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The status and identification of 'Icelandic Redwing' in Britain

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Abstract

'Icelandic Redwing' *Turdus iliacus coburnii* is well known in northern and westernmost Britain as a passage migrant and winter visitor. Elsewhere, however, its precise status is not well understood, though increasing observations on the near Continent suggest that it might be under-recorded in areas of Britain away from the north and west. This paper aims to encourage more observers to look for and document this subspecies in Britain; it summarises the literature on the subspecies' movements, attempts to quantify the importance of the published identification features and proposes an assessment framework for observers and records committees. Whilst there is significant overlap in individual characters, most birds can be identified by a combination of features.

Introduction

The 'Icelandic Redwing' *Turdus iliacus coburnii* was first described on 20th November 1901 at a meeting of the British Ornithologists' Club (BOC). The report of the meeting noted that 'Dr. Bowdler Sharpe exhibited three specimens of the Iceland Redwing, which had been procured in a valley in the north of Iceland by Mr. F. Coburn in June 1899' (*Bull. B.O.C.* Vol. xii, p.28).

Icelandic Redwing has a population of around 100,000–300,000 pairs (Wernham *et al.* 2002), breeding in Birch *Betula* scrub, amongst boulders and in fields of introduced Nootka Lupines *Lupinus nootkatensis* and,

increasingly, in towns and gardens across Iceland. Additionally, there are around 10–20 breeding pairs in the Faeroe Islands (www.birdmigrationatlas.dk/uk/species/redwing) and a small but increasing population at Qanassiassat, southern Greenland, where it bred in 1948, 1967 and from 1990/91 onwards (Boertmann 1994).

The subspecies has also bred in Scotland: pairs raised young on Fair Isle in 1935 and 2020 (Witherby *et al.* 1943; www.birdguides.com/news/redwings-nest-on-fair-isle), while on the Outer Hebrides, two pairs bred at Loch Druidibeg, South Uist, in 1973. A pair was also present at the latter site in 2000, and breeding was probably attempted at two other locations on the Outer Hebrides: on Lewis near Loch Seaforth in 1999 and at Achmore in 2000. Summering birds have also been recorded on South Uist and on St Kilda (Forrester & Andrews 2007). In England, summer records of Icelandic Redwing come from Spurn, Yorkshire, in June 2018 (P. French *in litt.*) and Nanjizal, Cornwall, in June and July 2020, though there have been no apparent breeding attempts.

Movements and vagrancy

The first birds recorded from Britain were in Scotland: one in east Ross-shire (now Highland) on 25th October 1924 and two on Fair Isle on 3rd October 1925 (Witherby 1927). Since then, the subspecies has come to be recognised as of regular occurrence in northern and western Scotland, particularly in the Northern Isles and the Outer Hebrides.

Small, though increasing, numbers of Icelandic Redwings have remained in Iceland throughout the winter since the 1930s, mainly in urban areas (Gudmundsson 1951), and a few also winter in the Faeroes

(www.birdmigrationatlas.dk/uk/species/redwing). Most birds, however, leave for the winter; ringing recoveries show that most spend the winter in western Scotland, Ireland, western and southern France, northwest Spain and Portugal, with Ireland hosting the majority of the population. Those wintering in France and Spain (largely, it seems, first-year birds) are thought to undertake a direct sea crossing rather than staging in Scotland or Ireland. As Icelandic Redwing has presumably evolved since the end of the last ice age, this represents a rapid adoption of a new and highly focused migration strategy (Milwright 2002).

Occasional large movements can occur, with Fair Isle recording a day total of over 1,000 on 18th October 1956. Here, Icelandic Redwings typically arrive in cyclonic westerly or northwesterly conditions between late September and November (though mostly in the latter part of this period) but there is also a small return movement noted in spring, peaking in late April (Williamson 1965; da Prato *et al.* 1980). Icelandic Redwing also occurs regularly in small numbers in both spring and autumn in the westernmost fringes of England and Wales, for example on the Isles of Scilly and at the Welsh bird observatories.

Away from these northern and western fringes, there are few records. Witherby *et al.* (1943) noted occurrences in Somerset and Kent and, today, Icelandic Redwing is still generally considered to be rare away from the far west of Britain. Even in Dorset, it is rarely recorded, with just a handful of records from Portland (www.portlandbirdobs.com/2024/03/30th-march.html). In an informal survey of county recorders, many noted that the subspecies was on their description list of rare subspecies but that few observers appeared to be looking for the taxon and few submissions were received. Even along the well-watched east coast from Northumberland to Kent, there are just a few

records in each county.

Icelandic Redwing

Tristan ap Rheinallt

402. 'Icelandic Redwing' *Turdus iliacus coburni*, Lewis, Outer Hebrides, April 2020.

This classic, dark, 'swarthy-looking' bird would be identifiable as *coburni* on just a brief view. The lack of contrast between the very dark rich-brown upperparts and very heavily marked underparts is striking. In fact, the underparts markings are so strong and 'blurry' that they obscure the ground colour almost entirely. Note that the feet are particularly dark, typical of many *coburni*.

This bird scores 17 (upperparts 3, supercilium 2, breast 3, flanks 3, undertail-coverts 3, legs and feet 3); see text for scoring details.

Prior to 2002, there were no recoveries of ringed birds between Iceland and

England or Wales (Milwright 2002; Wernham *et al.* 2002), lending support to the notion that Icelandic Redwing largely avoided these areas of Britain. However, an Icelandic-ringed bird was recovered at Kelling, Norfolk, in 2008 (Stoddart 2010) and a bird trapped at Billinge, Cheshire & Wirral, in 2018 (one of several now documented at this site; see <https://two-in-a-bush.blogspot.com/search/label/coburni>) subsequently yielded a recovery from Iceland. These recoveries suggest that Icelandic Redwing might not be quite as rare across most of England and Wales as previously supposed.

Icelandic Redwing has a proven ability to wander beyond its expected wintering areas. In the Nearctic, it is a regular vagrant to areas of Greenland away from its small breeding area there (Boertmann 1994). Redwings – of both races – have reached eastern Canada (Howell *et al.* 2014) and there is a ringing recovery of an Icelandic Redwing at sea on the Grand Banks off Newfoundland (Milwright 2002).

Redwings have also reached the northeast United States, with records coming from New York, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island (Howell *et al.* 2014). The subspecific identity of all birds is not known but a recent individual at Portland, Maine, in 2021, was an Icelandic bird (<https://naturescapeimages.wordpress.com/2021/02/04/31st-january-2021-maine-stay>).

More remarkably, a Redwing was found dead on 31st December 2001 on the *Ramform Victory*, a seismic research vessel operating 150 km off the coast of Espírito Santo state, southeast Brazil (Brito *et al.* 2013). This represents the first record of this species in South America – and, indeed, in the southern hemisphere. Photographs of the specimen suggest that it was an Icelandic Redwing.

In the Western Palearctic, Icelandic Redwings have wandered to Jan Mayen and Bear Island, Norway (Witherby *et al.* 1943), while on mainland Norway the subspecies is regular in small numbers along the west coast (including, for example, at Utsira, Rogaland), mainly in late autumn but also in spring (G. Mobakken *in litt.*). There are also two Norwegian recoveries of Iceland-ringed birds (Milwright 2002). At the time of writing, there are no accepted Swedish or Danish records (Malmhagen 2014).

In Germany, Icelandic Redwing was recorded five times between 1930 and 1950. More recently, 38 have been trapped on Helgoland between 1999 and 2009 (one in spring and 37 in autumn) and it has been estimated that an average of over 120 might occur on the island each year. The subspecies is now regarded as a scarce migrant on Helgoland, a few occurring in the second half of March but most between late September and December, with a pronounced peak in late October (Dierschke *et al.* 2010).

Icelandic Redwing

Graham Catley

403. Icelandic Redwing, North Uist, Outer Hebrides, April 2015. Another very dark and heavily marked individual, but with a little

more of the underparts ground colour showing through. The legs cannot be seen but the feet are clearly dark. It also scores 17 (upperparts 3, supercilium 2, breast 3, flanks 3, undertail-coverts 3, legs and feet 3).

Milwright (2002) noted a Dutch recovery of an Iceland-ringed Redwing, although it was a bird on Vlieland, Friesland, from 25th October to 4th November 2014 that was accepted as the first Dutch record (www.dutchavifauna.nl/record/30468; Haas *et al.* 2015). Subsequently, the Dutch Rarities Committee (CDNA) looked at claims over the following two years, noting that at least five birds deserved acceptance in each year, with other likely (but ultimately not accepted) records in both years. In 2017, the CDNA reclassified Icelandic Redwing as a scarce migrant in the Netherlands, typically occurring in late October and November, and not rare enough to be assessed at national level (www.dutchavifauna.nl/species/ijslandse_koperwiek?r=32529&all=1). Milwright (2002) also noted a recovery of an Iceland-ringed bird in Belgium and a Belgian-ringed bird identified as *coburni* subsequently recovered in Iceland.

This increasingly documented presence on the near Continent clearly provides a useful context in which to reflect on the possible status of Icelandic Redwing in much of England and Wales. Here, the main barriers to a fuller elucidation of its status seem to be a combination of low observer engagement and lingering identification difficulties.

Identification

Icelandic Redwings are traditionally described as differing from nominate *iliacus* by a combination of larger size, usually expressed in terms of wing length, and darker plumage.

Wing length

Icelandic Redwing has developed a longer wing as an adaptation to a long oversea migration (Williamson 1965). Owing to variations in sample sizes, the literature provides different wing-length ranges for each subspecies (Cramp 1988; Glutz von Blotzheim & Bauer 1988; Svensson 1992; Shirihai & Svensson 2018). However, combining these published measurements gives a range of 109–126 mm for nominate *iliacus* and 113–133 mm for *coburni*.

The long-standing view has therefore been that any Redwing with a wing length of over 126 mm must be a *coburni*; the extent of overlap with nominate *iliacus*, however, is not often emphasised nor the fact that only around 13% of Icelandic Redwings will have a wing length in excess of 126 mm. The wing lengths of most Icelandic Redwings fall in the range 120–125 mm (Dierschke *et al.* 2010).

Dierschke *et al.* (2010) demonstrated, based on much larger sample sizes, that around 0.5% of trapped and measured Redwings in southern Sweden and in Finland (all expected to be nominate) have a wing length of over 126 mm. The authors therefore argued that wing length alone is not sufficient to identify an Icelandic Redwing. A long-winged bird may well prove to be an Icelandic Redwing, but its identity should be confirmed by reference to its appearance. In any case, biometrics are, of course, only useful for birds in the hand or specimens.

Plumage

Sharpe's original description of *Turdus iliacus coburni* was highly misleading. Based on extremely worn breeding specimens, his description emphasised the paleness of the upperparts and flanks. The subspecies' true characters were only revealed by Claud Ticehurst, who exhibited further specimens at a BOC meeting on 8th April 1925. The report of this meeting noted that 'none of Dr Sharpe's characters hold good', concluding that: 'The Iceland bird is a trifle darker olive on the upper parts and more washed with olive on the breast and flanks' (*Bull. B.O.C.* Vol. xlv, p. 90).

Icelandic Redwing

Julian Hough

404. Icelandic Redwing, Portland, Maine, United States, January 2021. This vagrant was well watched and documented. Note the dark feet of this individual. From this and other photographs it scores 16 (upperparts 2, supercilium 2, breast 3, flanks 3, undertail-coverts 3, legs and feet 3).

The plumage features indicating *coburni* (compared to nominate *iliacus*) are today well described in the literature (Witherby *et al.* 1943; Cramp 1988; Svensson 1992; Clement & Hathway 2000; van Duivendijk 2010; Garner 2015; Shirihai & Svensson 2018). Not all authors emphasise the same features, but those most agreed upon are:

- Darker, ‘swarthy-looking’, rich earth-brown or olive-brown upperparts.
- Deeper ochre hues in the supercilium.
- More extensive and ‘smudged’ or ‘blurry’ dark feather markings on the breast and flanks, which may coalesce and dominate the ground colour. These markings can extend to the belly sides leaving just a narrow, unmarked central strip.
- More and larger dark feather-centres in the undertail-coverts.
- Darker legs and feet.

These published features signal that Icelandic Redwings are an overall darker and more heavily marked version of nominate birds. However, both subspecies are rather variable, and the above features are largely tendencies or a matter of degree rather than absolute, hard characters. While the extremes of each subspecies in multiple character traits are distinctive – and some are readily identifiable on even a brief view – many of the above-listed features of Icelandic Redwing can be either approached or even matched by nominate *iliacus*. Some strongly marked nominate *iliacus* might therefore be misidentified as *coburni*, while some less distinctive *coburni* may be overlooked as nominate *iliacus*.

Most importantly, the relative weight of the published features is not clear. It is not obvious, for example, which features are present in all individuals and which are present in only in a proportion; nor is it clear which are the most reliable for identification, whether any are fully diagnostic or whether some or all have to be used in combination.

Assertions about the identity of tricky individuals can therefore be little more than a matter of opinion. In this context, it is unsurprising that observers and records committees can sometimes be unsure as to what constitutes an 'acceptable' *coburni* in an extralimital context.

This paper attempts to quantify the prevalence and usefulness of the published features and clarify those which allow a safe identification not just of 'obvious' individuals but also of more 'intermediate-looking' birds.

Icelandic Redwing

Graham Catley

405. Icelandic Redwing, North Uist, Outer Hebrides, April 2015. This bird is heavily marked below but the markings are less obviously 'blurry' than those of the individuals in the previous images, appearing more clearly defined against the ground colour of the underparts. Nevertheless, it is still a typical *coburni* and scores 16 (upperparts 3, supercilium 2, breast 3, flanks 3, undertail-coverts 2, legs and feet 3).

A quantitative approach

A sample of 100 online photographs of *coburni* and 100 of nominate *iliacus* from within their respective expected ranges (mostly from the online Macaulay Library www.macaulaylibrary.org) were reviewed in detail.

The degree of variability in each subspecies was assessed by categorising the appearance (or 'character state') of each reviewed bird against the characters identified in the literature as the most divergent and therefore the most useful for field identification: darkness of upperparts, supercilium colour, darkness of breast, darkness of flanks, undertail-coverts pattern, and colour of legs and feet. The overall darkness of the breast and flanks was used as a proxy for both the extent of dark markings and their degree of 'blurriness'. Breast and flank patterns were assessed separately as they can vary independently of each other.

The categorisation identified the prevalence of each character state (the proportion of individuals showing it) as well as its usefulness (how reliably it separated the two subspecies). The nature and magnitude of each taxon's variability as well as the degree (if any) of overlap can thus be determined objectively. This approach is in line with that promoted by Sangster (2021) and recognises that overlapping characters can still be useful in identification if the degree of overlap can be quantified and set in the context of variation in a wider suite of characters.

Icelandic Redwing

Steve Arlow

406. Icelandic Redwing, Fair Isle, Shetland, October 2018. This bird is heavily marked below but the markings are less obviously 'blurry' here also. Note on this individual a deep ochre supercilium and more greyish-pink legs and feet. This bird scores 16 (upperparts 3, supercilium 3, breast 3, flanks 3, undertail-coverts 2, legs and feet 2).

Icelandic Redwing

Andy Stoddart

407. Icelandic Redwing, near Holt, Norfolk, January 2024. An example of a 'vagrant' individual showing its distinctive appearance even at range. Note the overall very dark and 'swarthy' appearance and very heavily marked underparts. From this and other photographs this bird scores 15 (upperparts 3, supercilium 2, breast 3, flanks 3, undertail-coverts 2, legs and feet 2).

Such a quantitative approach has been increasingly used to refine identification criteria for taxa that overlap in their appearance, for example the Common Gull *Larus canus* complex (Adriaens & Gibbins 2016), Caspian Gull *L. cachinnans* and Herring Gull *L. argentatus* (and hybrids) (Gibbins *et al.* 2011) and 'American Pipit' *Anthus rubescens rubescens* and 'Siberian Pipit' *A. r. japonicus* (Birch *et al.* 2024). It is perhaps particularly useful in the case of *coburni* and nominate *iliacus* Redwings, as this is a case of overlapping

characters between two taxa whose breeding ranges do *not* overlap, rather than intergradation between the two subspecies.

The image selection was limited to those taken between September and April, the period during which *coburni* might be encountered in Britain. Birds in late spring and summer were excluded from the analysis as, owing to wear and bleaching, their appearance can vary from that of fresh autumn and winter birds. For example, the upperparts may become paler and any ochre hues in the supercilium may fade; see also the notes above on the type specimens.

Images were not separated according to age or sex. Age and sex-related differences in this species are small and have little or no bearing on subspecific identification. In choosing images of *coburni*, it was, however, important to ensure that birds photographed in Iceland featured prominently. Those photographed elsewhere tend, understandably, to be the more distinctive individuals, and reliance on these images alone would skew the full range of variation.

Images were selected only if all the relevant features were clearly visible and not obviously under- or overexposed or subject to misleading lighting effects, for example being heavily back-lit, in deep shade or in snow.

Upperparts darkness was particularly difficult to categorise as, owing to the vagaries of light and photographic reproduction, it was not possible to carry out an accurate assessment of every image. The categorisations for upperparts darkness were therefore carried out very conservatively so as not to exaggerate the differences.

Icelandic Redwing

Andy Stoddart

408. Icelandic Redwing, Selfoss, Iceland, April 2011. This bird has extensive 'blurry' markings on the breast and flanks and the ground colour of the underparts is rather dull. However, the legs are somewhere between greyish-pink and pale pink. From this and other photographs it scores 14 (upperparts 3, supercilium 2, breast 3, flanks 3, undertail-coverts 2, legs and feet 1), but it could score 13 or 15 if different assessments were made of the upperparts and legs/feet colours. This individual is known to be a *coburni* from its location, but such low-scoring birds will prove problematic in a vagrant context and are likely to be overlooked.

Leg and foot colour was also a sometimes-difficult character to assess from

images, with strong shadow or back-lighting potentially making the legs and feet look darker or paler than they really are. Nevertheless, an assessment of this character proved possible in most cases, and many birds were straightforward to categorise.

The features that related to patterns rather than colours were less prone to photographic effects and were more straightforward to assess in images. However, it was important to recognise that 'fluffed-up' birds show whiter-looking flanks with less obvious streaking whilst those 'sleeked down' look more heavily marked.

It is, of course, recognised that any attempt at categorising plumage features creates arbitrary points of difference in characters that are continuously variable; different observers will also interpret colours differently. Some may see 'greyish-pink' as 'dark pinkish-horn' whilst others may see 'pale ochre' as 'deep ochre'.

The methodology is therefore inevitably somewhat subjective but the categorisations were reviewed multiple times for consistency and were also undertaken as conservatively as possible.

Redwing

Robin Chittenden

409. Nominate Redwing *Turdus iliacus*

iliacus, Martlesham, Suffolk, January 2014.

This bird shows heavy streaking on both the breast and the flanks, initially suggesting *coburni*. However, the underparts markings are well defined against a very white background and the legs and feet are strikingly pale, both features typical of more heavily marked nominate *iliacus*. From this and other photographs it scores 13 (upperparts 2, supercilium 2, breast 3, flanks 3, undertail-coverts 2, legs and feet 1).

Results

An overview of results is given in table 1.

Table 1. Categorisations against selected character states for nominate Redwing *Turdus iliacus iliacus* and Icelandic Redwings *T. i. coburni*.

character and character state	% of <i>coburni</i> with each character state	% of nominate <i>iliacus</i> with each character state
darkness of upperparts		
greyish-brown	0	13
medium warm brown	21	81
dark earth-brown or dark olive-brown	79	6
supercilium colour		
white	28	65
pale ochre	50	30
deep ochre	22	5
darkness of breast		
less than 50% dark	0	51
approximately 50% dark	1	38
more than 50% dark	99	11
darkness of flanks		
less than 50% dark	0	77
approximately 50% dark	14	18
more than 50% dark	86	5
undertail-covert pattern		
wholly white and unmarked	0	26
a few small dark feather centres	48	66
many large dark feather centres	52	8
colour of legs and feet		
pale pink	1	70
greyish-pink	41	28
dark pinkish-horn	58	2

Any exercise of the type described above is of course limited by its sample size. The numbers sampled here will not have captured the full range of variability in each subspecies but they should nevertheless be sufficient to

provide 99% confidence in the results (Sangster 2021). A number of conclusions can therefore be drawn and, while not too much weight should be attached to the absolute percentages, some overall patterns are clear.

Darkness of upperparts

Despite the cautious approach taken to categorisation, dark earth-brown or dark olive-brown upperparts were shown by over three-quarters (and probably more) of the *coburni* and by only a small minority of nominate *iliacus*. They are therefore a strong indicator of a bird being *coburni*. Medium-warm-brown upperparts were shown by significant numbers of both subspecies, although they were more typical of nominate *iliacus*. Greyish-brown upperparts were not shown by any of the *coburni* and, therefore, at least in this autumn and winter sample, pointed very strongly to nominate *iliacus*.

Supercilium colour

A deep-ochre supercilium was shown by less than a quarter of the *coburni* but, when present, was a weak indicator of this subspecies. Pale-ochre or white supercilia were shown frequently by both subspecies and were not a significant indicator for either. Supercilium colour is therefore the least informative feature of those assessed here.

Darkness of breast

A largely dark breast, often with significant 'blurriness' to the dark markings, was shown by almost all *coburni* in the sample. However, a minority of nominate *iliacus* shared this feature (including 'blurriness'). Only one *coburni* fitted the 'approximately 50% dark' breast category and this pattern was much more indicative of nominate *iliacus*. A largely white breast was not shown by any of the *coburni* and therefore pointed very strongly to nominate *iliacus*.

Darkness of flanks

Largely dark flanks, often with significant 'blurriness' in the dark markings, were shown by the majority of the *coburni*. However, a small minority of nominate *iliacus* shared this feature (including the 'blurriness'). Roughly equal numbers of each subspecies fell into the category 'approximately 50% dark flanks'. Largely white flanks were not shown by any of the *coburni* and therefore pointed very strongly to nominate *iliacus*.

Undertail-coverts pattern

A large amount of dark feathering in the undertail-coverts was shown by around half of the *coburni* and, when present, it was strongly indicative of this subspecies. A small amount of dark feathering was shown by both subspecies in approximately equal numbers. Wholly white and unmarked undertail-coverts were not shown by any of the *coburni* and therefore pointed very strongly to nominate *iliacus*.

Colour of legs and feet

Dark pinkish-horn legs and feet (or sometimes just the feet) were shown by over half of the *coburni* but by only a tiny minority of nominate *iliacus*. Greyish-pink legs and feet were shown by both subspecies in approximately equal numbers. Pale-pink legs and feet were shown by only one of the *coburni* but by the majority of nominate *iliacus*. They are therefore strongly indicative of the latter subspecies.

Discussion

In summary, there is no single diagnostic 'silver bullet' feature for *coburni*. All the character states overlap to some degree, and nominate *iliacus* with heavy

and 'blurry' breast and/or flank markings represent the greatest pitfall. In particular, nominate *iliacus* with heavily marked breasts are relatively common, comprising perhaps around 10% of all birds.

Therefore, like other taxa with overlapping characters, *coburni* is best identified by a combination of features. Many birds can be relatively straightforward to identify in this way, the darkness of their upperparts coupled with the extent and nature of their breast and flank markings contributing to a distinctive dark 'oily' or 'swarthy' appearance in which there is relatively little contrast between the upperparts and underparts. Other individuals may be less immediately distinctive, however, and for these taking a more structured, objective approach can be useful.

Redwing

Robin Chittenden

410. Nominate Redwing, Whitlingham, Norfolk, February 2023. This bird also shows heavy streaking on the breast and the flanks. However, the legs are typically pale pink and its total score of 13 (upperparts 2, supercilium 2, breast 3, flanks 3, undertail-

coverts 2, legs and feet 1) indicates a heavily marked nominate *iliacus*.

Scoring system

Character states for each of the 200 reviewed birds were scored, with a weighting given to each according to its usefulness as an identification feature as identified above. This weighting was applied very conservatively so as to recognise only those character states where the divergence was very significant and therefore potentially useful as an identification indicator. These scores were then totalled in order to reveal patterns both within and between the two subspecies.

This approach averages out the scores for an individual bird across the whole suite of characters so that an 'extreme' or 'anomalous' score for one character is balanced out by the overall 'basket' of scores for all the characters combined. A weakly marked *coburni* or a heavily marked nominate *iliacus* should therefore still be identifiable once the whole suite of characters is taken into account.

Scores were allocated according to three evidence categories as follows:

Score 3 Character states strongly indicative of *coburni* (occurring at least four times as frequently as in nominate *iliacus*). They are, however, not sufficient to establish an identification in isolation and should be viewed in combination with other features.

Score 2 Character states shown by significant numbers of both subspecies. These should not be used in identification.

Score 1 Character states strongly indicative of nominate *iliacus* (occurring at least four times as frequently as in *coburni*). They are, however, not sufficient to establish an identification in isolation and should be viewed in combination with other features.

The character states in the 200 reviewed images are given in table 2.

Table 2. Scores for selected character states in *coburni* and nominate *iliacus* Redwings.

character and character state	score
darkness of upperparts	
greyish-brown	1
medium warm brown	2
dark earth-brown or olive-brown	3
supercilium colour	
white	2
pale ochre	2
deep ochre	3
darkness of breast	
less than 50% dark	1
approximately 50% dark	1
more than 50% dark	3
flanks	
less than 50% dark	1
approximately 50% dark	2
more than 50% dark	3
undertail-covert pattern	
wholly white and unmarked	1
a few small dark feather centres	2
many large dark feather centres	3
colour of legs and feet	
pale pink	1

greyish-pink	2
dark pinkish-horn	3

Nominate *iliacus* scored mainly 1 and 2 and total scores fell in the range 7 to 13 while *coburni* scored mainly 2 and 3 with total scores falling in the range 14–18 (fig. 1).

fig 1

Fig. 1. Distribution of totalled scores for Redwings *Turdus iliacus*.

While there was significant overlap in most individual characters, the totalled scores for each bird of known identity (representing a combination of all the characters) fell into two highly distinct groups with no overlap. Therefore, the methodology, albeit somewhat crude, distinguished effectively between the two subspecies, its results matching the identity of the sampled individual in all cases.

By applying the same methodology, it should also be possible to reach a reliable identification for birds of unknown identity. However, there are two

important caveats. Firstly, despite this exercise not producing any, a larger sample size will inevitably throw up *coburni* scoring 13 (or conceivably even lower) and nominate *iliacus* scoring 14 (or conceivably even higher). Such instances should be rare, though. Secondly, the scoring judgements can, as noted above, be somewhat subjective and finely balanced. With most individuals this will not unduly affect the overall result but for 'borderline' birds there is greater scope for uncertainty.

Redwing

Andy Stoddart

411. Nominate Redwing, Blakeney Point, Norfolk, October 2018. This bird appears rather rich brown above but is less heavily marked on the underparts. It scores 10 (upperparts 3, supercilium 2, breast 1, flanks 1, undertail-coverts 1, legs and feet 2).

Redwing

Andy Stoddart

412. Nominate Redwing, Blakeney Point, Norfolk, October 2022. A typical example of this subspecies with medium-warm-brown upperparts and sparse and sharply defined underparts markings. It scores 9 (upperparts 2, supercilium 2, breast 1, flanks 1, undertail-coverts 1, legs and feet 2).

Nevertheless, the methodology appears useful. It seems clear that an 'acceptable' Icelandic Redwing in a vagrant context should generate a score of 14 or above, although any bird scoring 14 should perhaps be scrutinised with particular care. Any putative *coburni* scoring less than 14 should probably be left unidentified, though.

For the most striking individuals this methodology will of course simply confirm their already apparent identity. More usefully, however, it should also

permit the identification of more intermediate-looking or difficult birds, as long as views or photographs are good enough for all the relevant features to be assessed.

It is hoped that the approach set out here will encourage more observers to actively search for this subspecies. In most of Britain it represents a significantly under-explored but exciting field challenge.

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