



# The occurrence of the 'Black Brant' in Europe

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Since the mid 1970s, the number of European records of the race of the Brent Goose *Branta bernicla* known in North America as the 'Black Brant', *B. b. nigricans*, has increased. This paper surveys and analyses the 52 records up to and including the winter of 1981/82.

## Distribution of subspecies

When assessing the possible origin and arrival routes of Black Brant in Europe, it is essential to consider the geographical distribution of all three subspecies of Brent Goose (for field characters of each, see Cramp & Simmons 1977). The dark-bellied race *B. b. bernicla* breeds along the coasts of northwest Siberia east to the Taymyr Peninsula; it winters in coastal areas of southern Denmark, West Germany, the Netherlands, eastern and southern England and western France. The pale-bellied race *B. b. hrota* breeds in Franz Josef Land, Svalbard, Greenland and the eastern Canadian Arctic; those breeding in the Palearctic winter in Jutland, Denmark, and at Lindisfarne, Northumberland, in northeast England, while the Greenland population and part of the Canadian population winter on the coasts of Ireland (the remainder of the Nearctic population winters on the Atlantic coast of the USA). The Black Brant breeds in northern Siberia east from the Taymyr Peninsula, in Alaska and in the western Canadian Arctic east to eastern Melville Island; it winters on both sides of the Pacific Ocean, principally on the eastern side.

## Annual occurrence in Europe

Before 1974, there were only two records of Black Brant in Europe, and these probably concerned a single individual that returned to Essex in southeast England in February 1957 and February 1958 (Burton 1960). From 1974 to the winter of 1981/82, occurrences have been annual (figs. 1 & 2). There are now reports from England (16), Finland (one), Iceland (one),

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Heading drawing shows, left to right: adult *Branta bernicla hrota*, three adult *B. b. bernicla*, first-winter *hrota*, adult *hrota* and (foreground extreme right) adult *nigricans* (Killian Mullarney)

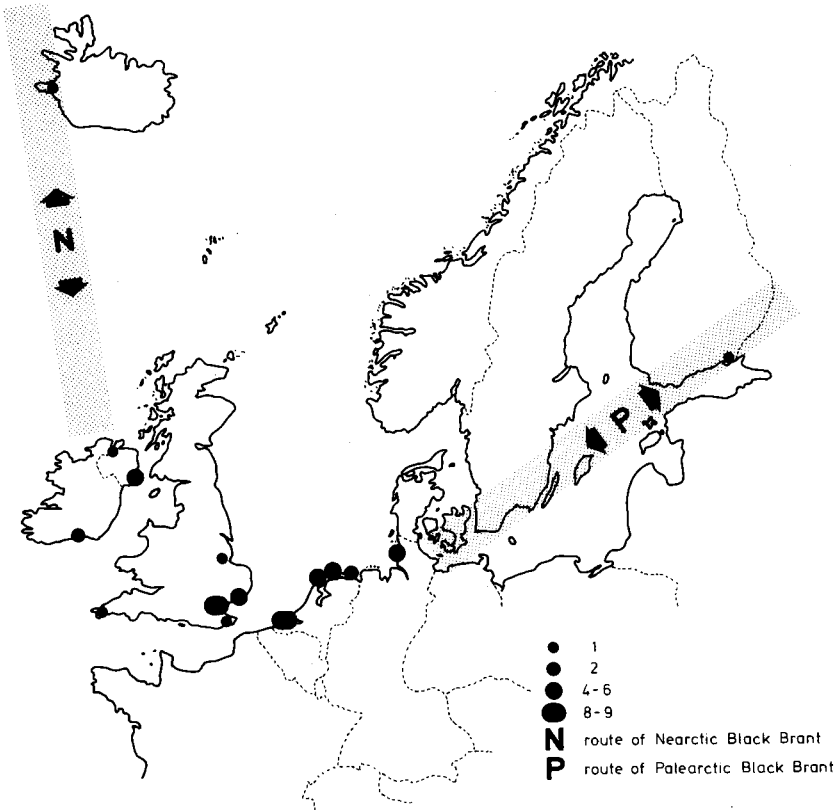


Fig. 1. Distribution of records of Black Brant *Branta bernicla nigricans* in Western Europe up to and including the winter of 1981/82

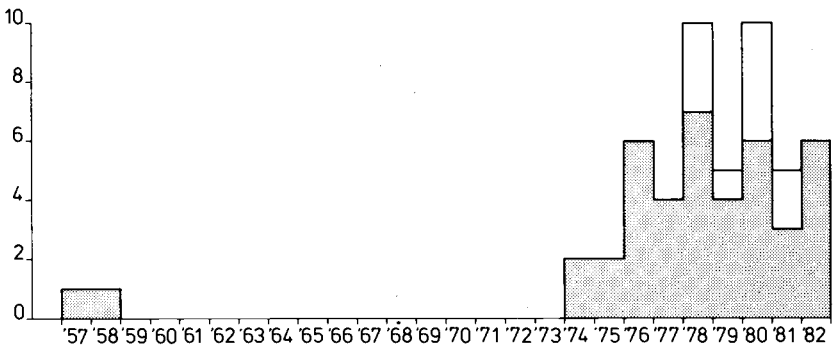


Fig. 2. Annual totals of records of Black Brant *Branta bernicla nigricans* (42 Palearctic origin, filled columns; 10 Nearctic origin, open columns) from 1957 to winter of 1981/82

the Netherlands (21), Northern Ireland (six), the Republic of Ireland (two) and the Federal German Republic (five) (table 1).

The first record for Denmark was of one on 15th January 1983, at Fanø in the Danish Wadden Sea area, in a flock of 950 dark- and four pale-bellied

**Table 1. Records of Black Brant *Branta bernicla nigricans* in Western Europe up to and including the winter of 1981/82**

Those records marked with an asterisk (\*) are awaiting formal acceptance by records committees of the countries concerned

Year	Dates	No.	Locality
<b>ENGLAND</b>			
1956/57	February	1	Foulness, Essex
1957/58	February	1	Foulness
1973/74	February	1	South Medway, Kent
1975/76	22-28 Dec	1	Nacton, Suffolk
	18 Feb	1	Trimley Marshes, Suffolk
	26 Mar	1	Horsey Island, Essex
1976/77	15 Dec	1*	Horsey Island
	7 Feb-2 Mar	1	Trimley Marshes
1977/78	5-12 Jan	1	Leigh-on-Sea, Essex
	7 Jan-4 Feb	1	Trimley Marshes
1978/79	28 Jan-25 Feb	1	Hamford Water, Essex
1979/80	24 Feb	1	Kirby-le-Soken, Essex
1980/81	21 Dec-18 Jan	1	Kirby-le-Soken
1981/82	1-15 Nov	1	Wadebridge, Cornwall
	20-28 Jan	1	North Farnbridge area, Essex
	21-23 Jan	1	Saltfleetby/Donna Nook, Lincolnshire
<b>FINLAND</b>			
1981/82	22 May	1	Violahti, Kymen Laäni
<b>ICELAND</b>			
1979/80	13-24 May	1	Álfatanes, Gulbringusýsla
<b>NETHERLANDS</b>			
1974/75	29 Nov-16 Apr	1	Terschelling, Friesland
1975/76	3 Dec	1*	Vlieland, Friesland
	5-7 Mar	1	Uithuizen, Groningen
	30 Apr-11 May	1	Texel, Noord-Holland
	23 May	1	Vlieland
1976/77	10 Jan	1	Vlieland
	15 Apr	1*	Terschelling
	14 May	1*	Terschelling
1977/78	11 Mar	1*	Wieringen, Noord-Holland
	15 Mar	1	Zonnemaire, Schouwen-Duiveland, Zeeland
1978/79	18 Mar	1*	Wierum, Friesland
1979/80	4 Nov-16 Dec	1	Schiermonnikoog, Friesland
	28 Mar	1	Ouwerkerk, Schouwen-Duiveland
	7 May	1*	Ameland, Friesland
1980/81	30 Nov-15 Mar	1	Zandkreekdam/Kortgene, Noord-Beveland, Zeeland
	11 Dec	1*	Texel
	11-18 Jan	1	St Philipsland, Zeeland
	21 Mar	1	Scharendijke, Schouwen-Duiveland
1981/82	7-9 Feb	1	Scharendijke
	14 Feb-5 Mar	1	Inlagen, Schouwen-Duiveland
	13 Mar	2	Inlagen
<b>NORTHERN IRELAND</b>			
1978/79	10-18 Nov	1*	Strangford Lough, Co. Down
	10 Nov-30 Dec	1*	Strangford Lough
1979/80	21 Oct-17 Nov	2*	Strangford Lough
1980/81	25 Oct-2 Nov	2*	Strangford Lough
	16-19 Oct	1*	Foyle Estuary, Co. Derry
1981/82	Oct and Nov	2*	Strangford Lough

## REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

1978/79	25 Nov-3 Mar	1*	Tramore Backstrand, Waterford
1980/81	Sep-4 Apr	1*	Tramore Backstrand

## FEDERAL GERMAN REPUBLIC

1977/78	13 Mar-3 May	1*	Süderoog	} Schleswig-Holstein
	12 May	1*	Rodenäs-Vorland	
1978/79	25 Nov	3*	Westerhever-Vorland	
	26 Apr-27 May	1*	Nordstrandischmoor/Hamburger Hallig	
1980/81	25 Mar	1*	Hamburger Hallig	

Brents (Jesper Madsen *in litt.*). The first Black Brant for Sweden was recorded on 4th October 1983, on Öland (Vår Fågelvärld 42: 476).

### Monthly pattern of occurrences

On the coasts of the North Sea, dates of first sightings of Black Brant coincide with the movements of dark-bellied Brent Geese. The first dark-bellied arrive in the Federal German Republic and the Netherlands at the end of September and in early October. They move steadily on, south-westwards, to western France and southeast England, where peak numbers occur from December to February. Most return northeastwards in March, remaining for a period on Dutch and German coasts, where spring gatherings are present until May/June. Dutch and German Wadden Sea records of Black Brant therefore show a double-peaked pattern, in autumn (November) and spring (March to May), while English records show a single peak, from December to February (figs. 3 & 4).

On the Atlantic coasts, first-sighting dates of Black Brant coincide with those of the Nearctic pale-bellied Brents, in October and November (fig. 5).

### Number of individuals

During the winters of 1976/77 to 1979/80 and 1981/82, there was no overlap in dates of English and Dutch/German Black Brants, suggesting that records from both sides of the North Sea might concern the same individuals; some consecutive dates indicated that only a single bird was involved. It has even been suggested that the total English records involve no more than five different individuals (Rogers *et al.* 1979, 1981). Indeed, colour-marking studies have shown that Brent Geese traditionally return to the same areas (Prokosch 1981; St Joseph 1979). A Black Brant, colour-ringed in the German Wadden Sea area on 26th April 1979, was still present there on 27th May; in the following winter, in November and December 1979, it was resighted on Schiermonnikoog, the Netherlands (Prokosch 1981).

### Age and social behaviour

There are no European records of Black Brants in first-winter plumage. Immatures, however, are much less distinctive than adults and are therefore likely to be overlooked, even among flocks of pale-bellied Brents. Nearly all records refer to solitary adults. Even the two individuals often

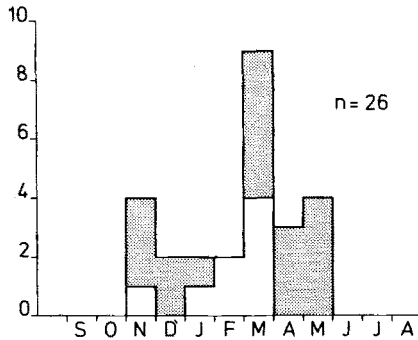


Fig. 3. Monthly occurrences (first-sighting dates) of Black Brant *Branta bernicla nigricans* in Federal German Republic and the Netherlands up to the winter of 1981/82 (Wadden Sea records, filled; Zeeland records, open)

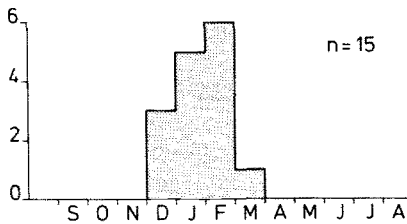


Fig. 4. Monthly occurrences (first-sighting dates) of Black Brant *Branta bernicla nigricans* in eastern England up to the winter of 1981/82

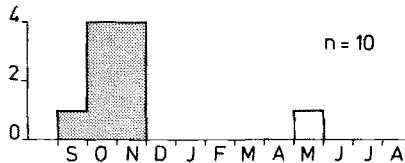


Fig. 5. Monthly occurrences (first-sighting dates) of Black Brant *Branta bernicla nigricans* in southwestern England, Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland (filled) and Iceland (open) up to the winter of 1981/82

present in a flock of pale-bellied Brents at Strangford Lough, Northern Ireland, and the two in March 1982 at Schouwen-Duiveland, the Netherlands, have shown no tendency to associate with one another (Anthony McGeehan, and RHD, personal observations). Only the May 1977 Terschelling Black Brant, a male, was reported to be paired with a Brent, a dark-bellied female (B. S. Ebbing *in litt.*). There is also a record of a Black Brant keeping close company with a particular Nearctic pale-bellied, at Strangford Lough in late 1979 (Anthony McGeehan *in litt.*).

Observations in Northern Ireland show that pale-bellied Brents are often aggressive towards Black Brants (Anthony McGeehan *in litt.*), and a Black Brant in Waterford, Republic of Ireland, in the winter of 1978/79 frequently directed aggression towards the pale-bellied geese which it accompanied (KM, personal observation).

Only one Black Brant, at the Zandkreekdam, the Netherlands, in the winter of 1980/81, was reported to show aberrant behaviour: it foraged at

the outer edge of the flock and was one of the last to take flight (RHDL, personal observation). The Cornwall individual, however, was not with any other Brent Geese, which is so far apparently unique.

### Escapes

Like most waterfowl, Black Brants are regularly kept in captivity; indeed, this is the only one of the three subspecies of Brent Goose that regularly breeds in captivity. They were imported into the Netherlands up to 1977 as part of exchange contracts with the USSR, the annual average of imported birds exceeding one hundred (P. Kooi verbally). The imports were stopped in 1977 by a change in legislation. A few may have escaped, and some may not have been tame, wing-clipped or ringed. On the other hand, waterfowl-keepers are currently dependent on captive-bred Black Brants and will take great care to hold on to captives, making escapes less likely (Dr M. A. Ogilvie *in litt.*). None of the European Black Brant records listed in this paper seems atypical, either in time or in place.

### Discussion

#### *The Atlantic situation*

Colour-marking projects involving populations of pale-bellied Brent Geese breeding on Queen Elisabeth Islands in the Canadian Arctic have shown that a significant proportion of those wintering in Ireland originates from much farther west than was previously realised: they come from at least as far as Melville Island, where the breeding ranges of pale-bellied Brent and Black Brant overlap (Ruttledge 1975, 1977). It is likely, therefore, that the Black Brants recorded in Iceland, Ireland and perhaps also the one in Cornwall were of wild Nearctic origin and arrived with pale-bellied Brents from Canada. The recent increase in records may be explained partly by increased observer-activity. In Ireland, where Brents other than pale-bellied are rare, some early records of dark-bellied may in fact have referred to Black Brants.

189. Brent Geese *Branta bernicla*: adult 'Black Brant' *B. b. nigricans* amongst adult and first-winter dark-bellied *B. b. bernicla* and pale-bellied *B. b. hrota*, Netherlands, February 1982  
(Arnoud B. van den Berg)



*The North Sea situation*

A wild Palearctic origin of Black Brants in the North Sea countries is suggested by their occurrence patterns and their exclusive association with dark-bellied Brents. There are no records of Black Brants associated with flocks of Palearctic pale-bellied Brents (there is no overlap in breeding ranges). The population size of the latter is, however, very small: about 3,000 individuals. In the winter of 1981/82, a Black Brant was present in a mixed flock of dark- and pale-bellied Brents at Scharendijke during only the second large influx of pale-bellied Brents ever documented for the Netherlands. It appeared to be associated with dark-bellied, while pale-bellied remained apart (ABvdB, personal observation).



190. Brent Geese *Branta bernicla*: adult 'Black Brant' *B. b. nigricans* amongst adult and first-winter dark-bellied *B. b. bernicla* and pale-bellied *B. b. hrola*, Netherlands, February 1982 (Arnoud B. van den Berg)

The extent of range and overlap of dark-bellied Brent and Black Brant populations at the Taymyr Peninsula, where both occur, are not well known. It is here that single Black Brants are most likely to become associated with westbound dark-bellied. The spring Finnish record of a Black Brant migrating ENE in a group of dark-bellied supports this view (*Brit. Birds* 76: 567). Dr M. A. Ogilvie (*in litt.*) has suggested that, with the vast increase in the dark-bellied Brent population, from 30,000 in the 1960s to 200,000 in 1982, the breeding range, or possibly the moulting areas of non-breeders, has expanded eastwards on the Taymyr Peninsula, coming into contact or extending a range of overlap with Black Brant to the east. This would explain the recent increase of records of Black Brants in the southern North Sea area. Likewise, records of dark-bellied Brents are perhaps to be expected among Black Brants on the Pacific coasts.

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### Summary

The number of reports in Europe of the race of the Brent Goose *Branta bernicla* known as the 'Black Brant', *B. b. nigricans*, has increased since the mid 1970s, and records have become annual since 1974. The 52 records up to and including the winter of 1981/82 are documented and their origin discussed. Those in Iceland and Ireland probably arrived with pale-bellied *B. b. hrota* from the eastern Canadian Arctic, while it is likely that those in the North Sea area came with dark-bellied *B. b. bernicla* from the Palearctic.

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