The Wild Geese of Wexford

Jon Gower

Published on: Jul 19, 2021

License: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0)
... Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting - over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

Mary Oliver, from ‘Wild Geese’

Many of us have dealt with the captivity of lockdown by imagining places they will go when restrictions lift. The Wexford Slobs in Ireland are near the top of my list. Why? Well, one of the most exciting sound of my childhood came with winter, when wild geese flew over the house at night. We lived in the small village of Pwll, half way along the south coast of Wales, on the edge of the Loughor estuary. Hearing the nocturnal fly-past I would go out to the small back yard to listen to a sound that was, for me, the very distillation of wildness. Honking their way through skies of ink-swirl clouds were small flocks of European White-fronted Geese, flying from their daytime feeding areas on the lush riverine meadows of the river Tywi near Dinefwr to night-time roosts at Whiteford Burrows on the north Gower coast. Whiteford has a disused iron lighthouse and if I was really lucky would see the small skeins pass in front of a plump moon, their imprinting silhouettes making a Chinese silk lantern of the scene. Sadly, the numbers of the geese fell, year on year. There were just over a hundred present in the winter of 92/93, which halved the following year so that the last small flock which was present in 1996/7
numbered just a dozen birds. With that, the winter skies above my childhood home fell painfully silent, but the birds still fly on in memory, together with that simple, haunting soundtrack of excited calls.

Nowadays the European white-fronted goose is only really found in Wales on the marshes of the Dyfi estuary, and even there the flock is small and unstable in number, mixed occasionally with ones which fly in from Greenland. A flock of geese which spent the winter on Tregaron Bog, a nearby upland peat bog in mid Wales, was thought to be of a sub-species, the Greenland white-fronted goose but it wasn’t until July 1947 – when a bird ringed at Ikamuit in west Greenland the previous year was found in Tregaron – that this was proved. But year on year this small flock diminished in number, perhaps overwintering in Ireland instead and while Greenland white-fronts have occasionally been seen in various places in Wales over the years, their stronghold is certainly Ireland, especially the Wexford Slobs. It’s an important place, globally, for this is Europe’s rarest goose and this is one of its most important winter haunts. Today, Wexford Wildfowl Reserve hosts about two-thirds of Ireland’s approximately 12,000 Greenland white-fronts, which make up half the world population.

If you come here at either dawn or dusk in winter you can relish a real wildlife spectacle. As the Irish Times journalist Paddy Woodworth described it ‘You are likely to be astounded by the sight of huge flocks of geese shifting, in vast patterns alive with kinetic energy, to and from the sandbanks in the harbour where they roost at night.’

Wexford has a central role in the story of this type of goose. The Greenland white-fronted goose was only identified as a sub-species in the middle of the twentieth century, because of one of the most pre-eminent naturalists of the day, Sir Peter Scott. He tells the story thus:

In the 1930s and 1940s the taxonomy of the Palaearctic White-fronted Geese was very confused, especially on those birds breeding in Greenland, whose wintering grounds were then unknown. I had received live hand-raised Whitefronts from West Greenland which had predominantly yellow bills and rather dark plumage. I had also noticed a description in a book by no less an authority than Payne-Galway, a normally reliable source, that the Whitefronts in Ireland had yellow bills.

A visit to Ireland by Scott confirmed that the White-fronts there were also dark coloured. The Second World War intervened but, by 1948, he and his colleague C.T. Dalgety had gathered enough evidence to propose a new race of Whitefront, quite distinct from the
Russian geese, breeding west of the Greenland icecap and wintering in the British Isles, chiefly in Ireland. A bird shot at Wexford was the necessary confirmation.

The new race, the Greenland white-fronted goose was readily accepted by the ornithological world and in the years that followed extensive studies, including ringing helped expand the knowledge we have about them, following their migration paths through Iceland into Scotland, Ireland and a thin scattering into central Wales.

These white-fronts had long been colloquially known in Ireland as the “bog goose”, wintering on open peatlands with little human presence and celebrated by poets such as W.B. Yeats. But during the nineteenth century the goose’s habitat was extensively drained and cut for turf, or later converted to forestry but this all coincided, fortuitously, with the reclamation of Wexford Slobs from Wexford Harbour.

The Greenlands first arrived here at the beginning of the twentieth century and by 1925 their numbers had grown, reaching 4000-6000 birds by the 1940s, leaving traditional haunts in the midland and western bogs. The Greenlands had virtually replaced the greylags on the North Slob at Wexford by the 1950s but this was a time of parlous and worrying decline for the race, down by 50% from the population of between 12000 and 17,000 in the fifties to an estimated 7,500 to 8,600 birds. Their populations are still scanty but the sound of the geese, and the sight of their wings beating a metronome rhythm as they lift from dining on cereal stalks are still an evocative part of Wexford winters. And then in spring, as the days lengthen, they leave for northern climes, as the poet Michael Wilson noted:

```
Slowly Spring warms blood and sap
Madness seizes boxing hares
And tumbling lapwings cry ‘pee-wit’.
The pendulum swings back.
Geese and waders leave, urged North
To Greenland’s summer plenty...
```

Jon Gower
May 2021