

Identifying Greenland Wheatears amongst the Bradford 800

Over the last couple of years I have noticed that a lot of the later Wheatears we get show characteristics of Greenland Wheatear. This is especially so of later arrivals i.e. those due through later in April and into May. So, if you're going to get 800+ birds again this year, it could be worth checking these.

Firstly, a word of caution might be helpful. There will be lots of individuals we can't tell because some are indistinguishable and good views are needed, usually with a scope. Also, there are intergrades. Still, the fact that we can't separate these doesn't mean we shouldn't note the ones we can. Importantly, you need to know how to age birds - it's easy once known, especially with males. Male adults have new wings so the ground colour of coverts and flight feathers is black; as black as the face mask. Often these new wings have crisp rusty fringes. 1st summer males' wings have a worn dull brown ground colour - browner than the face mask and without crisp rusty fringes. Don't confuse these old, completely brown wings with the rusty fringing on adults' new wings. The same applies to females though of course the face mask trick doesn't apply.

All this racial ID can be a bit tentative at first but here's what I do.

Worth a look are 'big', buffy, pot-bellied birds with obscene looking pinky fronts extending far down flanks and, especially, towards belly between legs - AND a brown suffusion to upperparts, even in full adults. Nominant Northern's are 'less bulky', and pale silvery grey above with a limited peach bib below that doesn't extend far down and so it has whiter belly and lower flanks.

Greenlands often look short-tailed because the longer wing invades the black tail tip to about 1/4-1/2. Northern's wings don't invade black of tail tip so much and so their tail looks longer.

CRITICALLY - and an absolute must, is the number of primary tips visible in the primary projection. There are 5 on Northern and 6 (7 just?) on Greenland. Hence the long wing that ringers get. You need to see the birds back on and still, and need to use a scope or a digi-camera.

If I get all of these features, I say 'showing characters of' Greenland. If not I let them go.

Sceptics said none of this was possible in the field but I was seeing Greenlands at the same time as ringers caught them at e.g. Winterset Res. Also, have a look at the BTO migrant atlas and note what it says about flocking behaviour of Greenland Wheatears, their migration route and their stopover strategy as compared to Northern. It'll prove very interesting because it says they come up the west coast in April-May and feed up/flock prior to setting off across the sea off the West Coast. I think we get these birds when they're pushed over the Pennine spine by westerlies.

Have fun!
Mick