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Birds Britannica

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Diver family Gaviidae

Four species of diver occur in Britain and Ireland, but one of them, the Yellow- or White-billed Diver, *Gavia adamsii*, is a vagrant (from Arctic Canada, Russia and northernmost Scandinavia) which has appeared in these islands on fewer than 200 occasions, with 90 per cent of records occurring since 1958.

Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellata*. VN: Loon, Rain Goose (Orkney and Shetland). This is the commonest species of diver in Britain, and a widespread winter visitor to almost the entire British coastline. Occasionally there are huge concentrations on the east coast. In the Moray Firth in October 1982 there was a build-up of 1500 birds, while the winter of 1999/2000 saw a remarkable gathering of about 2000 birds off Suffolk, one of the largest ever recorded in north-western Europe. This assembly was thought to be triggered by concentrations of sprats in the southern North Sea, and it is interesting to note that old East Anglian and East Lothian names for divers are respectively 'sprat borer' and 'spratoon'.

As a breeding species the red-throat is more restricted in range, with a 1994 population estimate of just 934 pairs. More than half of these are in Shetland, a further 10 per cent breeds in Orkney, while in Scotland itself redthroats nest mainly north and west of a line between Glasgow and Moray.

The larger, more beautiful and even rarer Blackthroated Diver, *Gavia arctica*, shares a similar mainland distribution, but is an inhabitant of large freshwater and sea lochs. It is absent from Shetland and Orkney, its own strongholds being in the Outer Hebrides and the coastal areas of Wester Ross between Lochs Gairloch and Broom. Both red- and black-throats have achieved a steady reclamation of their old Scottish breeding haunts after heavy persecution in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by an alliance of egg collectors, taxidermists and fishermen. The recent confiscation of 27 clutches of blackthroated diver eggs - part of 21 illegal egg collections - suggests that at least one of these factors plays some role in keeping the British total at just 150 summering pairs.



Despite their scarcity and limited distribution, divers have had a strong impact, mainly on account of their voices. During spring and summer, males and females of both red- and black-throated species produce a wide range of calls, including a magically atmospheric and eerily beautiful yodelling sound that has some similarities to the human voice, as well as evoking a wide range of other animals: 'Wailing-call . . . accompanied by strong harmonics that impart characteristic tonal quality, rather resembling meowing of cat'; 'a most mournful and eerie, long-drawn, mewing wail or shriek, like cry of a person in extreme pain' (red-throated diver). 'A more drawn-out note which may acquire the rhythm of a hen's cackling . . . a hoarse "kowk" compared to croak of Raven . . . a remarkable and far-carrying goose-like clamour . . . the loud and wild cries of assemblies in May, sounding in distance like noise of a crowd of people shouting and laughing' (black-throated diver).

Ironically, the diver species whose calls are probably most familiar to a British audience is seldom heard in the wild in this country. In the last half-century there has been just one confirmed breeding record of the Great Northern Diver, *Gavia immer* (VN: Immer/Ember Goose; Orkney and Shetland), in northern Scotland in 1997. Otherwise it is a winter visitor to British and Irish coastlines from Iceland and elsewhere in the northwestern Atlantic. Yet it is a widespread resident in North America, and its repertoire includes the most striking and far-carrying cries: 'Often strident or screaming, gives impression of uncontrolled idiotic laughter.'

It is these resonant calls that have become a standard background sound-effect in numerous films and television dramas where the creators wish to evoke an atmosphere of mystery, suspense and northern wilderness, although often the recordings are used without any regard for their true seasonality or the bird's genuine distribution. The call has also been commemorated in popular song, such as, 'Old Devil Moon' ('Wanna cry, wanna croon/Wanna laugh like a loon'), a jazz standard performed by artists such as Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald.

'Loon' is the family name used in North America and draws on the divers' powerful vocalisations. It is a corruption of the old Norse *lómr*, meaning 'moaning bird'. While in Britain 'diver' eventually assumed primacy in ornithological nomenclature, 'loon' survives as the vernacular alternative for the red-throated diver in Orkney and Shetland. The name is also enshrined in a place name on several of the islands: 'Looma Chun' can be found on Rousay, on Hoy and in both the West and East Mainland, and means 'lochan of the divers'; all of the sites still have breeding divers today.' On Shetland 'Loomi Shun' (Divers' Tarn) is quite widespread.

The two other Scottish names still in currency are 'immer goose' (great northern diver) and 'rain goose' (red-throated diver). The first of these comes from Norn, the old lost Orcadian language, and finds its echo in the bird's scientific name (*Gavia immer*) and in the current Icelandic name for the bird, *him-brimi*, meaning literally 'the surf roarer'.

The folklore scholar Edward Armstrong argued that the second of the Scottish names, rain goose, is the final British vestige of a large body of diver



mythology that once 'extended around the crown of the world'. For widely dispersed communities such as the Buriats in Siberia and Native American tribes like the Delaware, the diver was a revered creature, a key player in their creation stories and a winged helper in the shaman's journey to the spirit world. The rain goose's power to foretell the coming of storms was part of its ancient status as a bird of omen - a belief that was just on the edge of its range in northernmost Britain.

Divers were certainly familiar to the region's neolithic inhabitants and their remains have been found at Pictish middens just to the south of Kirkwall in Orkney. As well as featuring in the Scottish diet until at least the eighteenth century, the birds were used as a form of medicine. The Scottish traveller and author, Martin Martin, records that in the Hebrides the great northern diver was valued because 'there is about an inch deep of fat upon the skin of it, which the natives apply to the hip bone, and by experience find it a successful remedy for removing sciatica'.

To the Hebrideans it was known by the beautiful Gaelic construction, Bun a' Bhuachaille, 'herdsman of the tide races', which reflects perfectly all the British divers' consummate adaptation to an aquatic lifestyle. The bill is long and dagger-like, the head and long neck are smoothly arched, while the body lies low in the water so that in profile divers can assume an almost reptilian sinuosity. They are at home in the roughest of sea swells and are famous for the depth and duration of their dives. One great northern was recorded as having remained submerged for three minutes, but the claim of a bird caught in a net set at a depth of 180 feet (54m) is unsubstantiated, while a dive supposedly lasting 15 minutes sounds like pure fantasy.

