

Coues's Arctic Redpoll

The report of an adult male Coues's Arctic Redpoll in Wells Wood, Norfolk in March 1985 was enough to draw three NW birders to hire a beaten-up Vauxhall Cavalier and drive! The sight of a rolling red black and white carpet of little finches sparked a journey into redpolls. It was clear that as well as a pink-flushed white-bodied adult male, multiple white rumps were in the flock, unclaimed and unloved. In reality there could have been from 5-10 other Coues's present. Despite being some 30 years ago, streaky young Coues's versus Mealy Redpolls remains a conundrum with many misdirections in identification. While large flocks of Mealy Redpolls may be monotypic, sometimes just a handful of Mealies can contain the hoped for Coues's.



Vagrancy Potential | Occurrence Patterns

Breeds in the tundra zone across the whole of northern Europe, Asia and North America apart from Iceland, Greenland and the East Canadian Arctic. Many winter at higher latitudes, some move further south with Mealies. Appears sporadically in late autumn or winter period with occasional larger irruptions numbering up to hundreds. First British record Easington, East Yorkshire in winter 1893/4.



Taxonomy

Two 'Arctic Redpoll' taxa usually recognised, *exilipes* and *hornemanni* with pale *islandica* a possible third 'Arctic'.



Winter

ID points

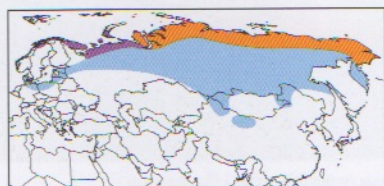
- ① Similar sized to Mealy, but more densely feathered and more frequently 'fluffy-looking', bull necked and large headed.
- ② Average shorter-billed and longer-tailed than Mealy.
- ③ Straw-toned upperparts merging to even paler (whitish) rear scapulars; occasionally browner in scapulars. Lack of red in face and breast separates from Mealy, at best pink stippling in late winter.
- ④ Flank streaking can be extensive and appear heavy, averaging slightly paler slate grey and messy, thus less organised into tramlines than on typical Mealy.
- ⑤ Undertail coverts vary from unmarked white to containing one thin slate-coloured streak. Rarely two streaks or single broader elliptical streak and a number of very thin 'pencil' lines.
- ⑥ Square rump patch ranges from pure white to lightly peppered dark throughout (dark base of feathers obscured by broad white tips); dark peppering becomes more obvious with wear. Usually a more obvious neat square of white, larger than thinner band on Mealy.
- ⑦ Adult males flush delicate pink in spring – never crimson red and range from quite heavily to virtually unstreaked flanks.
- ⑧ Overall appearance overlaps with Hornemann's' and Icelandic Arctic Redpolls. Care needed with vagrants.

Calls

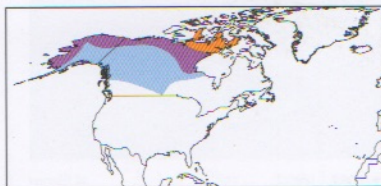
Similar pitch but different sonogram shape to Mealy. Higher pitched and different sonogram shape than Hornemann's. More research required.

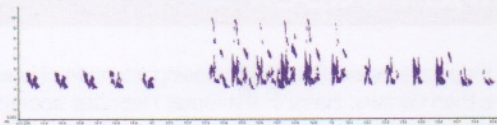


Distribution

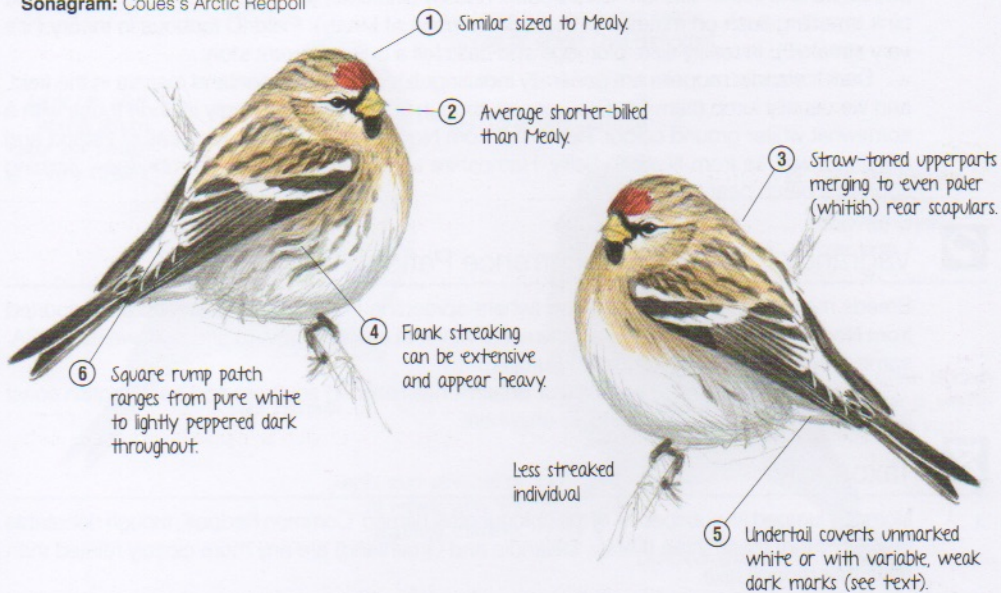


Acanthis hornemanni exilipes





Sonagram: Coues's Arctic Redpoll



Adult Male Coues's Arctic Redpoll *exilipes* | March M. Garner



Coues's Arctic Redpoll *exilipes* | March M. Garner



Coues's Arctic Redpoll *exilipes* | March M. Garner



Coues's Arctic Redpoll *exilipes* | March M. Garner

Greenland Redpoll

Collectively known as Northwest Redpolls, they have been afforded increasing attention of late, but have been a tasty proposition for more than century. Barra in the Outer Hebrides scored the first back in 1896, with breeding likely in the Highlands between 1900 and 1959 (and suspected both there and in the Northern Isles since). Virtually Chaffinch sized, possessing a lovely subtle pink breeding flush on males (not the vivid crimson of Mealy). Field ID tenuous in theory ('it's very streaky!'), in reality size, plumage and calls tell a quite different story...

Dark Icelandic redpolls are generally indistinguishable from Greenland *rostrata* in the field, and we usually lump them for ID purposes, though the former seemingly include those with a somewhat whiter ground colour. Recorded from Northern and Northwest areas of Ireland and Britain as well as from Norfolk, Scilly, Hampshire and well inland from Cambridge – coming soon to a patch near you?



Vagrancy Potential | Occurrence Patterns

Breeds mainly in southern Greenland (where spreading north), on Baffin Island and reported from Northern Labrador. Moves southwest to winter in eastern Canada and northwestern USA, some move southeast to northwest Europe.

Regular/annual in Northern Isles of Britain – has reached southern and east English coast and inland Britain. Potential to occur anywhere.



Taxonomy

Normally lumped as subspecies of the unfortunately named 'Common Redpoll', though debatable taxonomy that these three (Mealy, Icelandic and Greenland) are any more closely related than any other redpoll taxa.



Winter

ID points

- ① Largest of the darker redpolls – can be almost Chaffinch-sized though size can be difficult to assess on lone individuals or a monotypic flock. Body/tail often looks 'long'. Bill large and noticeably deep based (beware when base is obscured by feathering).
- ② Dark and swarthy overall plumage, variation from deep earth brown tones to warmer tan tones to head and upperparts. Some can have whitish ground colour but remain very streaky.
- ③ Flanks most streaked of all redpolls with 4-5 organised tramlines, which creep into the centre of the belly.
- ④ Often strikingly pale or whitish rump patch, which is heavily streaked.

Calls

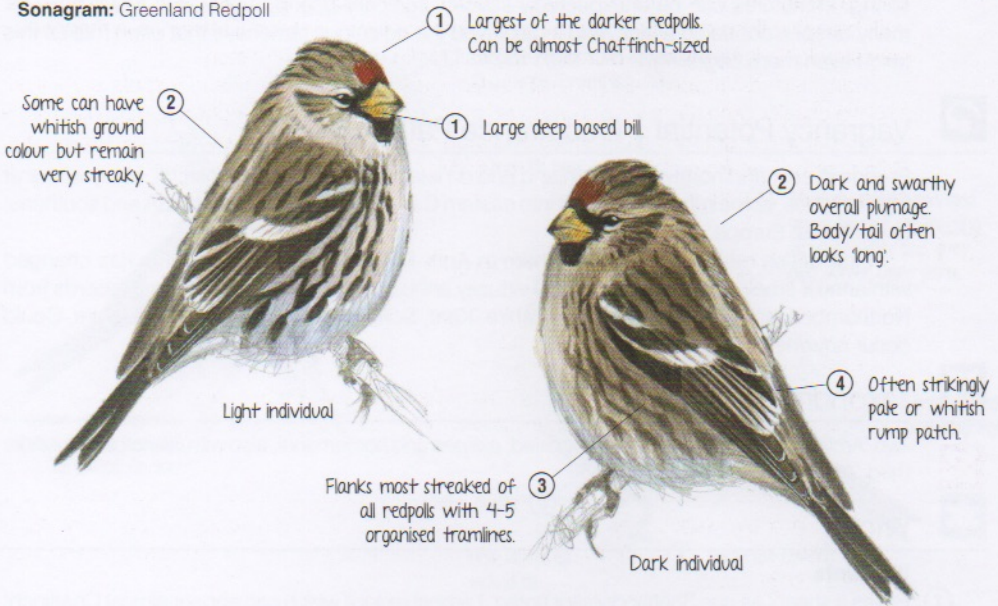
Calls are particularly loud, deep, harsh and nasal and can be distinguished from higher pitched more tinny calls of Mealy, especially Lesser. The individual chatter call notes in sequence are delivered often slowly and deliberately, making the sound seem more deliberate and precise.



Distribution



Acanthis flammea rostrata

Sonagram: Greenland RedpollGreenland Redpoll *rostrata* | October

M. Garner

Greenland Redpoll *rostrata* | October

M. Garner

Greenland Redpoll *rostrata* | October

M. Garner

Greenland Redpoll *rostrata* | October

M. Garner

Hornemann's Arctic Redpoll

Extra padded, extra dazzling, and extra beautiful, arguably the ultimate redpoll, built to prosper at the very roof of the world. Some irrupt from NW Greenland and beyond as early as late September, arriving alone or with Greenland Redpolls. The first British record came from the east coast in spring. Immatures can be unexpectedly streaky. Ironically one in Suffolk was a star draw for many despite not being a 'tick' and it displayed the ridiculous tameness that often makes this taxon even more beguiling.



Vagrancy Potential | Occurrence Patterns

Breeds in east and northwest Greenland and on islands in NE Canadian Arctic. Many winter at high latitudes, some move southwest into eastern Canada and northwestern USA and southeast to northwest Europe.

First British record in County Durham in April 1855. Since 2000 the status has changed with annual small-scale irruptions. Now virtually annual in Northern Isles with past records from Northumberland, County Durham, Yorkshire, Kent, Scilly, Norfolk, Suffolk and Cheshire. Could occur anywhere.



Taxonomy

Two 'Arctic Redpoll' taxa usually recognised; *exilipes* and *hornemanni*, also with *islandica* a possible third 'Arctic'.



Winter

ID points

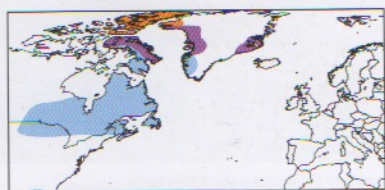
- ① 'Big as a sheep' as one Shetland visitor noted. Largest redpoll which can appear almost Chaffinch/ Brambling sized and the most well padded of redpoll taxa with dense feathering such that can appear especially fat headed and huge necked to disproportional degree. Most are prone to exceptional tameness at times bordering on inquisitiveness.
- ② Long-winged and long-tailed with tell tale deep bill base, especially compared with similar plumaged Coues's.
- ③ A striking 'two colour' appearance of chamois and white gives distinctive look to many. The chamois-buff head and upper breast usually contrasting strongly with white flanks and grey and white upperparts. This particular appearance is normal for Hornemann's though less often so obvious and striking in Coues's. Some trickier birds lack chamois and are more extensively cold grey/white.
- ④ Undertail coverts vary from pure white, to obvious dark central shaft streak to multiple (greyish) shaft streaks which can be quite broad/elliptical.
- ⑤ Some first winters have rather heavily streaked flanks though typical ground colour of the flanks remains white. Some first winters have more buff on upperparts and sides of upper breast. Extensive buff on flanks not normally found on Hornemann's.

Calls

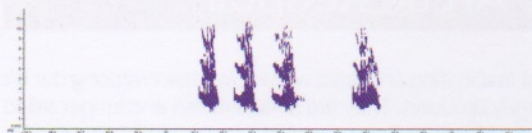
Deep pitched chatter calls down to 2.5 kHz though generally not as deep toned and slightly more melodic than Greenland. More research required.



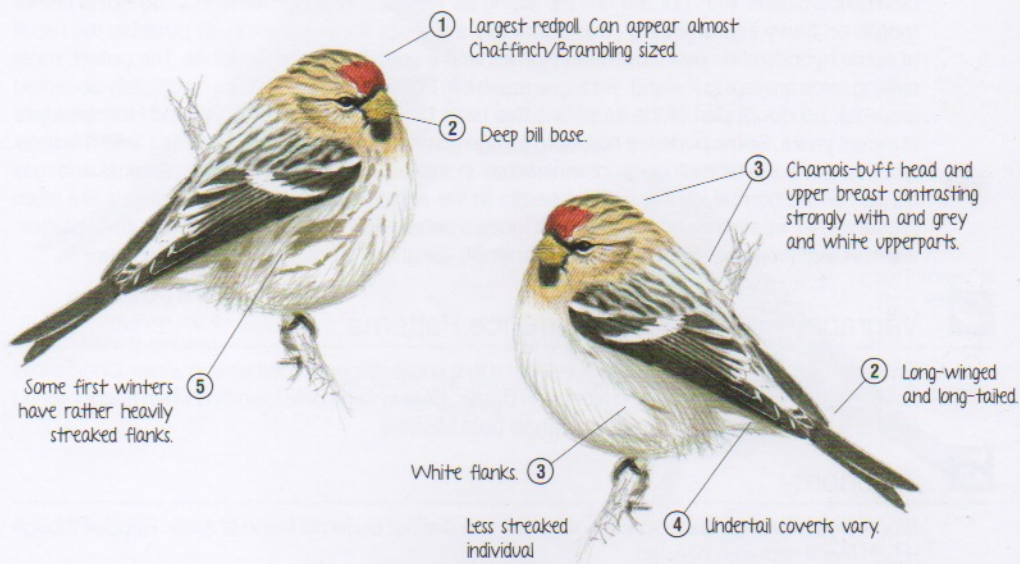
Distribution



Acanthis hornemanni hornemanni



Sonagram: Hornemann's Arctic Redpoll



Hornemann's Arctic Redpoll *hornemanni* | October M. Garner



Hornemann's Arctic Redpoll *hornemanni* | October M. Garner



1cy Hornemann's Arctic Redpoll *hornemanni* | March C. van Rijswijk



Ad Male Hornemann's Arctic Redpoll *hornemanni* | March C. van Rijswijk

Icelandic Arctic Redpoll

The 'Arctic Redpoll' of Iceland. The most fascinating and least well-known taxon among our six redpolls and recently championed by Andy Stoddart. They are smaller-billed and longer-tailed than the dark Icelandic *rostrata* types with the heavily padded gestalt of Coues's and Hornemann's. Distinct biometrically from dark Icelandic birds, and indeed from all dark redpoll forms, their biometrics cluster with but are not the same as Coues's and Hornemann's. So not a colour morph or 'freely interbreeding', but seemingly a distinct endemic taxon, or possibly the result of some hybridization event between Hornemann's and Greenland Redpolls. The palest, most striking birds are rare in Iceland. Yet some make it to Britain (though there are no officially accepted records), no doubt part of the irruptions that have brought more Greenland and Hornemann's in recent years. Some birds are harder to assign on plumage and get the dreaded 'intermediate' label, however the biometrics of 'intermediates' in Iceland actually cluster with pale birds and may be part of the normal variation of the taxon. In the same way young female Coues's are often presented as 'intermediate' in the Mealy/Coues's debate and create a false pool of intermediates, when in fact they represent normal intraspecific variation. A frosty redpoll frontier then!



Vagrancy Potential | Occurrence Patterns

Endemic breeder in Iceland. There is evidence that some disperse southeast in winter. Candidates have reached Northern Isles and Norfolk in Britain. Bear in mind pale *islandica* when encountering Coues's, some Hornemann's and strange pale Mealies.



Taxonomy

Biometrics, plumage and vocalisations point to a distinct endemic taxon of Arctic Redpoll though much more research needed.



Winter

ID points

- ① Poorly known: Larger redpoll than Mealy/Coues's, closer to Greenland/'dark *islandica*' in size. Longer tailed and the bill more pinched and pointy than Coues's.
- ② Typical birds resemble large streaky Coues's (averages more streaking on flanks, rump, undertail) similarly densely feathered and fluffy looking as per other Arctic Redpoll taxa. Some very similar to Coues's in appearance.
- ③ Some (perhaps mainly young birds) are even more coarsely streaked (looking like whiter versions of dark *islandica*) and so harder to assign.
- ④ More often buff fringes to flight feathers and buff patches in rump (areas which are whiter in Coues's.)
- ⑤ Adult males like other Arctic Redpolls have delicate pink flush to breast in spring.

Calls

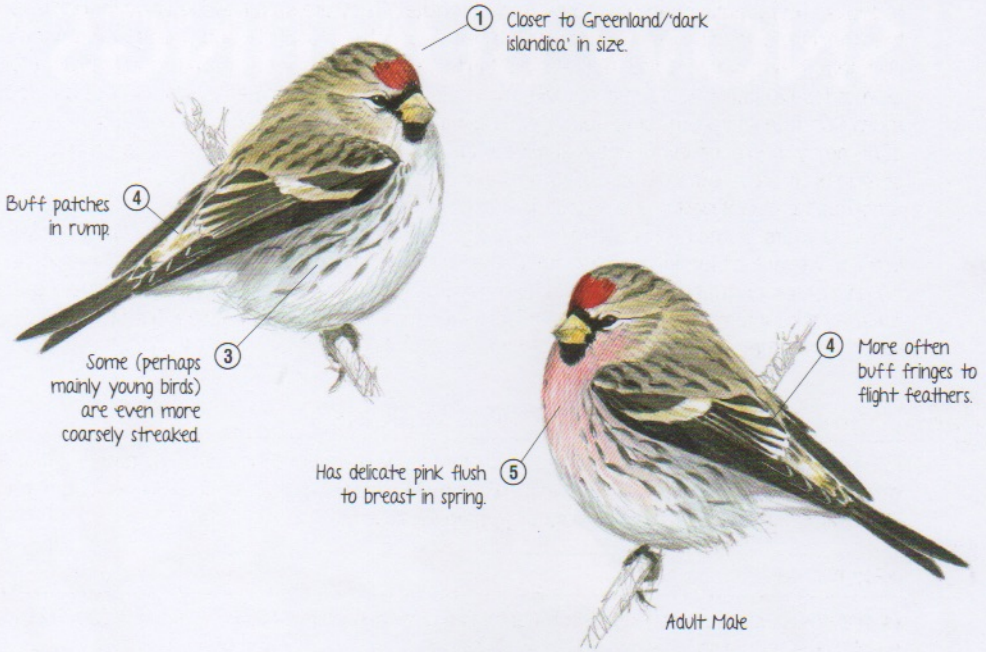
Harsher lower pitched chatter calls than Coues's/Mealy and can be uttered singly as 'chup' notes, similar to Greenland. More research needed.



Distribution



Acanthis (flammea) islandica



Icelandic Arctic Redpoll *islandica* | January

O. Oskarsson



Icelandic Arctic Redpoll *islandica* | March

Y. Kolbeinsson



Icelandic Arctic Redpoll *islandica* | April

O. Oskarsson



Adult Male Icelandic Arctic Redpoll *islandica* | April

Y. Kolbeinsson