

# Short papers

## Female Green-winged Teal in Shetland

**Abstract** A female Green-winged Teal *Anas carolinensis*, paired with a drake, was seen and photographed in Shetland in May 2018. This is perhaps the first confirmed record of a female for Britain & Ireland. The identification of this bird, and that of female Green-winged Teal in general, is discussed.

On 11th May 2018, Hugh Harrop found a male Green-winged Teal *Anas carolinensis* at Loch of Hillwell, a shallow, freshwater loch at the south end of Mainland Shetland. The loch is viewable from a minor road at a distance of c. 250–400 m, and the male Green-winged Teal was easy to see when I arrived that evening, feeding along the far shore. It appeared to be paired with a female teal and, through a telescope on  $\times 70$ , I was struck by the relatively well-marked head pattern of the female. It showed

a solidly dark crown, pale supercilium and a narrow but well-defined blackish eye-stripe; in addition, there was a solidly dark, grey cheek patch, the upper edge of which contrasted strongly with the pale bar below the eye-stripe, which in turn was broader and more obvious than the supercilium. Most striking of all, especially when the bird was viewed head on, was that the pale bar below the eye-stripe terminated in a pale loreal spot, in a pattern recalling a female Garganey *Spatula querquedula*. It was also a particularly



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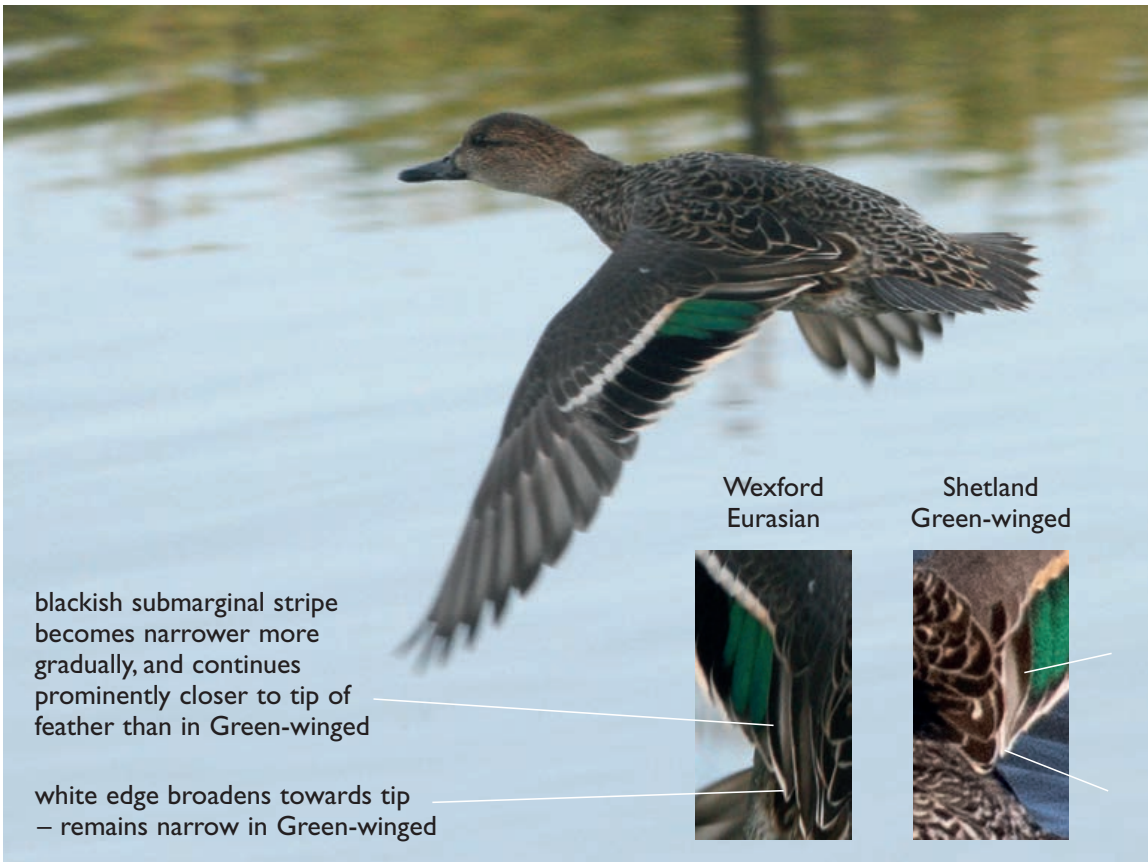
**14 & 15.** Female and male Green-winged Teals *Anas carolinensis*, Loch of Hillwell, Shetland, May 2018.

Roger Ridington



16. Female Green-winged Teal *Anas carolinensis*, Loch of Hillwell, Shetland, May 2018.

Killian Mullarney



17. Female Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*, Co. Wexford, December 2007, with annotations to illustrate the differences in the pattern of the outermost tertial between this bird and the Shetland bird as shown in plate 16.

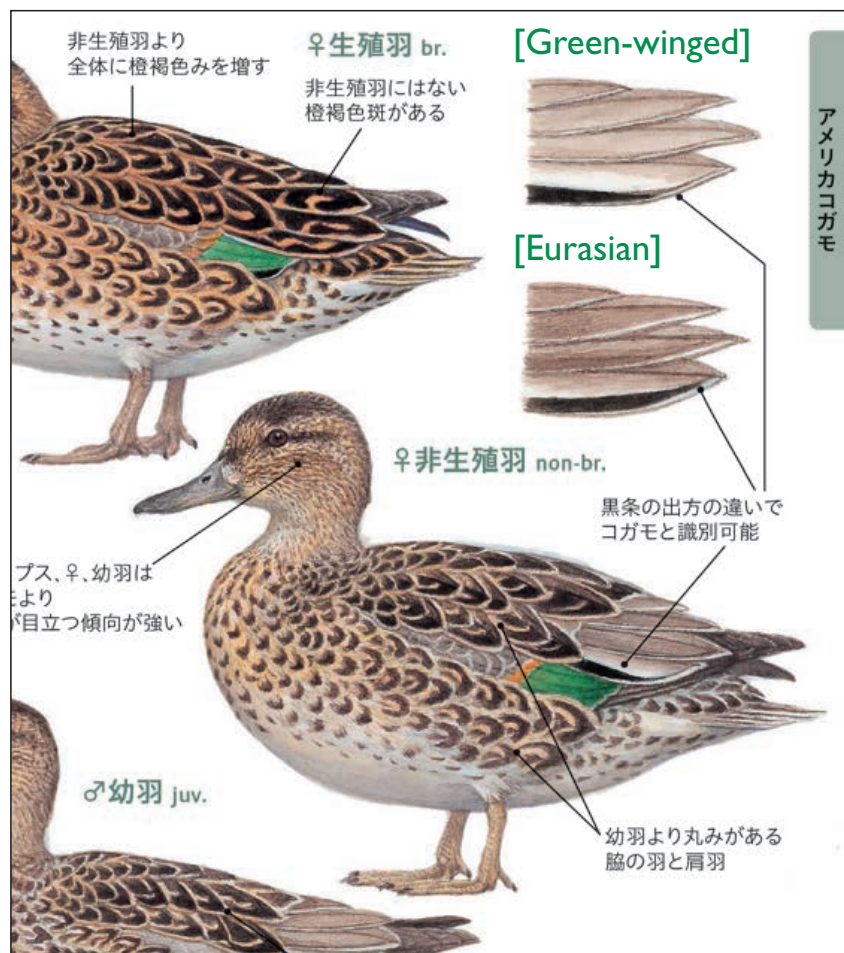
dark bird overall, almost blackish brown and lacking any obvious warmth (plates 14 & 15). These features are all associated with female Green-winged Teal but the degree of variation within both Green-winged and Eurasian Teal *A. crecca* means that they are at best a starting point in the identification process. My initial research suggested that the pattern of the upperwing was a better guide to the separation of female Green-winged/Eurasian Teal (as described in Reeber 2015; see also Garner 2008, van Duivendijk 2010).

Access to this site is not straightforward, especially in the middle of the Shetland lambing season. The following day, 12th May, Andrew Harrop watched from the road until the female in question flapped and preened; he saw a greater-covert bar that was pale cinnamon-buff on the inner feathers, paler on the outers; and also that the wing-bar was more or less the same width as the white trailing edge. Both he and I tried to photograph the wing pattern that day, but with little success since the bird was on the far side of the loch, around 400 m distant.

Eventually, on the evening of 14th May, the two birds were in an area that I could approach more closely. After a protracted stalk, I managed to come away with some decent flight shots, which showed the key features of the bird's upperwing pattern (plate 16); these pointed towards a female Green-winged Teal, as illustrated by Reeber (2015). The trailing edge, formed by white tips to the secondaries, was broad, more or less the same width as the

greater-covert bar (in Eurasian the width of the trailing edge is typically narrow, often less than half that of the wing-bar); the width of the wing-bar was more or less uniform across its length (in Eurasian the white tips to the outermost feathers can be up to twice as deep as those on the innermost); and the colour of the tips of the innermost greater coverts was distinctly cinnamon buff (often, although by no means always, largely white in Eurasian).

I sent the images to Killian Mullarney, who I knew had a particular interest in the identification and ageing of Green-winged Teals. His quick response was encouraging, and highlighted a key feature that I was hitherto unaware of: the pattern of the outermost tertial, as described in Ujihara & Ujihara (2015; see fig. 1). Killian commented that '... this seems to be the "silver bullet" when it comes to confident identification of out-of-



**Fig. 1.** A comparison of the tertial pattern of Green-winged *Anas carolinensis* (top right) and Eurasian Teal *A. crecca* (below); reproduced with permission from *An Identification Guide to the Ducks of Japan* (Ujihara & Ujihara 2015). This shows the broad black submarginal stripe of Eurasian continuing much further towards the feather tip, while the whitish feather fringe is also broader than in Green-winged.

range females... I have checked many photos and many live Eurasian Teals in the field, and this difference seems to hold up very well indeed. The extent of the dark submarginal stripe on the outermost tertial of your bird looks absolutely spot-on for Green-winged, narrowing to a fine line well back from the tip of the feather, and with a very narrow pale edge to the same feather, which does not seem to widen distally, as it usually does in Eurasian Teal.' Plate 17 shows the pattern of the Shetland bird, with annotations by KM.

I also sent the photos of the Shetland bird to Sébastien Reeber, and to Osao and Michiaki Ujihara. All three replied to say that they considered the bird was a female Green-winged Teal. Sébastien commented that, in addition to the tertial pattern, which he was not aware of when his guide was published in 2015, the pattern of the greater coverts and secondary tips (as described above) in addition to the bird's overall coloration (dark and cold-toned) and the obvious head pattern ('such a contrasting spot at the base of the bill is at best rare in Eurasian') gave a combination of characters that would be unlikely to occur in a female Eurasian.

### Age

Ageing teals in late spring is not easy, even in the hand. The Shetland bird showed no obvious remnants of juvenile plumage, and while this does not categorically rule out a 2CY, there are various tentative pointers towards it being an adult (SR felt that the pattern of the upperwing secondary coverts was at least suggestive of an adult; see <http://wildfowl-id.com/additional%20material/dabbling%20ducks/anacre.html> for comparison between adult and immature upperwing patterns). The tertial coverts and outermost tertial are of adult-type. Some young birds may retain juvenile feathers through the winter, but most replace them, so ageing using tertial feathers is useful only if juvenile feathers have been retained. There are two generations of tail feather on the Shetland female; some of the outermost feathers have been replaced by breeding-plumage feathers (patterned rather than essentially plain) but this is usually the case in both young and adult females. The central rectrices are of adult-type (pointed and not

worn/frayed at tip) but this is also the case in most young birds after early winter.

### Discussion

This appears to be the first record of a female Green-winged Teal in Britain & Ireland for which the critical aspects of the wing pattern could be analysed from photographs. The fact that a female Green-winged Teal would turn up in Britain is hardly surprising – the species is a regular visitor to western Europe, and the most recent report on scarce migrant birds in Britain (White & Kehoe 2018) showed a record year of no fewer than 63 presumed new males in 2016. With the availability of relatively affordable digital camera equipment, further records will surely follow. Any female teal paired with a drake Green-winged and with a striking head pattern is an obvious place to start (although not all female Green-winged Teals show a distinctive head pattern). At sites where access is more straightforward than at Loch of Hillwell, it should be possible to photograph the tertial pattern on a bird at rest, and the upperwing pattern on a preening or flapping bird, rather than having to resort to flight shots.

As with so many other examples of a difficult identification, it is ideal to have a suite of characters that all point in the same direction rather than relying on a single feature. The potential variability of many of the features described above adds to the headache of identifying a vagrant female Green-winged Teal with any confidence. The pattern of the outermost tertial is perhaps the single most important and reliable feature, but even with this there appears to be some variation. KM commented that some photographs of female Green-winged Teal show an outermost tertial that does not have such a narrow white border at the tip as illustrated in the Japanese guide (Ujihara & Ujihara 2005) – i.e. a pattern more similar to that of Eurasian. In terms of the pattern of the greater coverts and secondaries, a few Eurasians have a distinct cinnamon-buff wash on the innermost greater coverts, while it is not too difficult to find photographs of female Eurasian Teals in flight in Europe with a relatively even greater-covert wing-bar (plates 18 & 19). Broad white tips to the secondaries may be a more reliable pointer to Green-winged than the

two previous features, since this does appear to be unusual in female Eurasian Teal, but even here there are exceptions (plate 19). It is interesting to speculate whether these features of the upperwing might be more reliable in the hand than in photographs of a bird in flight; the width or shape of the wing-bar or trailing edge could potentially vary according to the angle of the wing when captured in a split second in those photos from a sequence which are sharp enough to examine closely. Even if that was the case, in most situations a vagrant will have to be assessed in the field rather than the hand, so working out the limitations of characters that can be recorded in the field is perhaps the key priority here. Coming back to the Shetland 2018 bird, the fact that it had a suite of features that were highly indicative of Green-winged Teal was of key importance in the confidence about the record, and it was duly accepted by the Shetland Bird Club records committee.

A final complication is the nightmarish prospect of a hybrid. Male hybrids between

Green-winged and Eurasian Teal have been recorded on multiple occasions in both North America and Europe (e.g. <http://birdhybrids.blogspot.com/2014/04/eurasian-teal-x-green-winged-teal.html>), so it is likely that female hybrids also exist. As with males, females like the one at Hillwell, which can be shown to have a suite of features consistent with Green-winged, seem unlikely to be hybrids.

I should have remembered that, in his review of the Ujiharas' book in *BB* (*Brit. Birds* 109: 304), Pierre Yésou had earlier drawn attention to a new feature (the tertial pattern) to separate Eurasian and Green-winged Teals in young and non-breeding female plumage, and predicted that the number of female Green-winged Teals reported in Britain should soon increase.

#### Acknowledgments

I am grateful for the expert comments of Killian Mullarney, Sébastien Reeber and Osao and Michiaki Ujihara regarding the bird's identity, and to Killian and



**18–20.** Photographs of female Eurasian Teals *Anas crecca* in Europe showing relatively broad white tips to the secondaries and/or a greater-covert wing-bar of relatively even width; Co. Wexford, November 2016.

## Short papers

Andrew Harrop for their comments on the text of this short paper. In addition, thanks to others who went to look for the Shetland bird and made comments on its appearance in the field: Pete Ellis, Andrew Harrop, Paul Harvey and Glen Tyler.

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21. Female and male Green-winged Teals *Anas carolinensis*, Loch of Hillwell, Shetland, May 2018.

# The *BB/BTO* Best Bird Book of the Year 2018

*British Birds* and the British Trust for Ornithology announce the winner of the award for Best Bird Book of the Year. All books reviewed in *BB*, *BTO News* and on the BTO website [www.bto.org/about-birds/book-reviews](http://www.bto.org/about-birds/book-reviews) during the year 2018 were eligible for consideration for this award.

A total of 65 books were reviewed by *British Birds* and/or BTO during the year, and a whopping 34 of those made the initial shortlist and were available to look through on the day of judging. Once again, the judging panel, made up of three representatives from BTO and three from *BB*, gathered at the BTO annual conference at Swanwick, in early December 2018. That such a large collection of books made it to Swanwick, in the back of one of the BTO cars, suggested an unusually open competition. That was confirmed when, at the end of the afternoon session, we sat back to survey the unusually large number of

books that had gained one or more points in the final round of voting. Counter-intuitively, perhaps, there was a standout winner (no fewer than five of the six judges placed it at the top of their selection), but beyond our winner, the judges' opinions and votes were widely spread, with relatively little agreement amongst us, reflecting our different interests and priorities and not least the inherent difficulty in deciding what, exactly, makes a book a contender for this award. There was no clear theme for this year's top-rated titles, although all of the first five could perhaps be classed as primarily factual rather than literary offerings.