

# Why I don't think this is a Black Brant

Dylan (12<sup>th</sup> December 2006)

The recent spate of Black Brant (*Branta nigricans*) sightings along the North Kent coast (from Castle Coote, near Seasalter, in the west to the Reculver Marshes, particularly the Coldharbour/Wantsum outflow, in the east) is probably attributable to just two birds. Having seen the images on the KOS website “latest sightings” pages, I was amazed at the prominence of the white neck markings, particularly on the bird that Geoff Burton had posted (Swalecliffe – KOS website). Then Gadget posted his pictures of the Black Brant (Coldharbour - Planetthanet.org unsurprisingly) swimming on the sea, again showing a vivid neckband. I recall Tim Hodge & myself discussing the extent and composition of the collar on the Black Brant (see Fig. 3) that was present in the Reculver area during the winter of 2005/6. Had this bird returned for a second winter? I was determined to have a look for myself.



**Fig 1** – A Black Brant? Prominent neck collar, generally dark appearance with obvious pale flanks, but there is contrast between the greater coverts and the remiges (flight feathers). Coldharbour 09.12.2006

The morning of 9<sup>th</sup> December 2006 saw me at Coldharbour, searching through the flocks of “dark – bellied” Brent Geese (*Branta bernicla*). Already being aware that a Black Brant had been reported from the Tankerton area, just to the west of Reculver, earlier in the morning. I paid particular attention to the flocks that were arriving from that direction; my vigilance justified when a Brant arrived in the company of a large flock of Brents and proceeded to preen and wash in the shallow water at the edge of

the beach (Fig.1). I was able to get a nice series of images in the superb winter sunshine. There were several other birders present, all of whom were happy with the id of this bird. I wasn't 100% sure; it wasn't quite what I had expected – yet it did show all of the features associated with Black Brant id. However, it was being viewed in extremely harsh light and several of the accompanying Brent Geese were also showing decidedly pale flanks, although to a much lesser extent. It was only when I got home, and downloaded the pics onto my PC, that I began to have serious reservations about this individual.



**Fig. 2** – Is this the effect of the harsh lighting? The neck collar is Black Brant, but what about the rest of the plumage? There is a very obvious brown tint to the body with a well-defined demarcation between the lower breast and the belly, when I would expect an indistinct gradation between these two areas. Also, the flanks are a dingy grey/brown instead of being clean white. Coldharbour 09.12.2006

One of the benefits of Planetthenet.org is that we have a superb archive of digital images, so it was easy for me to locate our other Black Brant pics. The bird present around the Reculver area 2005/6 is clearly a pure Black Brant. All the key id features can be seen in the two images that were posted on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2006. Even the poor record shot (November 2005) depicts the very prominent, clean white flanks and lack of contrast in the darker plumage areas. To further my research, I also accessed the Birdguides.com archive. There are nearly 50 images of Black Brants, the vast majority showing clean white flank markings and no distinct border between the lower neck and belly. E-mail correspondence with Norman McCanch has highlighted another feature of the Brent Goose complex, which further casts doubt on the credentials of the bird in Fig. 1 & 2. From his extensive collection of field notes and sketches, Norman has noted that both races of Brent Geese show marked contrast between their greater coverts (lighter grey/brown) and the remiges, the primaries &

secondaries (dark grey/black). As can be seen, in Fig. 3, there is no contrast between these two feather groups on the genuine Black Brant. Norman's comment quite simply stated, "They're black!"



**Fig 3** – Adult Black Brant at Coldharbour (01.03.2006) Gleaming white flanks, prominent neck collar and generally mono-toned dark colouration with no contrast between the coverts and secondaries – a feature quite obvious on the two Brent Geese standing immediately behind.

I have now consulted my library, particularly BWP, and am aware of the documented presence of “intergrades” (read hybrids?) that are present within the populations of the Brent Geese complex where their ranges overlap with Black Brant in both Arctic Canada/Alaska (pale-bellied) and Siberian Russia (dark-bellied). Is this the answer to the id of the current Coldharbour bird? It is certainly my “gut feeling” that this individual is an intergrade (a naturally occurring hybrid) and, as such, a very unusual visitor to these shores. I admit that I have no experience of Brent Geese/Black Brants away from the east coast of England, yet the presence of a C-R Brent Goose, also at Coldharbour, may provide a clue as to the origins of this mystery bird? I have not had the details returned from Holland (The base for the ringing project), but all indications are likely to prove the bird to be from breeding population of the Taimyr Peninsular – Siberian Russia, a recognised area where the ranges of *Branta bernicla* & *Branta nigricans* increasingly overlap as the two populations spread east and west respectively.

Will I ever get a definitive answer to this particular conundrum? Probably not. This goose is just another example as to why birding is such a wonderful hobby. It can never be reduced to an exact science, not everything will fit into neat boxes!



**Fig. 4** – C-R adult Brent Goose at Coldharbour (11.11.2006) I'm still awaiting details from Holland. Particularly of relevance is the general brown tint to the body plumage, a clear border between the lower breast and belly, plus the very obvious contrast between the greater coverts and the secondaries. Are the flanks pale? Or is it a trick of the light?

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Gadget, Steve Ashton, Norman McCanch and all the other birders who have posted reports and images of Black Brants on the various “latest sightings” pages of the KOS website. Their efforts have been of great assistance whilst compiling this article.

## **References**

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**Lincolnshire Bird Club – [www.lincsbirdclub.co.uk/articles/black\\_brant](http://www.lincsbirdclub.co.uk/articles/black_brant)**

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