

Twite?

Novice birders often bemoan the presence of the archetypal “Little Brown Job”, not without good reason, as such generally non-descript species can be difficult to identify, the more so if they are infrequently encountered.

The Twite (*Linaria flavirostris*) is just such a problem bird for many. In recent years the numbers wintering in Kent have declined dramatically; I can still recall seeing flocks numbering hundreds in the county in the early 1970's and during the years I lived in Ramsgate there was a pretty regular group of 30 – 50 on the saltmarsh at Pegwell Bay each winter.

Now I sometimes see small groups on the saltings there, but the last time I saw the species in Kent was a group picking grit off the roadside at the Pfizers roundabout on the Sandwich By-pass, hardly a typical location! Even so, the records committee still receives a number of submissions each winter, not all of which satisfy the critical attention necessary for inclusion in the KBR.

Sometimes Twite forsake the foreshore and join straggling groups of linnets on farmland not too far from the sea, especially when local food sources attract concentrations of small birds. This can prove problematic for observers not too familiar with the species,; Twite are typically streaky brown finches and look superficially like both Linnets and Redpolls.

A look at some of my older field sketches can help to understand the important field marks. Firstly, separating Twite from Redpoll should not present too much of a problem; Redpoll typically feed in trees or on the ground underneath them. I have never seen a Twite in or under a tree! Further, Redpolls normally show both a black bib and a red patch of varying size on the forehead, both features never shown by Twite. The Redpoll in winter has a two-tone bill, dark upper mandible and yellow lower, and it is noticeably long and pointed for a finch.



Twite field sketch, Pegwell Bay December 2007



Linnet field sketch, Grove Ferry, October 2003

When comparing Twite and Linnet the key feature to look at is the head end. Twite in winter show a head, face and upper breast washed with an ochre yellow colour (sometimes described as mustard or even curry-colour). They also show a stubby yellow bill. By contrast, Linnet in winter can be a variable species depending on age and gender, but typically show a greyish-fawn head with a prominent paler short supercilium and eyering. More especially, they always show a more substantial, longer and decidedly blue-grey bill.



Adult Linnets, two males on the left, female on the right, Grove Ferry, October 2002

Adult Linnets of both sexes tend to show a relatively un-streaked russet (male) or warm brown (female) mantle, which contrasts with the greyer head, nape and face. First winter birds of both sexes tend to be more streaky both above and below, but still exhibit the grey- toned head and nape, as well as the blue-grey bill.

Much is often made in field guides of the relative amounts of white on both wings and tail; generally Linnets show more white in both areas, Twite less so, but first winter linnets can be surprisingly dark in the wings and tail. Likewise, the books remark on the 'pinkish rump' of the Twite; in winter this feature can be very hard to see and both females and first winters seldom show it clearly. Adult males might show it more prominently at the end of the winter when feather wear reveals the paler feather bases.

Finally, locating Twite in the first place is largely down to learning their characteristic call. Books describe a nasal "twaaaitt", which does little to convey the quality of the call, but once heard, never forgotten!! A useful resource is :

<http://www.xeno-canto.org/species/Linaria-flavirostris>



Summary: typical winter Linnet (L) and typical winter Twite (R)



Winter Twite, by RB Smith

Also a very useful reference for novice birders is the BTO site:

<https://www.bto.org/about-birds/bird-id/identifying-linnet-and-twite>

Twite colour-ringing schemes are running in Wales, Scotland, Ireland and the Isle of Man. Linking these together allows for Twite monitoring to be put in context against the whole of the Britain and Ireland. To this end, a group was established to share findings between the various regions. Each region has a unique combination of rings (in England, for example, the metal ring is on the left leg with another colour ring, and two further colour rings on the right leg), or a small coded ring which is easier to read in the field than the 'standard' BTO metal ring.

In England we use a combination of blue, yellow, green, red, orange, black, white and pale blue, as well as carmine (hot pink) and silver (mid-grey); these last two are unique to the Derbyshire population. Both English breeding groups winter on the east coast, most commonly between Lincolnshire and Essex. Sightings can be reported via email to

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