

A PELICAN BOOK

JAMES FISHER

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Bird Recognition



Describing the appearance, life,
and habits of sea birds and waders,
with many maps and charts and
over eighty illustrations by
'FISH-HAWK'

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Bird Recognition has probably the widest circulation of any European bird-book. It provides more up-to-date information than has previously been fitted into a relatively small space; and deals much more fully and scientifically with the habits and yearly life of the British birds than does any other pocket identification book. Our present knowledge of the habits and distribution of birds is of an entirely different order from that of our grandfathers: this book is an essential introduction for the beginner to, and reminder for the expert of, the very numerous detailed facts of British ornithology, stored in the literature and experience of bird-watchers.

This first volume of *Bird Recognition* deals with sea birds and waders, and the second volume, which is also available (A176), describes the birds of prey and waterfowl. It was originally intended to include also the game-birds in Volume 2, but for the sake of a full treatment of the species it has now been decided to put these in the third volume (to be published soon), which will include also the larger perching birds – and to publish a fourth volume on the smaller perching and singing birds.

‘Mr Fisher has closed the gap between the amateur and the professional ornithologist. This book is the best available for amateurs; it also contains much that will give pleasure to the specialist.’ – *News Chronicle*

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JAMES FISHER

BIRD RECOGNITION

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SEA-BIRDS AND
WADERS

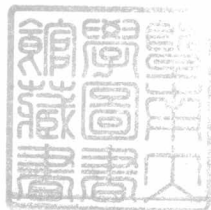
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With 88 illustrations by
FISH-HAWK

77 maps, mainly compiled by
W. B. ALEXANDER

and 75 charts compiled by the
writer

NEW AND REVISED
EDITION



PENGUIN BOOKS

MELBOURNE · LONDON · BALTIMORE

First published 1947

Revised edition 1954



FOR

Edmund

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for Penguin Books Ltd
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INTRODUCTION

THE object of this book, and of the three companion volumes that follow it (*Birds of prey and water-fowl*; *Rails, game-birds and larger perching and singing birds*; and *Smaller perching and singing birds*) is not a single one. It is my belief that the thousands of bird watchers in Britain today (less than a dozen of whom are professionals) want a pocket-book that enables them to recognize not only a bird's *kind*, but also its *place in nature*, and its *general importance*. A disrespectful friend of mine, when I once showed him a spotted redshank in September on a Midland sewage farm, said 'So what?' Which is a perfectly reasonable observation. This book is an attempt to answer it, not only for the spotted redshank but for all the species of waders and seabirds that have been observed more than a hundred times in Britain.

I have had a tremendous advantage over all previous compilers of similar books. By 1941, when I first began to collect my notes, the fifth and final volume of *The Handbook of British Birds*, under the general editorship of the late H. F. Witherby, had been published. This great storehouse of information, which has no parallel in any other country in the world, has been my continual guide. Particularly useful have been the sections compiled by the late B. W. Tucker, on habitat, field-characters and general habits, voice and display.

I must particularly thank 'Fish-Hawk', not only for his pictures, but his patience. W. B. Alexander's maps represent literally years of work, and I am grateful indeed for the opportunity to publish them. Others, to whom I have shown the book at its various stages, and who have been very helpful, include A. W. Boyd, H. Munro Fox and Julian Huxley.

Within the sea-birds and waders, I have arranged the birds in strict systematic order, by species. I have dealt with subspecies under the species to which they belong. The Witherby, or W numbers, attached to each species at the bottom of the page, correspond with those in the check-list in the *Handbook*, which until late 1952 was accepted as the standard list of British birds. The B numbers correspond with those in its successor, the *Check-List of the British Ornithologists' Union*.

The two words in italics after the English name of each species form its Linnean or scientific name. The first (which always bears a capital letter) is the name of the genus and the second (which starts with a small letter) is an adjective describing it. The two

together constitute the name of the species. The name in capital letters after the specific name is that of the author who first published a description of the species, and the date is the year in which he did so; if he assigned it then to a genus other than that in which it is now placed, his name is (by rule) enclosed in brackets.

At the risk of repetition I must make something quite clear: The task of compiling this volume would have been very much greater and the information contained in it would have been very much less, had not this standard work, *The Handbook of British Birds*, been published. It deals in immense detail with all the birds on the British list, and is illustrated in colour throughout. Its principal editor was the late H. F. Witherby and afterwards the late Mr B. W. Tucker, who revised it. It is published by Messrs H. F. & G. Witherby, Ltd, and is in five volumes.

BOOKS ON BIRD RECOGNITION

- T. A. Coward (1920 and subsequent editions). *The birds of the British Isles and their eggs*. London, Warne, Wayside and Woodland series. Entirely illustrated with the colour plates by Thorburn and Keulemans from Lord Lilford's *Coloured figures of the birds of the British Islands*. Highly recommended.
- Edmund Sandars (1927 and subsequent editions). *A bird book for the pocket*. London, Oxford University Press. Crude coloured pictures. Practical and common-sensical. Recommended.
- Norman H. Joy (1936 and subsequent edition). *How to know British birds*. London, Witherby. Black and white and coloured sketches. Extremely practical. Recommended.
- H. F. Witherby (editor), F. C. R. Jourdain, N. F. Ticehurst and B. W. Tucker (1938-41 and subsequent edition). *The handbook of British birds*. London, Witherby, 5 vols. Coloured pictures of most stages of plumage of every species on the British list. Standard textbook. Serious students ignore it at their peril.
- P. A. D. Hollom (editor, 1952). *The popular handbook of British Birds*, London, Witherby. A condensed version of the *Handbook* designed for the practical field-man. Highly recommended.
- R. S. R. Fitter and R. A. Richardson (1952). *The pocket guide to British birds*. London, Collins. Highly recommended.
- Roger T. Peterson, Guy R. Mountfort and P. A. D. Hollom (in press). *Field guide to the birds of Britain and Western Europe*. London, Collins. Will prove essential.

HOW TO READ THE MAPS

PRACTICALLY every map has been compiled by W. B. Alexander, who has recently retired from the Directorship of the Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology at Oxford.

In nearly every case the distribution has been blocked in from the *published* literature only, on a vice-county basis. Black areas represent breeding distribution: grey areas those where the species has been observed, but not breeding; white areas those from which the species has not been recorded. The vice-counties of Britain are shown on the following pages.

In the course of his work at the Institute, Mr Alexander has read through all the published records of birds available in its excellent library, and nearly all others besides. Records published since 1894 but not after 1950 (except in special cases) have been used to compile the maps published here, though Mr Alexander has also compiled sets to show nineteenth century distribution, which are of the greatest interest to students of change.

As far as breeding distribution is concerned, there have, of course, been changes in many species since the beginning of the present century; and the black areas only in special cases represent what, on the latest information available, is considered to be the breeding distribution at the time of publication of this book; in these cases there is usually some comment in the text under *Distribution*. In most other cases, however, the reader is warned that a black vice-county may mean only one breeding record for it since 1894.

The black areas have not all been produced by blacking in the whole vice-counties. In the case of coastal breeding species we have simply blacked in the coastal strips concerned. In other cases the species is known to breed at definite limited stations, which can be better indicated by dots than by blacking in.

The grey areas simply represent those vice-counties from which there has been one non-breeding record or more of the species since 1894.

LIST OF VICE-COUNTIES

ENGLAND AND WALES

PENINSULA

- 1 West Cornwall with Scilly
- 2 East Cornwall
- 3 South Devon
- 4 North Devon
- 5 South Somerset
- 6 North Somerset

CHANNEL

- 7 North Wilts.
- 8 South Wilts.
- 9 Dorset
- 10 Isle of Wight
- 11 South Hants.
- 12 North Hants.
- 13 West Sussex
- 14 East Sussex

THAMES

- 15 East Kent
- 16 West Kent
- 17 Surrey
- 18 South Essex
- 19 North Essex
- 20 Hertford
- 21 Middlesex

- 22 Berks.
- 23 Oxford
- 24 Buckingham

ANGLIA

- 25 East Suffolk
- 26 West Suffolk
- 27 East Norfolk
- 28 West Norfolk
- 29 Cambridge
- 30 Bedford and detached parts of Hunts.
- 31 Huntingdon
- 32 Northampton

SEVERN

- 33 East Gloucester
- 34 West Gloucester
- 35 Monmouth
- 36 Hereford
- 37 Worcester
- 38 Warwick
- 39 Stafford and Dudley
- 40 Shropshire

SOUTH WALES

- 41 Glamorgan
- 42 Brecon
- 43 Radnor
- 44 Carmarthen
- 45 Pembroke
- 46 Cardigan

NORTH WALES

- 47 Montgomery
- 48 Merioneth
- 49 Carnarvon
- 50 Denbigh and parts of Flint
- 51 Flint
- 52 Anglesey

TRENT

- 53 South Lincoln
- 54 North Lincoln
- 55 Leicester with Rutland
- 56 Nottingham
- 57 Derby

MERSEY

- 58 Cheshire
- 59 South Lancashire
- 60 Mid Lancashire

HUMBER

- 61 South-east York
- 62 North-east York
- 63 South-west York
- 64 Mid-west York
- 65 North-west York

TYNE

- 66 Durham
- 67 Northumberland. South
- 68 Cheviotland, or Northumberland. North

LAKES

- 69 Westmorland with North Lancashire
- 70 Cumberland
- 71 Isle of Man

SCOTLAND

W. LOWLANDS

- 72 Dumfries
- 73 Kirkcudbright
- 74 Wigtown
- 75 Ayr
- 76 Renfrew
- 77 Lanark and E. Dumbarton

E. LOWLANDS

- 78 Peebles
- 79 Selkirk
- 80 Roxburgh
- 81 Berwick
- 82 East Lothian

- 83 Midlothian
- 84 West Lothian

E. HIGHLANDS

- 85 Fife with Kinross
- 86 Stirling
- 87 South Perth with Clackmannan, and parts of Stirling
- 88 Mid Perth
- 89 North Perth
- 90 Angus or Forfar
- 91 Kincardine
- 92 South Aberdeen
- 93 North Aberdeen
- 94 Banff

- 95 Moray or Elgin
- 96 Easterness (East Inverness with Nairn)

W. HIGHLANDS

- 97 Westerness (West Inverness with North Argyll)
- 98 Argyll (Main)
- 99 Dumbarton (West)
- 100 Clyde Isles
- 101 Cantire
- 102 South Ebudes (Islay, etc.) and Scarba

N. HIGHLANDS

- 103 Mid Ebudes (Mull, etc.)
- 104 North Ebudes (Skye, etc.)
- 105 West Ross
- 106 East Ross
- 107 East Sutherland
- 108 West Sutherland
- 109 Caithness

NORTH ISLES

- 110 Outer Hebrides
- 111 Orkney
- 112 Shetland

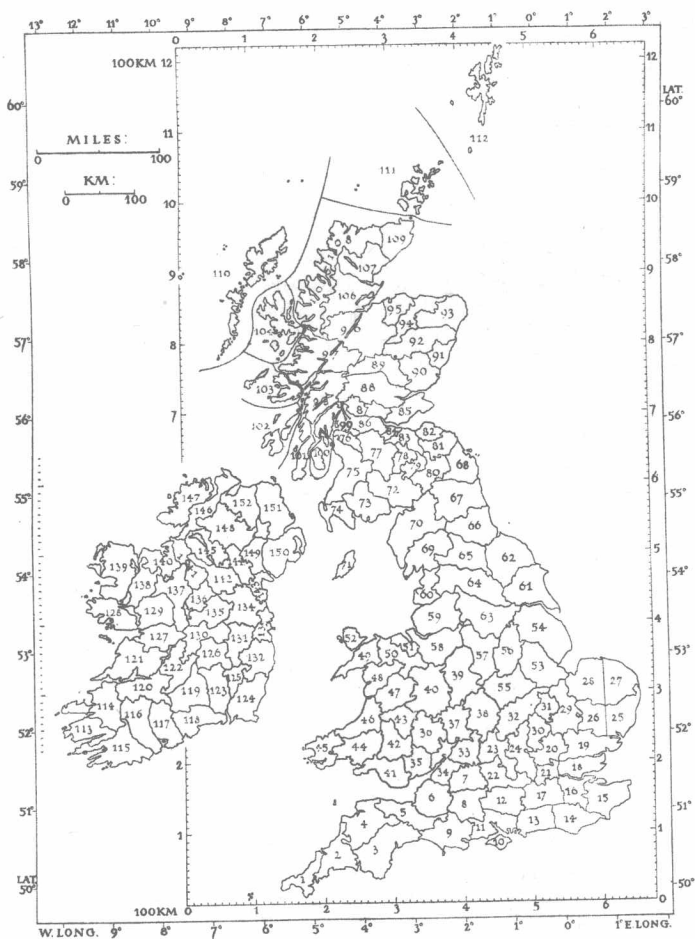
IRELAND

- (1) 113 South Kerry
- (2) 114 North Kerry
- (3) 115 West Cork
- (4) 116 Mid Cork
- (5) 117 East Cork
- (6) 118 Waterford
- (7) 119 South Tipperary
- (8) 120 Limerick
- (9) 121 Clare with Aran Isles
- (10) 122 North Tipperary

- (11) 123 Kilkenny
- (12) 124 Wexford
- (13) 125 Carlow
- (14) 126 Leix
- (15) 127 South-east Galway
- (16) 128 West Galway
- (17) 129 North-east Galway
- (18) 130 Offaly
- (19) 131 Kildare
- (20) 132 Wicklow
- (21) 133 Dublin

- (22) 134 Meath
- (23) 135 Westmeath
- (24) 136 Longford
- (25) 137 Roscommon
- (26) 138 East Mayo
- (27) 139 West Mayo
- (28) 140 Sligo
- (29) 141 Leitrim
- (30) 142 Cavan
- (31) 143 Louth
- (32) 144 Monaghan
- (33) 145 Fermanagh
- (34) 146 East Donegal

- (35) 147 West Donegal
- (36) 148 Tyrone
- (37) 149 Armagh
- (38) 150 Down
- (39) 151 Antrim
- (40) 152 Derry



THE NEW NATURALIST VICE-COUNTY MAP OF THE BRITISH ISLES

The Vice-Counties of the British Isles. The political divisions of Britain, i.e., the simple counties, are of all sorts of different shapes and sizes, and differ greatly in biological importance. The idea of the vice-county system is to divide Britain into areas of roughly equal importance, without sacrificing the county system. A glance at the map will show the sort of compromise that has been reached. Reproduced by permission of Messrs Collins, publishers of the *New Naturalist*.

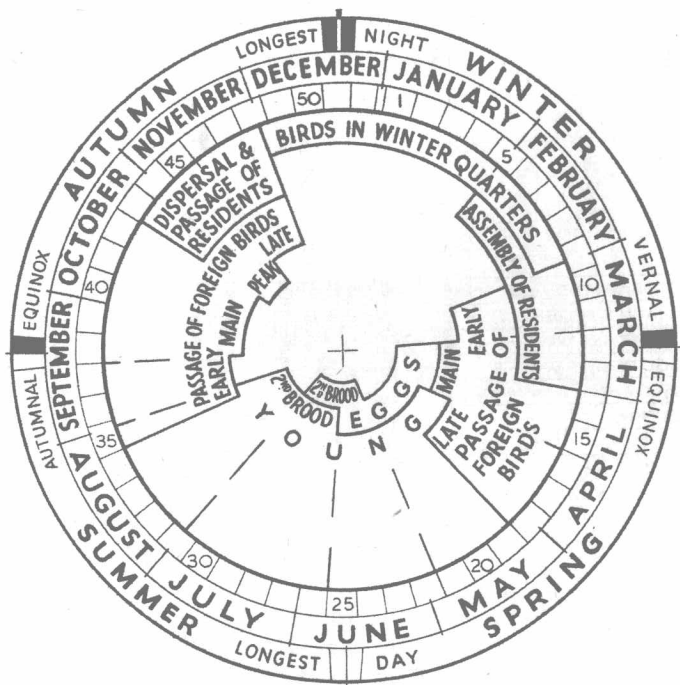
HOW THE YEAR-CYCLE CHARTS WORK

THOSE woodcock which are resident in this country leave their winter haunts and feeding-grounds and begin to assemble at their breeding-grounds at the beginning of February. This assembly is usually complete at the end of March. The breeding season is a long one, the species being double-brooded. Eggs of the first brood can be found between the middle of March and the end of May; of the second brood in June and July. Young of the first brood can be found unable to fly from mid-April; and young found from the last week of June until the end of August are likely to be of the second brood.

Although all young can fly by September British resident woodcock do not normally disperse to their winter haunts until the end of October or November. By December this dispersal is complete and birds are generally in their winter quarters.

The passage of continental birds through and to Britain begins in March, a month after home birds have begun to reassemble at their breeding haunts. The passage of continental birds is at full strength between mid-March and mid-April, and continues at diminished strength until the first week in May.

The autumn passage of continental birds begins nearly two months before the autumn dispersal of residents. Early birds pass from the last week of August to mid-September; from mid-September the main autumn passage takes place, reaching its peak at the end of October and the beginning of November. Passage continues until the end of November after which birds are generally in their winter quarters either in Britain or on the Continent.



THE statement about woodcock on the opposite page took up two-thirds of it, and described the yearly life of the woodcock in fair detail. It is obvious that there would be no room for it in its proper place, on page 56 or 57. The above chart, however, gives the same information; indeed, it is more precise about dates; and reduced in size (but not, I believe, in clarity), occupies only a quarter of page 57.

All that is needed to read the charts is a straight edge placed across the centre of the circle and the desired date or period.

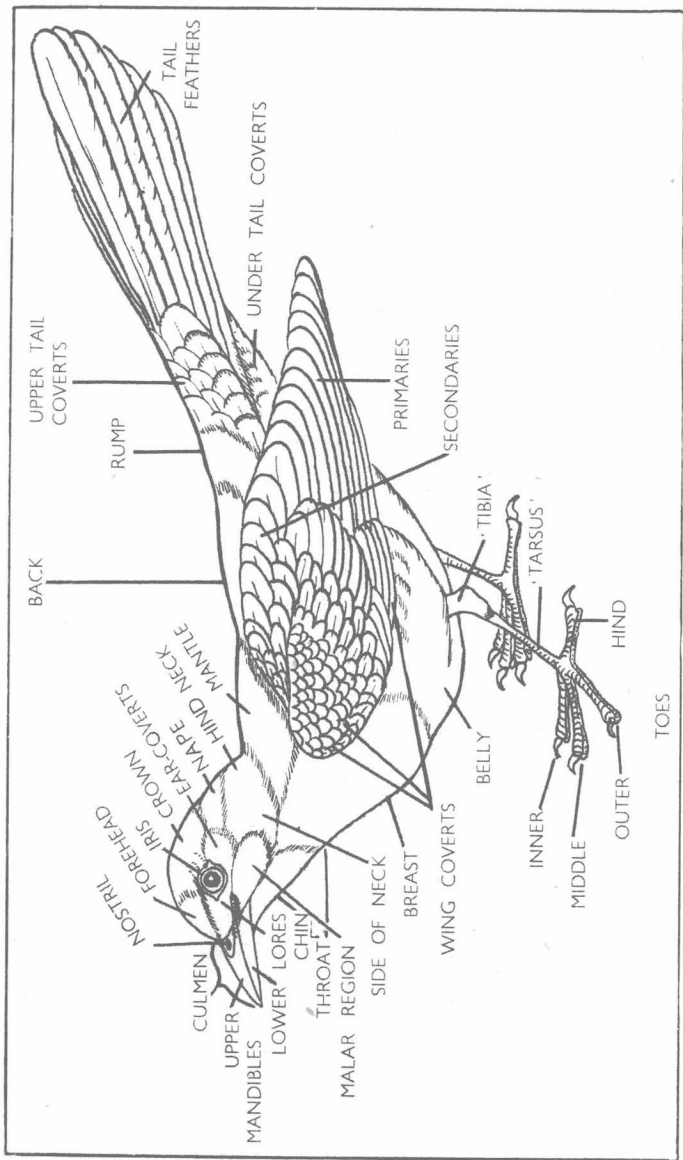
Readers must not imagine that the periods chronicled on the chart are accurate to within a day. The chart (like the maps) is a first approximation to the truth and should be treated as no more.

KEY: HABITAT WHEN NOT AT BREEDING-PLACE: SEA BIRDS

	Oceans	Seas to Edge of Continental Shelf	Seas in Sight of Rocky Shores	Seas in Sight of Sandy Shores	Estuaries	Inland Waters	On Dry Land
STORM-PETREL							
LEACH'S PETREL							
GREAT SHEARWATER							
SOOTY SHEARWATER							
LITTLE AUK							
PUFFIN							
FULMAR							
KITTIWAKE							
GREAT SKUA							
ARCTIC SKUA							
POMARINE SKUA							
LONG-TAILED SKUA							
MANX SHEARWATER							
GANNET							
RAZORBILL							
GUILLEMOT							
ARCTIC TERN							
GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL							
GLAUCOUS GULL							
ICELAND GULL							
COMMON GULL							
HERRING-GULL							
LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL							
SHAG							
BLACK GUILLEMOT							
ROSEATE TERN							
BLACK TERN							
SANDWICH TERN							
COMMON TERN							
CORMORANT							
LITTLE TERN							
LITTLE GULL							
BLACK-HEADED GULL							

KEY: HABITAT WHEN NOT AT BREEDING-PLACE: WADERS

	At Sea	Rocky Shores	Estuaries, Open Sands and Flats	Estuarine Creeks, Salt Marsh Gutters	Rivers, Streams and their Banks	Lakes, Reservoirs and their Borders	Marshes, Buggy Pools and Sewage Farms	Dry Open Land	Woodland
GREY PHALAROPE									
RED-NECKED PHALAROPE									
REDSHANK									
SPOTTED REDSHANK									
COMMON SANDPIPER									
PURPLE SANDPIPER									
TURNSTONE									
OYSTERCATCHER									
WHIMBREL									
CURLEW									
DOTTEREL									
GOLDEN PLOVER									
LAPWING									
LITTLE RINGED PLOVER									
RINGED PLOVER									
KENTISH PLOVER									
AVOCET									
DUNLIN									
CURLEW-SANDPIPER									
BLACK-TAILED GODWIT									
BAR-TAILED GODWIT									
KNOT									
SANDERLING									
GREY PLOVER									
LITTLE STINT									
TEMMINCK'S STINT									
GREEN SANDPIPER									
GREENSHANK									
BLACK-WINGED STILT									
SNIPE									
JACK SNIPE									
CRANE									
RUFF									
WOOD-SANDPIPER									
WOODCOCK									
STONE-CURLEW									
GREAT BUSTARD									
LITTLE BUSTARD									



HOW TO USE THE FIELD CHARACTER KEYS

NO key is perfect. Every system that has been devised for running down something by a process of elimination has this common fault; that once the user has taken the wrong turning it is difficult for him to get back on the rails again. It is my hope that users of the sea-bird and wader identification keys that follow will be able to keep on the rails. I have tried to avoid, as much as possible, suggesting size as a key to the distinction between any two species or groups. But sometimes size *must* be used. Lest my use of the words 'small', 'medium-large', 'immense', etc., etc., be thought vague I must state at once that they have exact meanings. They correspond to the length of the bird from bill-tip to tail-tip in its normal live posture, in nearly every case. In some cases, however, where birds have specially long bills (e.g., curlew), long necks (e.g., crane) or long tails (e.g., long-tailed skua) I have placed them in those categories to which they would have belonged had they 'normal' bills, necks or tails; and have explained about it in the text. The object of this is to gather into the same categories those birds which bulk approximately the same. The meanings are as follows:

<i>Adjective</i>	<i>Length in inches</i>	<i>Example</i>
Minute	5-6	Little stint
Very small	6-8	Storm-petrel
Small	8-12	Golden plover
Small-medium	12-16	Manx shearwater
Medium	16-20	Kittiwake
Medium-large	20-24	Herring-gull
Large	24-28	Great black-backed gull
Very large	28-32	Cormorant
Immense	32-36	Gannet
Gigantic	over 36	Great bustard male

There are no very minute (length 4-5 inches) or tiny birds (under 4 inches) mentioned in this volume.

To show the key in action, let us take an example from the wader key. You are walking, one day late in July, along the broad white beach of the island of Tiree in the Inner Hebrides. A flock of small birds with grey backs settles and proceeds to scuttle along the sands in a very busy way, packed close. The flock takes