

The Maidens Brent Geese - a Brief Recent History

Pale-bellied Brent Geese (*Branta bernicla hrota*) breed in Greenland, Svalbard and Eastern Canada, with the former two populations heading towards Denmark and the Lindisfarne mud flats in winter. This is by far the smaller of the populations, with the Canadian component being around six times larger at an estimated 36,000 birds. It is this, latter part of the pale-bellied sub-species which winters in Western parts of the UK, with Strangford Lough in Northern Ireland holding up to 80% of the total population.

By contrast, the dark-bellied race (*Branta bernicla bernicla*) breeds in Arctic Russia and winters, within the UK, principally in the South and East of England. Finally, the Black Brant (*Branta bernicla nigricans*) breeds from Arctic Russia Eastwards across Alaska and towards Western Canada. Although it has only been recorded a few times in Scotland, the numbers occurring within flocks of dark-bellied Brent Geese in Southern England have been increasing recently. It would also be fair to add that some controversy still exists about just how many sub-species exist, with most taxonomists accepting three at present

The Brent Goose in Ayrshire



Two squabbling adult pale-bellied Brent Geese at Maidens (*Angus Hogg*)

Virtually all the Brent Geese occurring withing Ayrshire are of the pale-bellied sub-species. Prior to the 1940s the vast expanse of Hunterston Sands accommodated up to 500 birds in winter, but this dwindled and disappeared through increased disturbance and hunting. Since then, most records have involved passage birds, mostly in the autumn. However, although most of these birds are heading towards their Northern Irish winter quarters, a small but steadily increasing group began to form in Loch Ryan, Wigtownshire during the 1990s. Following this, a small, over-wintering party took up residence at Maidens in South Ayrshire. This small group currently forms the only regular winter “flock” within the county and, despite fluctuations in numbers, it has become a regular feature on this part of the coast between October and April. The following sections trace the fortunes of this small group of geese at Maidens.

The Maidens Brent Geese – the early years

My first encounter with the pale-bellied Brent Goose at Maidens came during October 1973 when 2 adult birds appeared just off the inner jetty on the 17th. I remember this well since, whilst stalking the birds in an attempt to photograph them, I was totally unaware of the elderly lady, umbrella in hand, who was stalking me! Just as I broke cover and began focussing the camera, she set about me with her brolly, threatening to report me to the RSPB for crimes marginally short of high treason. Peace eventually broke out when I explained what I was doing and that it was a camera, not a rifle that I was holding – her heart was in the right place!

The two geese stayed until December 23rd, making me wonder if this could be the start of something.

It was another 6 years until a small family party of 2 adults and a juvenile turned up on September 17th 1979, but they had gone by the 18th. Between 1981 and 1995 there were only a few records of passage birds, with one in 1983 spending a fortnight during the mid-winter. So, it looked like this goose was going to remain a migrant.

However, during 1998, two juveniles spent the period between November 27th and May 27th of the following year between Maidens and Dipple. Maybe, just maybe **this** was the beginning!

1999 to 2019 – consolidation.

It was like welcoming back old friends when two birds showed up again November 3rd 1999. They were both adults, but were they the same two birds which had left during May of that year? I'd like to think so, since they both stayed at Maidens until May 21st 2000, re-appearing on December 10th. They finally left Northwards on May 20th 2001, returning once more on December 8th. Here I encountered a problem with separating out passage birds, since there had already been a couple of adults at Maidens on October 5th. However, they had both gone by the following day. Things were getting complicated!

However, both of the “regulars” hung on until May 12th 2002 before migrating. They brought back a pal when they turned up again on December 23rd, all 3 adults remaining until May 12th 2003.

I Spy Strangers



Adult dark-bellied Brent Goose at Maidens (*Angus Hogg*)

2002 also saw the discovery of a dark-bellied Brent Goose (Ayrshire's second record – the first being at Barassie in 1990) when a young bird turned up, spending the period from 26 April to May 12th with the 3 pale-bellied birds. Another, perhaps the same, turned up again on January 1st 2003, but only stayed for a day. Dark-bellied Brents are rare in Ayrshire, so another on December 28th 2009 was a welcome surprise – it remained until January 6th 2010. Yet another, an adult, appeared briefly on 16 Dec 2018. Not always immediately obvious, this distinct sub-species can escape attention if it is in the water at the time.

Local Celebrities

By the early 2000s, the people of Maidens had begun to recognise these visitors, and had come almost to regard them as “their” geese! However, there was no indication that the Maidens birds were succeeding in their breeding grounds, and December 3rd 2003 saw the 2 returning adults still without a family. They'd obviously thought about it after their departure on May 1st 2004 since they returned on November 5th with 2 juveniles in tow. Another adult and juvenile joined them on January 26th 2005, staying till February 6th when 3 of them moved down to Dipple. The remaining 3 left for their breeding grounds on May 1st.

One of the problems of monitoring this small flock is working out who's who and who belongs to whom. There is a considerable turnaround of birds, especially in the early autumn when Strangford birds are moving through. In addition, people have commented that “they've seen no Brent Geese at Maidens” during the winter. The birds can visit nearby locations such as Culzean Bay to the North, or Balkenna and Dipple to the South and sometimes remain there for several days.

The numbers of wintering Brent Geese has varied over the following years, and a look through each group as it arrives in the autumn can help reveal how well they've done on the breeding grounds.

The juveniles are usually distinctive, with very clear barring on the upperwing coverts, and this contrasts with the much plainer upperwings of the adults.



Two adult and 7 juvenile Brent Geese at Maidens (*Angus Hogg*)

Success rates have never remained constant. 2006 saw no juveniles in the flock which was down to 4 birds. Between 4 and 7 birds wintered in 2007-2008, with one juvenile present, and departure was unusually late on May 15th. Five adults showed up during autumn 2008, including an Icelandic-ringed bird, and the problem of changing flock-composition was clearly illustrated on November 7th when it was replaced by different adult. In February 2009 the group acquired another 2 adults and all left on April 12th. A very early group of 7 adults turned up on August 30th of that year, having

probably failed as breeders. The 2009-2010 winter group stayed at the low numbers of between 4 and 6 birds - all adults. Similarly, 2010-2011 saw no improvement, with only 5 birds present for most of the winter.

Changing Fortunes

In autumn 2011, the first 10 arrived on November 6th, but the 11 birds there on the 7th revealed 8 juveniles. Thirteen birds remained for most of the winter, including the 8 youngsters, the last one departing on April 27th 2012. Four birds on September 12th that year were likely on passage, but 2 pairs, each with 2 juveniles, arrived on October 8th and remained for the winter, during which time the flock size rose to a maximum of 18 individuals. There was now nearly enough to turn out two full football teams on the Maidens pitch which they used during stormy weather!

The winter of 2013-2014 once more saw high numbers, with a maximum of 24 between October 30th and November 3rd – 2 football teams at last!! This peak involved a couple of Irish-ringed birds which soon departed for Strangford Lough, and the flock settled down to between 14 and 15 birds. No juveniles stayed through the winter.

The winter of 2014-2015 was poor, with a peak of 11 birds in December, rising to 17 in February - but no youngsters. The following winter saw a slight improvement, with 3 juveniles present in a group which rose from 4 on October 15th to between 9 and 12 birds, a 13th joining them from February 29th till they left on April 7th 2016. Further improvement during winter 2016-2017 began with 10 birds comprising 2 pairs, each with 3 juveniles, on October 19th. The flock size climbed to 15 on October 28th and a peak of 22 on December 17th, falling back to 17 at the year's end. Sixteen remained into spring 2017, with 4 Northbound Irish birds joining them between March 18th and April 7th. Two of this Irish group were satellite tagged, and the results from the period of their stay again showed just how much these birds can move around, with visits to Doonfoot, Arran and even Kilbrannan Sound.



Four Irish satellite-tagged Brent Geese at Maidens (Angus Hogg)

Another lean period followed, with the 2017-2018 winter flock reaching 14 adults on December 31st and 16 on March 7th, one sickly-looking individual lingering until May 10th. 2018-2019 was worrying, with a drop to only 7 adults in the early part of the winter, although this rose during March to between 9 and 11 birds as some geese started to move North. And so, we reach the present day, with the better news that the wintering group currently sits at between 13 and 17 birds, but there are 10 juveniles in the group, their best result for many years.

The Future

Hopefully, the combined interests of people and geese will see this small group survive at this location. Locals are well aware of the birds, and “ownership” of something special should afford them some protection. Perhaps more concerning are the climatic changes affecting their breeding grounds and their ability to migrate to and from them. The Maidens Brents have now become an established group, and it just wouldn’t be the same if their cheerful “pronking” calls were to disappear.

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