

Brent Goose

Light-bellied Brent Goose
 Photograph: Brian Burke



As many as 30,000 of the world's Light-bellied Brent Geese spend the winter in Ireland. **Ricky Whelan** reports.

The name 'Brent' is derived from the Norse word 'brand,' meaning burnt. The goose was given this name because of its predominant colours. Brent Geese are a winter visitor to Ireland. This small black goose species can be found at sites around the entire coast but the biggest flocks congregate at just a few important sites.

The birds we commonly refer to as 'Brent Geese' are **Light-bellied Brent Geese** *Branta bernicla hrota*, which are by far the most commonly encountered Brent Goose race in Ireland. Two other subspecies of Brent Goose can be encountered in Ireland but are far rarer: **Dark-bellied Brent Goose** *Branta bernicla bernicla* is sometimes found in small numbers while the **Black Brant** *Branta bernicla nigricans* is rarer still.

Population

Ireland is home to the largest wintering population of Light-bellied Brent Geese in Europe, with as many as 30,000 individuals spending the winter months (October-March) here, with smaller numbers wintering in western Iceland, western Britain and northern France. The entire European population has recently (winter 2016/17) been estimated at 37,000, an increase from declines recorded in the past decade. Significant numbers also winter along the eastern seaboard of North America.

Brent Goose censuses have been carried out in Ireland over the past 20 years, coordinated by the **Irish Brent Goose Research Group** (see also, page 22). Over the

years Strangford Lough has been shown to support the highest flock numbers and, with 22,000 individuals being counted there during the 2016 winter census (carried out in mid-October), that trend continues.

Ecology

Brent typically arrive in Ireland from early September on. The first records often come from Strangford Lough, where these small herbivores gather in large flocks to feast on the *Zostera* (eelgrass) beds. Eelgrass is a small plant that grows in large carpets on intertidal mudflats. The Brent Goose flocks will graze on the *Zostera* until none remains before moving on to feed on other intertidal plants and algae.

The Brent flocks spread out and move clockwise around the coast to find foraging areas; they can be found all around the Irish coastline by mid-winter.

Individuals and family groups are site-faithful, meaning they will return to the same preferred feeding locations each winter. Brent have also shown themselves to be very adaptable and in recent times have taken to grazing terrestrial grasslands when food becomes scarce along the immediate coastline. Brent will happily graze on grass within parks, playing fields and even on roundabouts.

Residents along the Dublin city coastline will be familiar with Brent Goose flocks sharing their recreational grasslands. Inland feeding

Light-bellied Brent Geese foraging on BirdWatch Ireland's East Coast Nature Reserve, Newcastle, Co Wicklow. Photograph: Brian Burke



sites are important for these grazing groups: in 2009, an MSc study by **Lorraine Benson** identified sixty inland sites used by Brent Geese; one of these, Tymon Park, is 11.5km inland and just inside the M50 corridor. Since 2009, the number of inland feeding areas has grown to close to one hundred sites.

For these migratory birds, feeding is all about bulking up and replacing the fat reserves depleted during their long journey south. Eelgrass and other intertidal marine plants are preferentially grazed by the geese, as the energy reward is far greater than that from terrestrial grasses. Terrestrial grass, however, is a vital component in the diet of the Brent, as eelgrass beds are grazed bare by the end of autumn, and the geese need to retain body condition to survive the winter and make the return journey north to their breeding grounds in the spring.

Migration

During our summer (June-August) the Brent are in the eastern Canadian High Arctic, mating, nesting and rearing young. Following the breeding season, the geese migrate south-east, travelling in family groups. The flocks stage in western Iceland and Greenland during August and September before arriving in Ireland, with the first birds often being spotted in late August and larger numbers arriving day by day.

The flocks build during the early winter and stay in Ireland until March, before the



Light-bellied Brent Geese
Photograph: Brian Burke

AMBASSADORS FOR BRENT GEESE IN DUBLIN

Dublin Bay is a UNESCO Biosphere reserve, having the purpose "to inspire a positive future by connecting people and nature today." The Brent Goose Ambassador Project aims to raise awareness of Brent Geese wintering in Dublin Bay through storytelling and peer communication between communities, advising people to help protect the visiting geese by avoiding disturbing the flocks, and raising awareness of wider conservation issues affecting migratory species.

This partnership project conceived by **Dublin City Council** brings the local authority together with **BirdWatch Ireland, UNESCO Biosphere stakeholders** and, most importantly, **local schools and communities**, with a common purpose to look out for and help conserve their local Brent Goose populations.

To date, the project has involved the 4th Class school pupils from schools across north Dublin. Schools were invited to learn how to identify Brent Geese with confidence at North Bull Island and in their local parks.

Medical students from the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland have also held workshops on nature and UNESCO Biospheres with the children.

Photographs of the students' fieldwork along with their drawings and stories were exhibited in the Civic Offices on Wood Quay. Students were invited to the Civic Offices earlier this year and were presented with certificates by Dublin City Council to celebrate their involvement and pride in being civic-minded for the city and the planet. Their work was also showcased at the EuroMAB Biosphere Conference 2017 in France in April and on RTÉ Radio 1's *Mooney Goes Wild* programme.

Plans to grow the project are underway, and an online Brent Goose Project resource will go live later this year.

Factfile

Common name: Light-bellied Brent Goose

Scientific name: *Branta bernicla hrota*

Irish name: Cadhan

Local name: Sea Goose

Occurrence: Winter migrant from high Arctic Canada. Most occur in Ireland between October and April.

Life-span: The oldest known wild bird was 28 years old, although surviving to about 19 years is the norm.

Conservation status: Amber-listed in Ireland, as the majority winter at fewer than ten sites. The Irish population is also internationally significant, another amber-listing criterion. The European population has been evaluated as 'vulnerable' as several important populations have declined.

Identification: Small dark goose with black head, neck and breast, dark-brown upperparts and pale underparts. Almost whitish flanks, and small white crescent on the neck visible at close range.

urge to head north again takes hold. On the way back to the breeding grounds the birds will again make a stopover in western Iceland and in Greenland to refuel and rest before finally arriving back in Canada.

Conservation issues

In Ireland, the Light-bellied Brent Goose is Amber-listed (*Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland*), as the majority winter at fewer than ten sites. The Irish population is also internationally significant, another amber-listing criterion. Across their migratory range they encounter several threats, including disturbance at important feeding sites; competition for nest sites on breeding grounds; and hunting. They are also

vulnerable to issues affecting the availability of eelgrass in their wintering areas.

Where to see

Highest numbers (*circa* 30,000) are seen in October at Strangford Lough (Co Down), where most congregate on arrival.

Thereafter, they move to other estuarine sites such as Lough Foyle (Co Derry) and Dublin Bay, which holds up to 7,000 by late winter. Other well-used sites (with 1,000 to 3,500 birds) are Tralee Bay, Lough Gill and Akeragh Lough (all in Co Kerry), Rogerstown Estuary (Co Dublin) and Wexford Harbour and Slobs (Co Wexford).

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