole wider farmland was alive with birds, including excellent populations of tree sparrows.

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