

# THE SEPARATION OF LESSER AND MEALY REDPOLLS

*By Lee G R Evans*



*Lesser and Mealy Redpoll in hand, Aberdeenshire, November 2010 (Chris Jones)*

## Introduction

Continuing my run of identification papers on Redpolls, I hereby present this further resumé on the identification of LESSER and MEALY REDPOLLS for perusal.

To clarify the current position of the UK400 Club and British Birding Association, **FIVE** Redpoll species are presently recognised for the Western Palearctic Region :-

**LESSER REDPOLL** *Carduelis cabaret* – occurring in the British Isles discontinuously eastwards through southern Norway, Denmark, Belgium, northern France, Germany, Czechoslovakia and Switzerland

**MEALY REDPOLL** *Carduelis flammea* – occurring in a broad band across Scandinavia, the Baltic Republics south to East Germany and Poland, across Russia and former Soviet states, Kamchatka, Mongolia, Amurland, Ussuriland and perhaps across to Alaska and northern Canada.

**SCANDINAVIAN ARCTIC REDPOLL** *Carduelis exilipes* - in Europe, from extreme north of Norway and Sweden, through Finland, the islands of the Arctic Ocean, the Kola Peninsula east through tundra belts of northern Russia, northern Siberia to Anadyrland and the Chukotski Peninsula, northern Kamchatka and the coasts of the Sea of Okhotsk, south to Khabarovsk and the northern Sakhalin Islands.

**HORNEMANN'S ARCTIC REDPOLL** *Carduelis hornemanni* – restricted to the High Arctic, from Ellesmere Island to Baffin Island, Canada to northern Greenland.

**NORTHWESTERN REDPOLL** *Carduelis rostrata* – another high Arctic species occurring from eastern Baffin Island to the west and east coasts of Greenland. It includes the Icelandic form *islandica*. The relationship with the North American Mealy Redpoll is uncertain, this redpoll type occurring from west and north Alaska to Yukon and the Mackenzie range to NE Manitoba, northern Quebec and northern Labrador.

\* Please note that redpolls may in fact represent a clinal population from north to south and east to west although intergradation is not definitely proven.

In general terms, a typical Mealy Redpoll can be separated from a Lesser Redpoll in its much paler grey plumage, the greyer head, the primarily whitish basal colour to the underparts, the longer primary projection, the much whiter rump, the more contrasting dark ear-coverts, the sparsely marked undertail-coverts and the slightly more saturated nape and hindneck feathering and cloaking of the upper tarsi.

Chris Jones has been trapping redpolls this autumn in Aberdeenshire and has very kindly sent me his instructive photographs for publication. These are *typical* Mealy Redpolls, alongside a Lesser Redpoll, displaying the longer wings, much greyer overall tone in plumage, the white basal colour of the rump invariably streaked and the pale in the mantle. The wings average longer, as does the tail feathers.

The image below shows two Mealy Redpolls side-by-side.



## LESSER REDPOLL *Carduelis cabaret*

The Lesser Redpoll was once a common breeding bird in Britain but since the late 1970's, a dramatic contraction of range has taken place. Reasons put forward for this decline have been the intensification of agricultural practises resulting in the loss of hedgerows and farmland habitat and the fact that Birch trees have significantly reduced in the woodlands of lowland England. As a consequence, there are probably no more than just a few thousand pairs breeding in Britain, with the main densities in the west.

Fortunately, it still remains a fairly common winter visitor to our shores and can be located in large flocks between September and April. It favours Alder and Birch scrub in which to feed and is a highly gregarious species forming flocks of several hundred or more.



### Identification

The beautiful portrait above was taken by Steven Round. This is a fairly typical Lesser Redpoll. Heavily streaked on the mantle, scapulars and underparts, with prominent markings on the flanks. It has two wing-bars, the greater covert bar being the broadest and most obvious, invariably buff in colour but also appearing as whitish, particularly on bleached birds in spring. The lesser covert bar is invariably buff and much more indistinct. The crimson-red forehead patch is extensive, with black on the loral region and on the throat. The culmen of the bill is often slightly concave and the nape and hindneck feathers loose, with whitish or buffish 'tramlines' on the mantle a typical feature. The basal colour of the underparts is invariably buff or yellowish-brown becoming whiter on the belly and contrasting with the dark streaking. The tone of the upperparts is more brown too, with the streaking on the lower flanks often extending on to the undertail-coverts. The rump and uppertail coverts are normally streaked, with adult males taking on a pink wash in early spring, with the undertail-covert basal colour often off-white or light buff-toned. With such a dark head, the white eye-ring appears more obvious and well-defined and from mid February onwards, males exhibit a deep red throat and breast.



Lesser Redpoll in early spring, photographed by Steve Seal on 9 March

Note the extensive red on the sides of the lower face, breast and underparts – red too rather than the much paler pink of Mealy Redpoll. The wingbars are suffused with buff.



Male Lesser Redpoll in spring (18 February) photographed by Steve Valentine



Lesser Redpolls photographed by Dave Hutton in the Midlands in February. This is the time of the year when the plumage wears with birds often showing extensive white covert bars and fringes to the flight feathers. The white eye borders are still noticeable though



Another Lesser Redpoll photographed by Dave Hutton in March – heavily striated on the underparts and mantle with a distinct buff wash to the outer greater coverts, dark streaks on the uppertail coverts, a few streaks on the undertail coverts and a long pointed bill.

It is at this time of year when Lesser Redpolls take on a very Mealy-type appearance and why there will always be an upsurge of claims at this time of year, particularly from garden feeders in England. These are invariably typically small, heavily streaked birds though with no apparent heavy cloaking of the feathers on the nape and hindneck.



Lesser Redpolls photographed in winter (Steve Seal, above) and in March (Dave Hutton) revealing once again the variability in the plumage. The male below has an extensive gleaming white and fairly broad greater covert bar and distinct white fringes to the tertials and wing-linings; it also has much white on the mantle but rich reddish-pink on the breast.



Further Lesser Redpolls photographed in late March (Dave Hutton top, Steve Seal below) and once again showing the variation in plumage at that time of year. The top bird is another example of the plumage bleaching and wear in early spring whilst the lower shows the extent and saturation of the red underparts of male Lesser Redpoll. The rich red 'poll' is a more deep crimson-red.

Another classic example of a typical Lesser Redpoll, this individual photographed in Staffordshire in winter by Steve Nuttall. A very dark bird overall, with heavy streaking on the mantle, back and sides and a rich brown-buff wash or background colour to the underparts extending almost to the undertail coverts. The greater covert bar is typically buffish and the upperwings primarily dark.





More Lesser Redpolls photographed at Whitacre Heath in Warwickshire (Steve Seal, above and Dave Hutton, below) – both typical examples



Another bright Lesser Redpoll photographed in the West Midlands in early spring (Steve Seal) – extensively red on the underparts but brown above



Another typical Lesser Redpoll photographed in early Spring  
(Dave Hutton)



This male however was photographed in Norway at the height of summer in July 2008 by Rob Wilson. It is heavily worn particularly on the upperparts.

## MEALY REDPOLL *Carduelis flammea*

The Mealy Redpoll is a fairly common passage migrant and winter visitor to Britain which occurs in varying numbers from year to year and is prone to occasional irruptions perhaps induced by a failure of the Birch seed crop or exceptional breeding numbers. It is a common bird throughout Scandinavia with even larger numbers occurring in the forests of northern Russia.

For the purpose of this short paper, I shall only concentrate on birds that can be safely separated and identified (eg, the paler variants) but there is a school of thought that many first-winter Mealy Redpolls are in fact rather brown and heavily streaked and almost indistinguishable from Lesser Redpoll.

In general, Mealy Redpolls are paler, whiter birds than Lesser Redpolls, with longer wings and more heavily cloaked on the upper mantle and hindneck region and on the tarsi. Here are the main pointers :-

- 1) Much paler grey overall with whiter underparts, more white in the mantle, a greyer head and a larger size;
- 2) Basal colour of the underparts primarily white, with less streaking on the undertail coverts;
- 3) Averaging much longer in the wing leading to a more elongated rear-end appearance;
- 4) Both greater and median covert bar pure white with little infiltration of buff, extending on to the tertials and the wing-linings;
- 5) Rump and uppertail-coverts invariably white and poorly streaked;
- 6) Contrasting dark ear-covert patch and little evidence of eye-ring;
- 7) A larger bird, longer-winged and more heavily feathered on the tarsi and hindneck.
- 8) In spring, the pink on the breast is more restricted and much paler in intensity





A male Mealy Redpoll photographed by Graham Catley in North Lincolnshire in early spring – well defined ear-covert patch with no apparent eye-ring and very pale pink underparts. Very pale overall but quite heavily streaked and markedly white in the wings with an evenly broad greater covert bar.



A classic Mealy Redpoll captured on film by Steve Seal at a wintering site in Warwickshire. Completely mealy complexion, with much white in the plumage. Evenly gleaming white on the greater covert bar, with white wing-linings and an extensive white rump. The edges of the rump are streaked with a hint of a very light pale pink wash to the base and a slightly bulging neck area and white feathering on the tarsi.

\* Individuals such as that portrayed above are so well-marked that they are often mistaken for *exilipes* Arctic Redpolls. They are also equally difficult to separate from Icelandic Redpolls, although the latter are generally much more heavily streaked, longer-winged, larger and heavier and longer-billed.



This autumn (November 2010) has seen an exceptional movement of Mealy Redpolls in to Britain, initially heralded on the Northern Isles – in Orkney and Shetland. Dougie Preston's photograph of one such bird above, taken on Shetland, portrays a typical individual – quite heavily streaked on a white background, more bulbous-necked, white on the mantle, grey headed, an obvious dark ear-covert and extensive white in the wing.

Mealy Redpolls are longer-winged than Lesser Redpoll, Lars Svensson (in *Identification Guide to European Passerines*) quoting 70-80 mm for a male and 68-77 for a female (as opposed to 68-73 and 67-71). The bill also averages longer and more pointed. Using a much larger sample of individual birds trapped and ringed in Britain, Lesser Redpoll wing length was recorded as between 67-75mm in males and 64-73mm in females so clearly overlap occurs.

### **Acknowledgements**

Once again I am indebted to the many photographers whose essential work adorns this article, including Chris Jones, Steve Seal, Dave Hutton, Graham Catley, Steve Round, Steve Valentine, Stevie Nuttall and Dougie Preston. I thank Neil and Paul Wright and Kevin Shepherd for sharing their experiences on the Northern Isles, Martin Scott, Angus Murray, Chris Batty and Andrew Holden.