



Birds of the Howe of Fife

and surrounding area

S.T. Buckland

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A selection of photos illustrating some of the bird species of the Howe of Fife and of the higher ground surrounding the Howe. I have taken the boundaries of this wider area to be defined by the coast of the Firth of Tay from Newburgh to Balmerino, then through Gauldry, Logie, Dairsie, Pitscottie, Ceres, Teasses, Kennoway, Glenrothes and Auchmuirbridge, then along the Fife boundary back to Newburgh.

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Canada goose

Flocks pass through Fife in June to moult on the Beaully Firth, returning in August. The single bird was at the Wilderness in August 2019. The birds below were part of a flock of 77 at Letham Pools in early June 2022. The birds above were part of a flock of 13 at Luthrie in late December 2023.





Barnacle goose

Flocks can occasionally be seen or heard flying to or from wintering grounds. The above bird is probably an escape. It has paired up with a greylag, and they rear a brood of odd-looking hybrids each year. Two of the young are shown below. These shots were taken at Birnie and Gaddon Lochs. The bird bottom right was with a flock of pinkfeet, eating carrots in the field between the Wilderness and Ladybank in late December 2018, and may be a wild bird.





Ross's goose

A rare vagrant from North America — and an occasional escape from a wildfowl collection. This bird was with pinkfeet in the Balmalcolm area in late February 2022.





Greylag goose

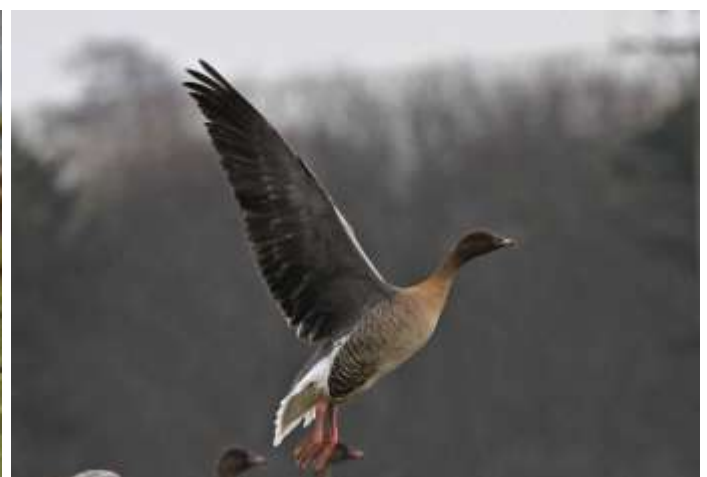
A few resident birds are joined by larger numbers in autumn and winter.





Pink-footed goose

Occurs in large numbers in autumn and winter, flying out to feed in fields each morning from roosts.





Tundra bean goose

A rare winter migrant. This bird was with pinkfeet near the Wilderness on 5 March 2022.





White-fronted goose

Occasionally occurs in winter. The Greenland whitefront above was with pinkfeet at the Letham Pools on 22 March 2018, the one below right was with pinkfeet and greylags near Letham Pools in February 2019, while the European whitefront below left was with pinkfeet and greylags also at the Letham Pools on 16 Feb 2014.





Mute swan

Common on the lochs and pools of the Howe of Fife.





Whooper swan

A regular winter visitor. The above birds were at Clatto Reservoir. A large flock can sometimes be seen at the Letham Pools. This family (right and below) received a hot reception from the local mute swans when they arrived there ...





Egyptian goose

Populations have established in parts of England, but an unusual visitor to Fife. This bird was at Letham Pools in late May 2021.





Shelduck

Occurs at Luthrie, Letham Pools and the Wilderness, and can also be seen in the Firth of Tay.





Garganey

A rare spring migrant in Fife. These males were at Letham Pools, on 10 May 2021 (below and right) and on 21 May 2022 (above).





Shoveler

Occurs in small numbers. Unusually, many were present at Letham Pools in October 2018, when the shots above and below were taken. The shot on the right was taken in October 2020.





Gadwall

This species is increasing, and is common at Letham Pools.





Wigeon

Common in autumn and winter. Below was a feeding frenzy on 8 Feb 2015 at Birnie Loch, which was mostly frozen over.





American wigeon

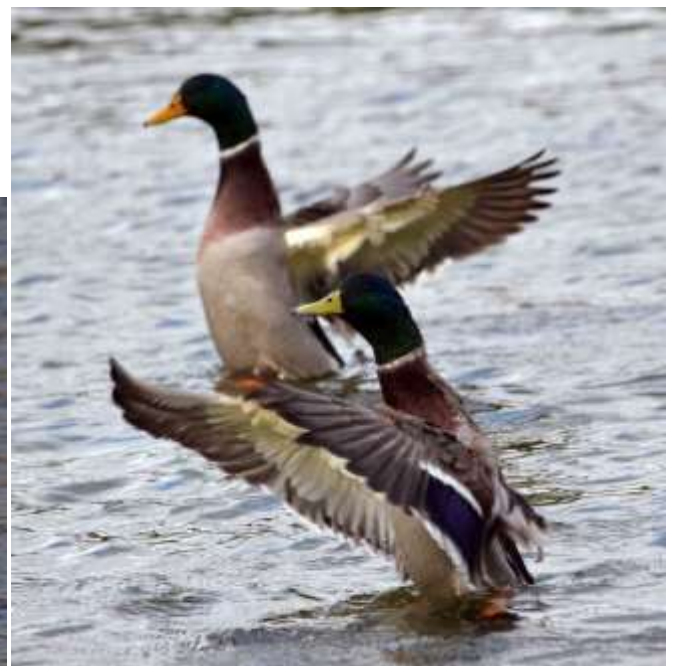
A rare vagrant from North America. Presumably the same bird was at Gaddon Loch in the winters of 2015/16 and 2016/17.





Mallard

Common in suitable—and sometimes unsuitable — habitat.





Pintail

Not common in the Howe of Fife. The drake above and below right was one of five birds at the flood waters by Luthrie in early March 2017, the drake below left was at Letham Pools in mid-January 2023, and the pair on the right was at the Wilderness in late February 2023.





Teal

Common in suitable habitat.





Green-winged teal

A North American duck that is a rare migrant in Fife. The drake is very similar to the European teal, but with a vertical white stripe on its side. This bird was at Letham Pools in mid-May 2021.





Pochard

Rarely seen in the Howe, despite apparently suitable habitat. These images were taken in early November at Birnie Loch.





Ring-necked duck

A rare visitor from North America. The drake below was at the Wilderness in late May 2022, while the female above was at Birnie Loch through the winter of 2022/23.





Tufted duck

Common on suitable lochs.





Greater scaup

Scaup are a marine duck and are very rarely recorded in or near the Howe of Fife. These were part of a group of five birds at Newburgh on 28 November 2021.





Lesser scaup

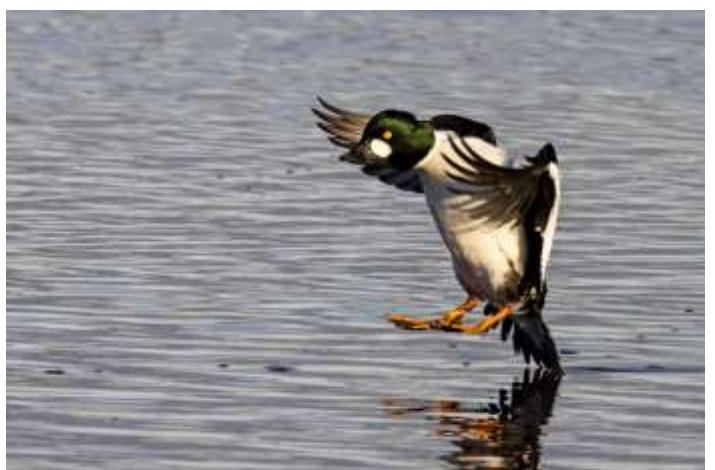
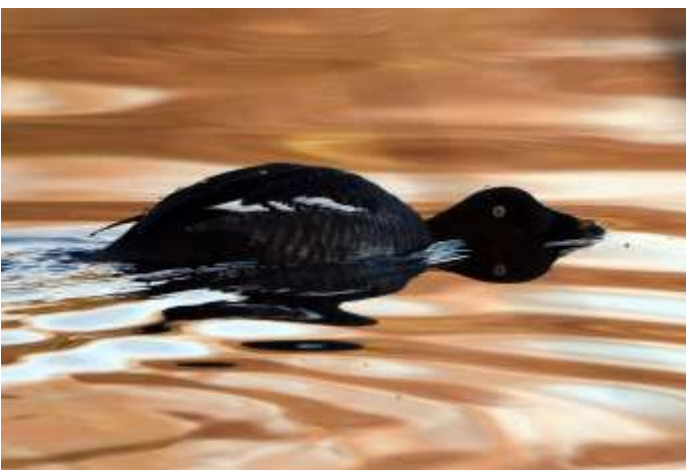
The lesser scaup is a rare vagrant from North America. This female was at Angle Park in late December 2024.





Goldeneye

Common. These shots were taken at Birnie and Gaddon Lochs, and the bird bottom right was at Newburgh.





Smew

A scarce winter visitor in Fife, and only rarely recorded from the Howe. This female was at Angle Park in late January 2024.





Goosander

Common in winter, especially at Birnie and Gaddon Lochs.





Red grouse

Small numbers are resident in the Lomond Hills. This bird was on the slopes of East Lomond that look across to the Howe of Fife.





Grey partridge

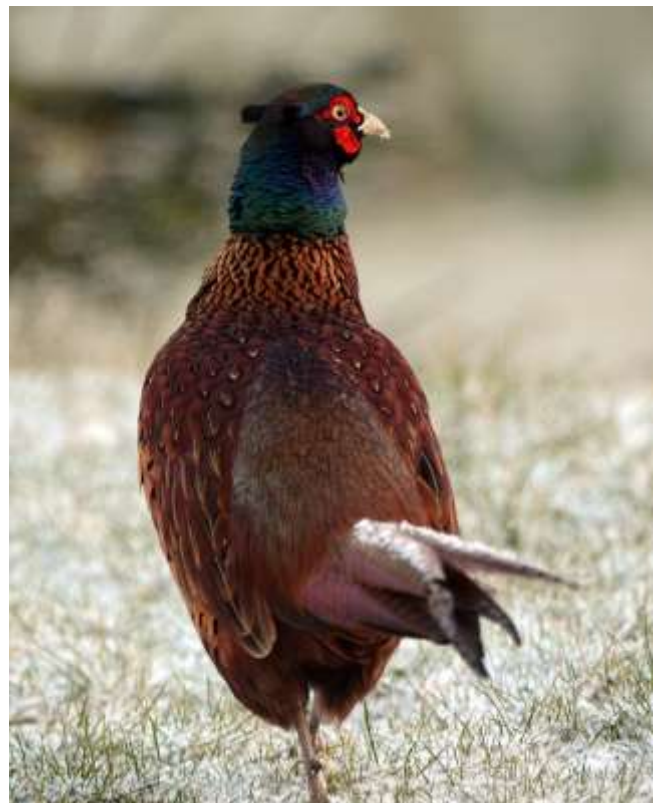
Common in arable fields.





Pheasant

Common, with large numbers released for shooting.





Red-legged partridge

Small numbers present, as a result of releases for shooting.





Swift

A summer visitor that breeds in the towns and villages.





Cuckoo

Once a common summer visitor, now mostly a migrant. This bird flew from Balmerino across the Tay, pursued by a crow, on its journey north in early May 2021.





Feral pigeon

Occurs mostly on farms and in urban areas.





Stock dove

Small numbers breed.





Woodpigeon

Very numerous throughout.





Collared dove

Common in suitable habitat.





Turtle dove

The UK turtle dove population is in sharp decline, and Scottish records are now rare. This one was at Burnturk in early July 2024.





Water rail

Sometimes occurs in good numbers at Letham Pools (below left); some will come out into the open if the water level is low. The bird above and below right was at Birnie Loch in April 2021.





Moorhen

Common in suitable habitat. There are usually birds near the car park at Birnie Loch.





Coot

Common on the lochs and former gravel pits of the Howe of Fife.





Crane

A very rare species in Fife, occasionally recorded on passage. These three birds flew high over the Wilderness on 12 October 2021.





Little grebe

Breeds in small numbers. The bird on the right was at Edensmuir (Mountcastle), those below at Letham Pools, the pair below right at Gaddon Loch, and the above pair at Clatto Reservoir.





Red-necked grebe

Very unusual in the Howe of Fife. This bird appeared at Letham Pools on 1 June 2021.





Great crested grebe

The bird above and below was at Gaddon Loch, while the two on the right were at Edensmuir (Mountcastle), where a pair breeds each year. The bird bottom right was at the nearby Letham Pools in November 2021.





Oystercatcher

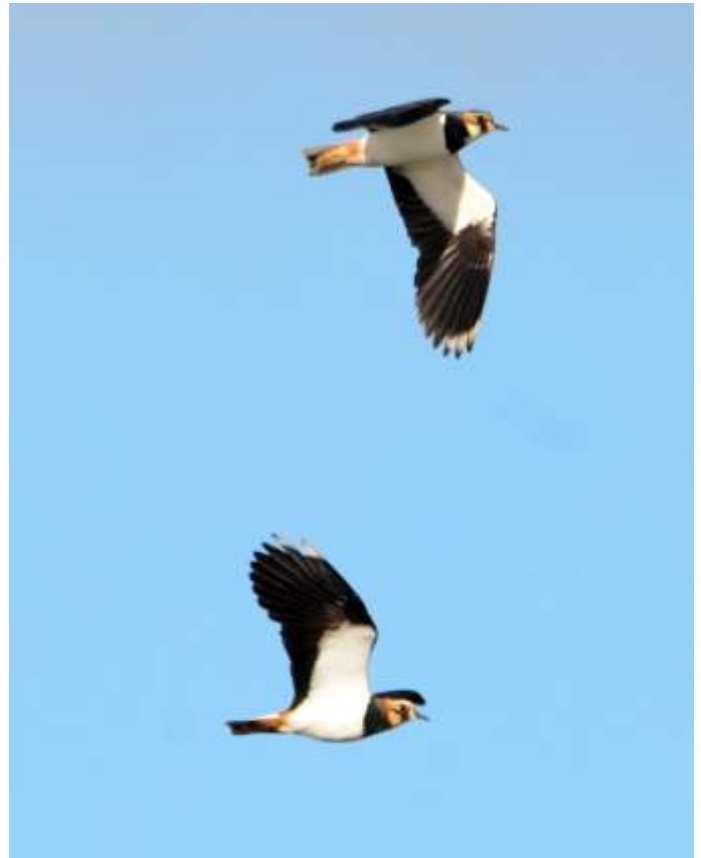
Occurs inland from late winter through the breeding season.





Lapwing

Common passage migrant and some birds breed.





Golden plover

Occasionally encountered in the Howe of Fife. The birds below right were at Forret Hill near Kilmany in early February 2022, while those below left were part of a flock of 70 at the Wilderness in early October 2019. Those above and right were part of a flock of 160 on East Lomond in early January 2024.





Ringed plover

A scarce passage migrant inland in Fife. The juvenile above was at Wilderness in mid-September 2019 and the adult below was one of two at Letham Pools in May 2022.





Little ringed plover

Very small numbers breed in the Howe of Fife, and it occurs as a scarce passage migrant. The adult above and right was at Letham Pools, while the juveniles were at the Wilderness.





Whimbrel

Seldom recorded inland in Fife, this bird was at Luthrie on 21 March 2023.





Curlew

Occurs regularly outside the breeding season at suitable sites. The bird above was at Newburgh, those on the right were at Rossie Bog, which sometimes holds a large flock, and the bird below left was at Balmerino.





Black-tailed godwit

Frequent especially at Letham Pools and the Wilderness, with largest numbers in late summer and autumn.





Turnstone

A bird of the rocky shore, these were at Balmerino.





Ruff

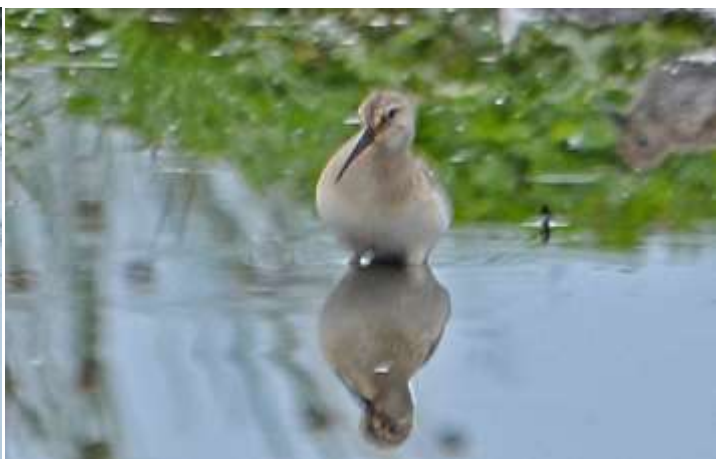
Occurs on spring and autumn migration at the Wilderness and the Letham Pools, provided the water level is not too high.





Curlew sandpiper

An uncommon passage migrant. The bird above and below (with a dunlin) was at Letham Pools in mid-September 2013. The birds on the right were at the Wilderness at the end of August 2019.





Temminck's stint

A very rare passage migrant, this bird was at Letham Pools on 7 May 2022.





Dunlin

Inland, a passage migrant in small numbers. The birds below, shown with a curlew sandpiper, were at Letham Pools. The other birds were at Balmerino.





Pectoral sandpiper

A rare vagrant from North America. The bird below (pictured with a ruff below right) was at Wilderness in mid-September 2018. The bird above and right was at Letham Pools in mid-July 2022.





Woodcock

Although quite common in winter, the woodcock is a difficult species to photograph. Usually, it is not seen until it flushes, when it rapidly flies away. The above out-of-focus shot and the shots below are the best I have managed for the Howe of Fife area. The above bird was one of four flushed on Darklaw Hill near Rathillet in late January 2024, the one below left was flushed from a stubble field at Kedlock Feus a few days later, and the one below right was flushed from moorland on Black Craig near Norman's Law in mid-January 2025.





Snipe

Common in late summer, autumn and winter in suitable habitat. The birds above and below were at Letham Pools in late August, while the one on the right was at Luthrie in December.





Common sandpiper

Scarce migrant in the Howe of fife. This bird was at Edensmuir (Mountcastle) near Letham in mid-April 2019.





Green sandpiper

A scarce migrant in the Howe of Fife. The two distant birds above were at Luthrie in late April 2022, while the one below was at the Wilderness in mid-August 2022.





Redshank

Inland records are relatively uncommon in the Howe of Fife. The bird below right was at Luthrie, while the bird below left was at Letham Pools. The species is common along the shoreline at Balmerino, where images above and on the right were taken.





Wood sandpiper

Uncommon migrant. These birds were at Letham Pools in mid-May.





Greenshank

A passage migrant in small numbers. The birds above and on the right were at the Wilderness, while the other two were at Letham Pools.





Black-headed gull

Common in open habitats.





Little gull

Not often recorded in the Howe of Fife. These adults were at the Wilderness by Ladybank in late June 2019 (below left), Letham Pools in May 2022 (below right), and Letham Pools in May 2023 (above).





Mediterranean gull

Rare in the Howe of Fife, but is likely to become regular, given the spread northwards of this species, which is now relatively common along the shores of the Firth of Forth. This immature bird was at the black-headed gull colony at Letham Pools in late April 2021.





Common gull

Common in open habitats.





Great black-backed gull

A mainly coastal species, although small numbers occur in the Howe of Fife. These birds were at the Letham Pools in late 2018.





Iceland gull

Rarely recorded inland, the Iceland gull is an uncommon winter visitor to Fife. This immature was at Luthrie in late November 2022.





Herring gull

Common in open habitats.





Lesser black-backed gull

Common in spring and summer but unusual in winter. The winter-plumage bird below right was with herring gulls at Angle Park in January 2020.





Cormorant

Becoming increasingly common at inland waters.





Grey heron

Common. These shots were taken at Letham Pools





Great white egret

A rare migrant in Fife. The shots below and above are of a long-staying bird at Angle Park, taken in early September 2024 and early January 2025. The one on the right was at Gaddon Loch in mid-February 2025, and may have been the same bird.





Little egret

This species is spreading rapidly through Scotland. In Fife, it is still mostly coastal, but this bird was at Rossie Bog in late March 2023.





Osprey

Often recorded in or around the Howe of Fife in spring and summer.





Sparrowhawk

Low numbers but widespread.





Goshawk

Scarce and not often seen, but becoming more common in Fife.





Marsh harrier

Marsh harriers breed in the Tay reed beds, and birds are increasingly seen in the Howe of Fife.





Hen harrier

Not often seen in the Howe of Fife, the ringtail above and below left was at Rossie Bog in mid-December 2023, the male right was east of Rathillet in mid-January 2024, and the male below right was at Wester Forret south of Kilmany in mid-November 2024.





Red kite

A rare visitor to the Howe of Fife. This one was by Mount Hill near Cupar in early April 2023.





Sea eagle

After reintroduction, a pair breeds at Tentsmuir, and this is probably one of those birds, wandering inland a few miles on 22 January 2021.





Common buzzard

After its recent return to the area, it is now common throughout the Howe of Fife.





Barn owl

Small numbers in suitable habitat.





Long-eared owl

Seldom recorded in the Howe of Fife area. This one was photographed with a phone through my car windscreen! It was at Kedlock Feus in December 2023.



Short-eared owl

Occasionally recorded in winter in the Howe of Fife area. This was one of four on East Lomond in late February 2024.





Tawny owl

Sparsely but widely distributed. This bird was just out of the nest.





Great spotted woodpecker

A regular visitor to many bird tables.





Kestrel

Once the most common bird of prey, its numbers have declined while sparrowhawks and buzzards have increased.





Merlin

Rarely encountered in the Howe of Fife, this female was at Rossie Bog in mid-November 2020.





Peregrine

Occurs in the Lomond Hills, and occasionally down in the Howe outside the breeding season. The bird above and below left was at Luthrie on 21 September 2020, while the bird below right was at Letham Pools on 1st December 2019.





Jay

Present in small numbers in suitable woodland. The above bird was at Edensmuir (Mountcastle), while the flying bird was at Clatto Reservoir.





Magpie

Until recently, the magpie did not occur in the Howe of Fife. It is now becoming common.





Jackdaw

Very common, often outnumbering rooks in mixed flocks.





Rook

Very common, a communal species that often flocks with jackdaws.





Carrion crow

Very common. While they can be very tame at the coast, where they are unlikely to be shot, they are usually wary in the Howe of Fife.





Raven

This species has shown a rapid increase in Fife, especially in the hills of northern Fife. The bird below right was at Luthrie, and shows the difference in size between the raven and the rook.





Waxwing

Uncommon winter visitor in variable numbers. These two birds were at Ballantager Farm, Letham in early January 2019.





Coal tit

Common woodland species, with large numbers in coniferous plantations.





Blue tit

Very common, one of the most frequent visitors to bird tables.





Great tit

Common woodland species.





Skylark

Common in suitable habitat.





Sand martin

Common migrant and breeds in suitable habitat.





Swallow

Common migrant and summer visitor.





House martin

Common migrant and summer visitor.





Long-tailed tit

Fairly common resident.





Willow warbler

Common summer visitor in woodland.





Chiffchaff

Summer visitor in woodland, and becoming more common.





Sedge warbler

Summer visitor, breeding mostly in wet habitats with thick vegetation cover.





Grasshopper warbler

A rare breeding bird in the Howe of Fife area, and a few pass through on migration. This bird was at Kilmany in early May 2021.





Blackcap

Common summer visitor in woodland. A few winter.





Garden warbler

Scarce breeding bird. The above bird was at Edensmuir (Mountcastle), while the one below was at Gaddon Loch.





Whitethroat

Common summer visitor in farmland hedgerows.





Goldcrest

Common, mostly where conifers are present. Numbers increase in winter with continental migrants arriving.





Wren

Very common resident.





Nuthatch

The nuthatch is currently spreading into Fife. These images were of two birds at Rankeilour in late February 2023.





Treecreeper

Small numbers present mostly in deciduous woodland.





Starling

Common throughout the year, with increased numbers in winter.





Song thrush

Small numbers in suitable habitat.





Mistle thrush

Present in small numbers throughout the year.





Redwing

Common autumn migrant and winter visitor, often flocking with fieldfares, as in the image on the right.





Blackbird

Common throughout the year.





Fieldfare

Migrant and winter visitor, sometimes in large numbers.





Spotted flycatcher

Once a common species, the spotted flycatcher is now rarely recorded in and around the Howe of Fife. This poor image was taken with a macro lens while recording hoverflies at Auchtermuchty Common!



Robin

Common throughout the year, although numbers increase each autumn with migrant birds arriving.





Whinchat

Whinchats were until relatively recently a regular breeder on high ground around the Howe of Fife, but have now become rare in summer. Migrants are mostly coastal, but these birds were at Letham Pools in late August 2024.





Stonechat

Scarce in and around the Howe of Fife. The pair below was on the slopes of East Lomond above the Howe in February 2024, while the female above was at Forret Hill in January 2021.





Wheatear

A few occur on migration. The above male was at Luthrie in early May 2024. The birds below (male left, female right) were west of Gauldry, on the high ground above Balmerino, in early May 2021.





Dipper

Uncommon in and around the Howe, occurring on the Eden and some of its tributaries. These birds were at Kilmany.





Tree sparrow

Patchily distributed but can be quite numerous where it occurs.





House sparrow

Common around human habitation.





Dunnock

Common resident.





Grey wagtail

Present in suitable habitat in small numbers.





Pied wagtail

Present in variable numbers throughout the year.





Meadow pipit

Breeds on high ground around the Howe, and is often encountered on low ground, mostly outside the breeding season. The bird below left was on East Lomond, the one below right near Logie, the one on the right at Black Craig, and the one above at Luthrie.





Chaffinch

Common throughout the year.





Brambling

A winter visitor in variable but usually low numbers.





Bullfinch

Common throughout the year.





Greenfinch

Resident in suitable habitat.





Linnet

Occurs throughout the year. Large flocks sometimes occur in winter. The above shows part of a flock of about 250 birds at Kedlock in January 2021, while below shows part of a flock of about 380 birds at Black Craig near Luthrie in January 2024.





Lesser redpoll

Small numbers in summer, with more in winter, but not common.





Common crossbill

Variable but generally very low numbers. The birds above and on the right were at Darklaw Hill by Rathillet in January 2021, while the birds below came down to drink at the Wilderness in September 2018.





Goldfinch

Common throughout the year.





Siskin

Small numbers in summer, more in winter, when they often visit bird tables.





Snow bunting

Unlikely to be encountered in the Howe, but it is occasionally recorded on the Lomond Hills. These birds were in a flock of 20 on the east slope of West Lomond on 6 March 2020.





Yellowhammer

Common throughout the year in arable farmland.





Reed bunting

Breeds in suitable wetland habitats. In winter, birds will sometimes join flocks of finches, buntings and sparrows away from wetland habitats.

