

THE IDENTIFICATION CHALLENGE

Redpolls

While collectively their ranges span the northern zone of planet earth, the very best place to see all six Redpoll taxa is... Britain. What an opportunity! Vocalisations are under-researched and breeding studies indicate biological separation between some taxa, while genetic studies indicate one evolutionary unit. Irruptive movements are evolving and changing, and one endemic form, the rare Icelandic Arctic is little known. Unusually, domestic gardens can provide as many opportunities of encountering rare taxa as any coastal lair. The charm of redpolls is unending.



6 Taxa

Further Information

Europe

Lesser Redpoll *Acanthis cabaret*

Europe, Asia and North America

Mealy Redpoll *Acanthis flammea flammea*

Coues's Arctic Redpoll *Acanthis hornemanni exilipes*

Greenland and NE Canada

Greenland Redpoll *Acanthis flammea rostrata*

Hornemann's Arctic Redpoll *Acanthis hornemanni hornemanni*

Iceland

Icelandic Arctic Redpoll *Acanthis (flammea) islandica*

Dark *islandica* (*rostrata*-like)



Scan Here

Fieldcraft and Redpolls

Irrepressibly gregarious, a single redpoll that finds an available food supply can easily 'pull' in others. Weedy fields, Alder and Birch trees plus gardens supplied with Millet and Nyger offer rewards. The Redpoll Code is a new approach to redpoll identification. It is predicated on the understanding that too much emphasis is placed on 'silver bullet features'. Instead, find a feeding flock, settle in and take time. Note overall shape, body length, size impression, 'fluffiness' and colour tones as the plumage can morph with light and angle of viewing. Whites and browns can seem to appear obvious but then disappear. Streaking can look different as plumage is sleeked down or fluffed up. Those who find the rare taxa do not start with minutiae so much as an intuitive approach based on experience and gradual assimilation of the field appearance of different taxa.

Ageing and Sexing

All redpolls have one moult per year. In adults this is a complete post-breeding moult. First years undergo a partial moult retaining most of their juvenile wing and tail feathers. Young birds in autumn are aged by worn, pointed juvenile wing and tail feathers. Moult limits may be apparent in wing coverts or tail. From November wear in adults makes it harder. Males sport red or pink tones on the cheeks and breast, initially obscured by broad fresh feather tips that abrade and reveal the red though winter into spring. Adult males average the largest and are generally paler with more red than first years; some adult females can flush red or pink tones. Males average paler and less streaked than females. Beware – Redpolls can be difficult to age and sex even in the hand.

The Redpolls Team

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The Redpoll Code

The Redpoll Code is designed to speed up the initial identification process. It is based on a number of general characters, which some taxa usually have and others usually don't. It provides an early 'filter' towards identification of a particular bird. Those who find the most rare/interesting redpolls do not use plumage minutiae as their starting point. It is these kind of 'filters' which help eliminate some possibilities and point to others.

Start Differently

When you watch lots of redpolls their identification does get easier. Honest. The brain is a marvellously vivid computer that just needs plenty of data and practice. Flocks can begin by looking like a frighteningly similar bunch of birds. However after exploring, studying and watching, key characters gradually become more familiar and the scary canvas of 'they all look the same' begins to fade.

Relax into taking time to drink in a bird's overall appearance and try to avoid looking for that one silver bullet you hope will secure the identification; they don't always work anyway. Once you have perspective on overall shape, size and plumage tones, *then* check out the minutiae.

① Red

Only two taxa show obvious red on head and breast: Lesser and Mealy. This is an obvious crimson red in worn spring plumage. It can be extrapolated earlier in the plumage cycle when the red is obscured by large pale feather tips but begins to 'emerge' by late autumn/mid winter. In some males crimson first appears in the ear coverts just below the eye as stippling.

Arctic Redpolls (*exilipes/hornemanni/islandica*) flush delicate pink on the breast in spring. Even adult male Greenlands only appear to show slightly more intense deep (reddish) pink than the strongest flush of colour on the Arctic Redpolls.

② Straw

A first impression of overall colours in which the upperparts appear 'straw-coloured' (pale yellow-buff) often interspersed with white over the lower scapulars is more pro-Arctic taxa.

③ Brown

A first impression of rich earth brown tones especially on scapular 'strip' is often (not always) more indicative of Mealy than Coues's.

④ Flank streaks

Should be generally underplayed in the early part of the ID process as ALL taxa can show well-marked flank streaking. Most Coues's have some streaking, especially young birds. The specific pattern, background colours or 'type' of streaking can be more important than the amount. Indicative patterns for Lesser are very buffy yellow background to streaking and for Greenland, an extreme pattern up to five well-defined 'lines'.

⑤ Undertail

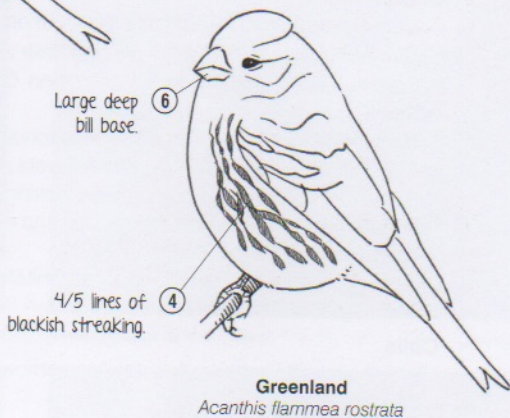
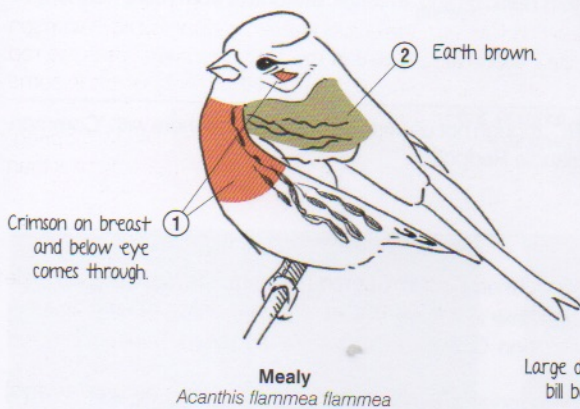
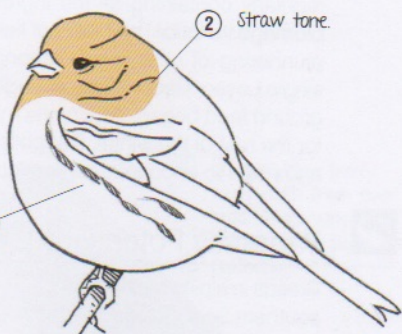
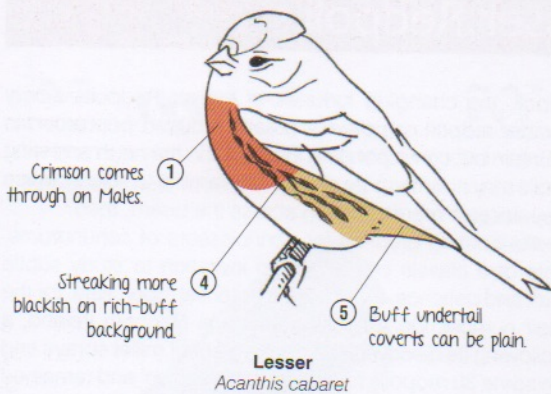
Lesser: Excellent first indicator is very often a buff/yellow wash to the undertail with variable dark marks, which are sometimes completely lacking (plain undertail).

Mealy: Variable, typically with multiple arrow shaped marks.

Coues's: Unmarked white or single thin streak in white often indicative.

⑥ Bill base

Useful with excellent views, as Hornemann's Arctic and Greenland have noticeably deep bill bases compared with similar looking, confusion taxa.



Size comparison



Lesser
Acanthis cabaret



Mealy
Acanthis flammea flammea



Coues's Arctic
Acanthis hornemanni exilipes



Greenland
Acanthis flammea rostrata



Hornemann's Arctic
Acanthis hornemanni hornemanni



Icelandic Arctic
Acanthis (flammea) islandica

Lesser Redpoll

Often thought of as the default redpoll, the changing fortunes of Lesser Redpolls amply illustrate the dynamic nature of the wider redpoll complex. A greatly reduced population in recent years in eastern and southern Britain but corresponding increases in the north and west mean that winter irrupting Mealy Redpolls may now be more regular and familiar to some birders than our endemic breeder. Maybe they deserve more attention across the board, then?

Flocks of Lessers can also be fertile hunting grounds for connoisseurs of conundrums, regularly containing all the ingredients of a classic challenge: an invitation to study subtle plumage variation; stiff tests of fieldcraft and patience. Flocks are a potential 'open safe' for the plundering of rarer jewels among their number. On a housing estate in Northern Ireland, a single Lesser Redpoll was enough. Following its discovery the deployment of millet sprays and ground feed began. Within one month some 30 redpolls had been 'called down' and remained for the rest of the winter. Redpolls pull in redpolls and there's no better way to learn the basics and hope to encounter rarer relatives than to find a flock and work it!



Vagrancy Potential | Occurrence Patterns

Breeds in alpine central Europe, Britain and Ireland, around the southern North Sea, spreading into southern Scandinavia and the southern Baltic region. In winter withdraws from more northerly or high latitude parts of the range.



Taxonomy

Recognized as full species by BOURC, though not universally. Lumped by others with 'Common Redpoll' (Mealy, Greenland and Icelandic Redpolls).



Winter

ID points

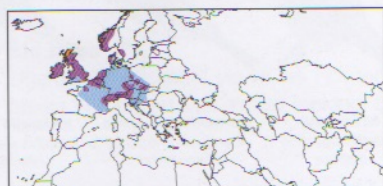
- 1 Smallest redpoll; roughly Blue Tit-sized. Short bodied and relatively short tailed.
- 2 Adult males can stand out as larger and paler in a flock of buffy-brown female/immatures, leading to the temptation to identify as another taxon. Only adult male Lesser and Mealy have obvious red tones in head and underpart plumage.
- 3 Size combined with obvious yellow buffy tones when fresh, over head, flanks, wing bars, fringes of flight feathers and especially undertail/vent are often distinctive. Streaking in vent variable from well marked to weak and thin or even lacking.
- 4 Flank streaking variable, usually obvious and extensive, though less organised in tramlines and a little wispiest than many Mealy.
- 5 By spring, plumage browner and some whiteness emerging thus plumage tones overlapping to some degree with Mealy and Greenland.

Calls

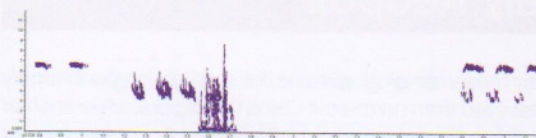
Highest pitched chatter calls sounding somewhat tinny and given in more rapid succession than other taxa.



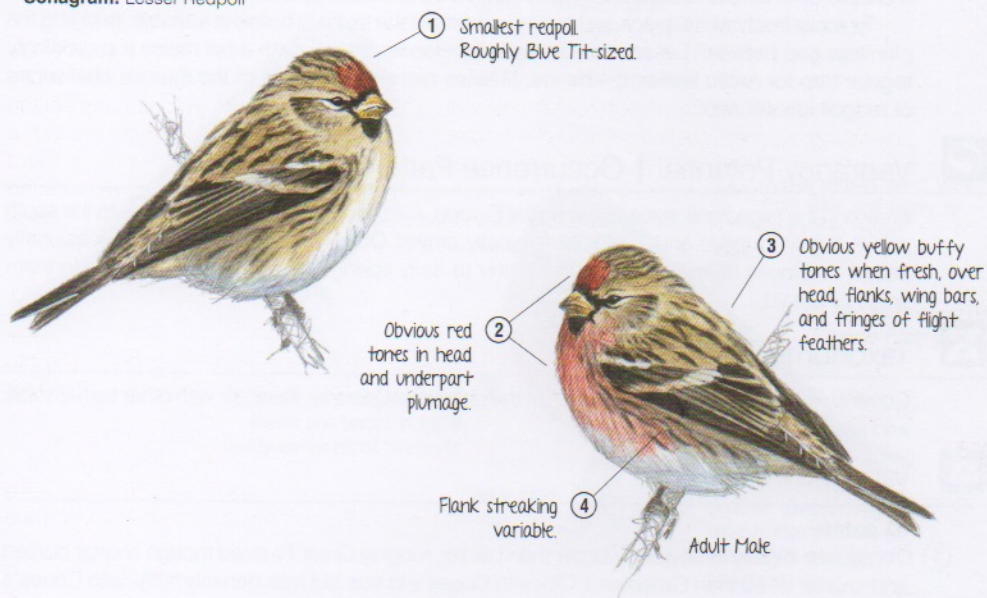
Distribution



Acanthis cabaret



Sonogram: Lesser Redpoll



Adult Male Lesser Redpoll cabaret | March

J. Wellford



Lesser Redpoll cabaret | March

J. Wellford



Lesser Redpoll cabaret | March

J. Wellford



Lesser Redpoll cabaret | March

J. Wellford

Mealy Redpoll

A notorious wanderer, two monster Mealy movements have shone the spotlight on the thrillingly irruptive world of the redpoll clan. One travelled from north-east China to Belgium, while another made the epic journey from Michigan, USA to Siberia – a cool 10,200 miles! And these are just a couple of fortuitous recoveries – how many more are making monumental journeys?

Typically frosty white, black and red in mid-winter, the taxon is however variable, bridging the plumage gap between Lesser and Coues's & Icelandic Arctics (with adult males a surprisingly regular trap for Arctic seekers) – hence, Mealties can provide some of the thornier challenges of redpoll identification.



Vagrancy Potential | Occurrence Patterns

Breeds in the taiga zone across continental Europe, Asia and North America. Winters to the south and is highly irruptive and nomadic. Typically arrives October onwards, though occasionally earlier, continues to irrupt through the winter to early spring. Breeds occasionally in Northern areas of Britain.



Taxonomy

Currently treated as the nominate form of the polytypic 'Common Redpoll' with other taxa *rostrata* and *islandica*.



Winter

ID points

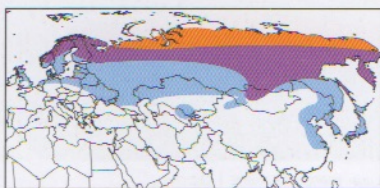
- ① Overall size slightly to obviously larger than Lesser, roughly Great Tit-sized though shorter bodied and shorter tailed than Greenland. Close to Coues's in size but less densely fluffy, with Coues's being on average shorter billed and longer tailed. Some with long Goldfinch-like bills formerly known as '*holboellii*'.
- ② Overall plumage tones vary from paler and frosty to deep earth brown. Scapular band often has broad dark centres and darker earth brown fringes. Upperparts can be paler though not quite as 'straw' overall as typical Coues's.
- ③ Presence of emergent red in cheeks and breast in males usually eliminates all but Lesser.
- ④ Can have unmarked white rump patch, though typically a thinner 'band' of white not the obvious square or larger area of white as on most Coues's.
- ⑤ Undertail coverts typically have multiple blackish arrowheads on a white background not found in Coues's; some closer to Coues's with one broad central streak.
- ⑥ Some adult males confusable with Coues's due to (reddish-washed) white rump patch and unstreaked white undertail coverts. Red on head and breast separate from Coues's.
- ⑦ Given the intermediate appearance of Mealy between other taxa, it is important not to default to Mealy on tricky birds but identify each on their own merit- some are best left unidentified.

Calls

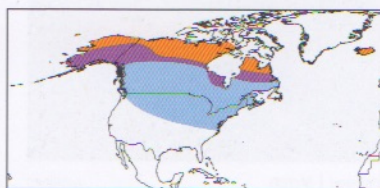
Slightly deeper and more spaced out chatter calls than Lesser, different sonagram shape. More research needed.



Distribution



Acanthis flammea flammea





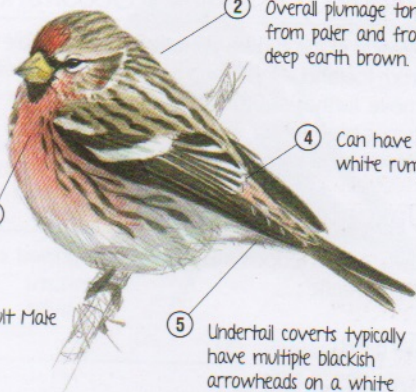
Sonagram: Mealy Redpoll



① Slightly to obviously larger than Lesser. Roughly Great Tit-sized.

Presence of emergent red in cheeks and breast in males usually eliminates all but Lesser.

Adult Male



② Overall plumage tones vary from paler and frosty to deep earth brown.

④ Can have unmarked white rump patch.

⑤ Undertail coverts typically have multiple blackish arrowheads on a white background.



Adult Male Mealy Redpoll *flammea* | March

M. Garner



Adult Male Mealy Redpoll *flammea* 'holboelli' | March

M. Garner



Mealy Redpoll *flammea* | March

M. Garner



Mealy Redpoll *flammea* | October

M. Garner