

Finding Migrant Hawfinches - Check the Redwing Flocks!



Hawfinch and Redwing, Harden, near Penistone, W Yorkshire, Oct 2017. Photo: Dave Pennington

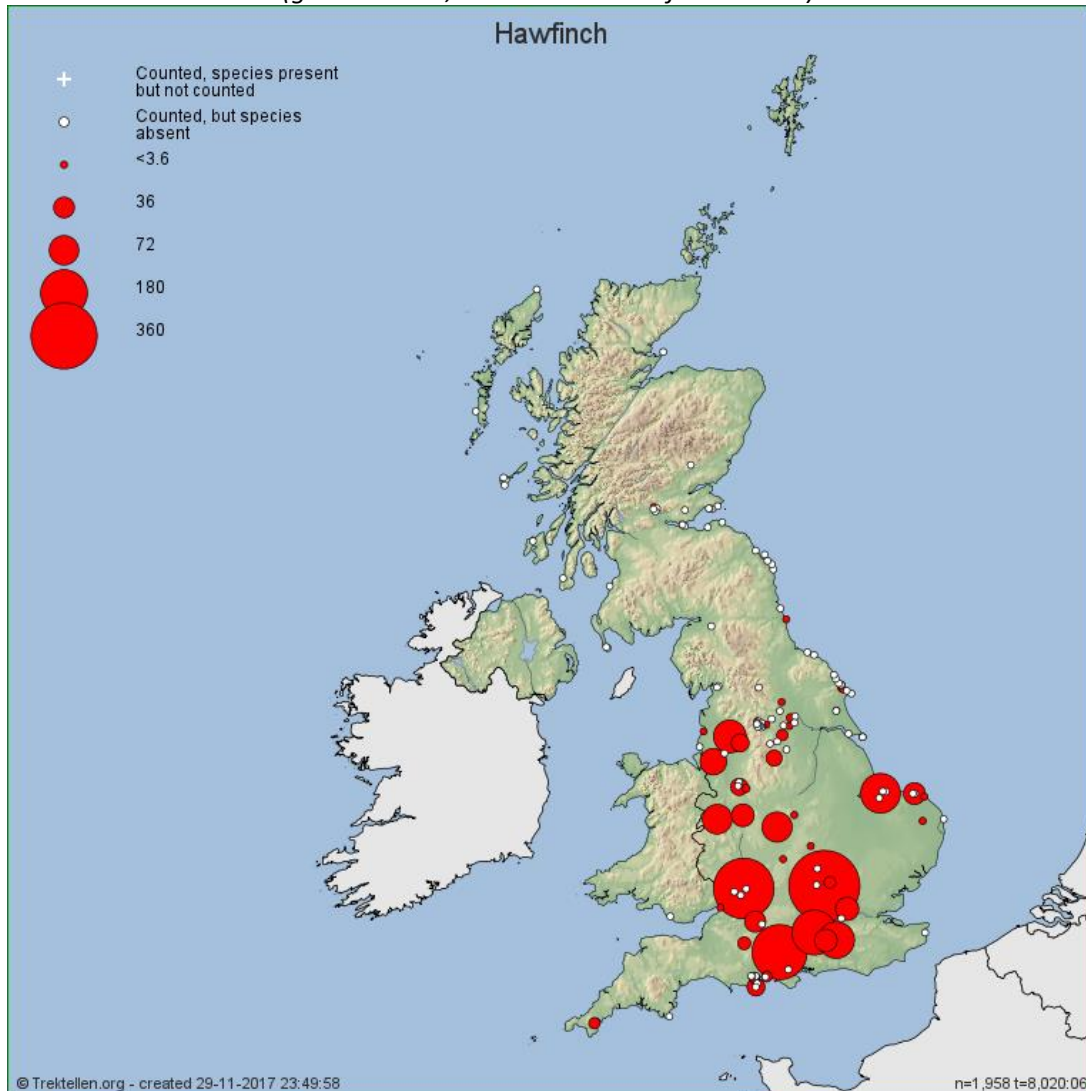
Much of what follows is more applicable in 'normal' years when Hawfinches are rare and vismig offers the best, albeit often slim, chance of seeing one. The article below is based on one I was asked to do for Oxon Ornithological Society. Our UK Vis meister Clive suggested the Vismig Group might be interested in it. So here it is. Some of what's said below is speculative. If you know better - please shout.

Introduction

I moved from Yorkshire to Standlake, West Oxford on 31st March this year. So it feels a bit presumptuous to be offering 'advice' in the OOS Bulletin. But, following email exchanges about my October Hawfinch sightings in Standlake, Jason C (Oxon birding Blog Meister) asked me to write this article. He said it would be interesting to OOS members. So, if it isn't, blame him! What follows is based on my experience of 'vismigging' in the Pennine Hills and at Spurn on the Yorkshire coast. You'll be aware 'vismigging' means standing in one spot for hours and scanning the skies for/listening for diurnal migrants, especially in autumn. *This has proved the best way for me to see hawfinches away from known breeding and wintering sites, mainly at Spurn but now also in Oxon.* This article is about why and how this, sometimes, works for me. A caveat is needed here. This year has seen an exceptional irruption of hawfinches into/through the UK. Many birders have seen them in places where they were never or rarely recorded before, including in Oxon. Vismig sites have had day counts ranging from one to 87, including single species flocks of 40-50. By November, hawfinches were being found 'wintering' in many more areas than usual, and in bigger numbers,

from southern England northwards. More recently, hawfinches have been seen heading north (re-orienting from southern sites they reached during the initial stage of the irruption?), with 'irruption' records now coming from Scotland too (see Figure 1). The numbers and autumn/winter distribution this year are, respectively, much larger and more widespread than normal. But, what about finding hawfinches in normal years?

Figure 1. *Hawfinch totals at visible migration sites in the UK, autumn 2017 (grand total 1,958 birds to end of November)*



Map: © www.trektellen.org

Hawfinch migration

Hawfinches migrate into/through the UK during September to early November, peaking in mid-October. In most years, unless birders visit known wintering and breeding sites, they don't see hawfinches. All the more reason, then, to try to maximise our chances of seeing the few that might move through Oxon. And, in my experience, that means carefully checking redwing flocks, especially during autumn 'redwing movements'. The reason? Redwings and hawfinches are fellow travellers. In 'normal' years, lone migrant hawfinches are seen sometimes, as are migrating hawfinch flocks; but not often. Usually, it's a question of spotting one or two hawfinches moving with a redwing flock. Even these sightings are *not* annual. Many dedicated vismiggers have never had hawfinch over their vis site. One reason is annual fluctuations in the number of migrant hawfinches. But another is

that even if a flock of redwings contains them, hawfinches are hard to hear and hard to see, for reasons explored below.

Flying thrushes call "sreeee" but so do hawfinches

Hawfinches go "tick", but they also call "sreeee" or variants of this, and often so when migrating. Sometimes the call has a 'small pipit'/'yellow wag' quality to me. Whatever, these calls are hard to pick out from similar Redwing flight calls, especially from rapidly disappearing over-fliers. I first realised this in 2005 on an autumn trip to Hungary when I initially mistook 100s of vocal, migrating hawfinches as redwings. Back in the UK, I witnessed a mass arrival of winter thrushes at Spurn. I suddenly realised that the few autumn hawfinches I'd seen there were on big 'redwing days'. Spurn has had White's and Rock Thrushes but never a rare Turdus. The reason is that Turdus flocks disappear inland soon after arrival. We've known for years from radar studies that even more thrushes bypass Spurn overnight, being picked up by inland vismiggers from dawn. Peaks of 3-5k in a morning is not unusual at good sites, with 10k on a watch exceptional but not unknown. I started to suspect that hawfinches get caught up in the thrush flocks, but were being missed because they were 'sreeeing' not 'ticking'. As an aside, migrant hawfinch "ticks" can sound like migrant song thrush "tics" owing to 'open landscape atmospheric'. Eventually, I spoke to a French birder who organises autumn migration watches in the Pyrenees. "Do you get hawfinches?" I asked. "Oh yes" he replied. "They come through with the redwings". He also confirmed my experience of the 'sreeee' flight call. Bingo! I'll draw a veil over what followed. Suffice it to say that, having alerted my vismig mates to all this, some of them went on to have their first vismig hawfinches, some that very year. I didn't! It took me years to see a "vis" hawfinch. But I do remember testing the theory out at Spurn with Tim Cleeves. Thousands of thrushes were piling over the point as we arrived. We deliberately checked the redwing flocks. Unbelievably, as we grilled one of the first packs of redwings, a hawfinch dropped out of it to land in front of us. Magic! I've noted hawfinches with redwings at Spurn since. And the trick worked on my new Oxon patch this year. Some compensation for failing to find a decent vismig spot here - yet.

Migrating hawfinches look similar to, and fly like, redwings

An overstatement of course but, *to me*, the two are similar enough that, when one, or two, hawfinches are within a redwing flock, it's hard to pick them out without plumage clues. Firstly, counting becomes a distraction. Also, flocks often consist of silhouettes until they draw near. Then they're suddenly on you and gone before you can take in plumage details or calls. The two species are similar enough in body length and wing length to confuse. Lastly, in full migration mode, their flight is surprisingly similar too (to my old eyes anyway): a series of flurried wing flaps, fairly alike in cadence, then wings closed into the body. Plus, given hawfinches keep up with the redwings, their velocity must be roughly the same. Indeed, having together watched a single hawfinch disappear overhead with redwings in Oxon, Johnny 'Mac' suggested individual/isolated hawfinches join redwing flocks for safety rather than merge with other finches they might outpace. An intriguing thought. To be clear, I have sometimes momentarily misidentified an individual redwing in a flock as a hawfinch. But when looking for head-on hawfinches among redwings, I look for a 'broad, oblate fat ball' body and strong flight undulations (though sometimes these can be quite shallow). Obviously, side-on, the hawfinch's big-headed, front-heavy, short-tailed silhouette is a give-away. Some say the flight shape reminds them of migrating starlings or a blunt-billed nuthatch. In vismig conditions, hawfinch plumage often looks 'dark', except for a whacking white wing bar, as in the wonderfully atmospheric photo below.



Hawfinch, Harden, nr Penistone, W Yorkshire, Oct 2017.

Photo: Dave Pennington

Hawfinch and redwing autumn migrations coincide

Hawfinch movements are rather a mystery. But even in normal years, their peak arrival dates at Spurn are in mid-October, coinciding nicely with redwing immigration. In the absence of other hawfinches, a lone bird pressing on inland is at least as likely to join redwings as any other immigrant.

Hawfinches and redwings share some food preferences; check those berry bushes

I've not studied this in detail and could be talking rubbish but, in my experience, redwings often frequent yew trees. And so do hawfinches. I presume both eat yew berries or maybe they both like to disappear deep into yew trees' foliage; something I've seen several times. In fact, on moving to Standlake, I noted that the beautiful local churchyard held some nice, coppiced yews (as do many churchyards). Even before the irruption I'd marked this site out to check for wintering hawfinches, despite knowing they are pretty rare in Oxon - anyone can dream! My first irrupting hawfinches went bombing through this churchyard with redwings. I've seen more there since, including perched birds (and hope some will now linger). There are holly berries here too. Another shared food source? Me and Johnny Mac watched hawfinches migrating with redwings through my new patch. The flocks followed hedgerow lines across fields.

Photograph redwing flocks!

I'm a Luddite but photographing flying redwing flocks is a novel, if potentially frustrating, way of finding migrant hawfinches. After photographing, check the images. At two Pennine sites, birders have found hawfinches 'hidden' in photographed redwing flocks, the frustration being they hadn't

seen the birds in “real time”. However, this did show that the species was 'going over', motivating birders to try harder to connect with them - which they did, several times!

Make sound recordings during vismig sessions

Similarly, friends have kept a recorder going through vismig sessions (good recorders are relatively cheap now). In the field, calls can be missed owing to other noises. But, as with photos, on checking recordings, my tech-savvy mates have found hawfinch calls they missed during the watch. They've used free software to create sonograms that proved the ID. I have also had third hand reports of birders recording hawfinches as nocturnal migrants.

Exceptions to the rule, and keep trying in winter.

This year, vismig friends *have* had lone hawfinches during vismig watches, often calling 'sree'/'seeeee'. So exceptions to the practice of hawfinches moving with redwings do happen. But, if you've missed the peak irruption and not had a true vismig hawfinch (the most exciting way to see them in my view!), all is not lost. Many sites are now recording single species hawfinch flocks that seem to be wintering. Fine if you live near a good wood or, say, an arboretum. But what if your local patch is not so blessed? Well, I'd still try to check local redwing flocks. In c.1987, the late Peter Carlton found six waxwings feeding on hawthorn berries. *They were in company with many redwings*. I went to see the waxwings. On arrival I was chuffed to see nine distant waxwings. Then I got my bins on them. The extra three fawn-coloured birds were hawfinches. So, this winter, I'll be checking redwing flocks in my local hedgerows and yews.

Mick Cunningham

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