



# NatureNotes

Rupert Evershed's monthly diary of the natural world  
 Twitter @rupertevershed Blog: [www.notingnature.wordpress.com](http://www.notingnature.wordpress.com)

## Dark wings - the secret night migration of birds



Common scoters (*Melaniitta nigra*) at home on the sea by Keith Pritchard

**It all started with a tweet - not a real bird tweet but a Tweet on the social media app Twitter. It read, "Well, blow me down! 2 groups of common scoter heard calling in the dark from my back garden at 9.31pm and 9.37pm." And there it was: like a line cast to a waiting fish: a simple message from a nearby fellow birder and I was hooked.**

I rushed outside, it now being quite late and completely dark, and after a nervous wait, with ears bent to the skies, at 10.50pm I picked out the calls of my first flocks of common scoters flying north over my garden!

It's difficult to describe the thrill, in part made up of the knowledge that these were sea ducks, spending the winter in huge rafts of thousands off our coasts – the last bird I would expect to record over my garden. In part too the excitement came from the sense of a new door being opened in my birding experience. If this most unlikely of birds was flying over on an early April evening what else might also be chancing it over my suburban patch?

This is the question at the heart of a growing new trend in that ancient hobby of birdwatching. Known as 'nocmig' (short for nocturnal migration) an increasing number of birdwatchers are becoming nighttime listeners too as the sheer variety of bird life moving over our gardens at night

becomes revealed.

In many ways it is nothing new and should really be obvious: if thousands of birds that were in the south suddenly appear in the north, and we didn't see them move, then logically they must have done so at night. However, what is new is that more and more people are recording these movements and with access to better technology and social media are able to quickly share and confirm their findings.

With the first report of common scoters flying over Hadfield in Derbyshire on March 31 a huge and spontaneous citizen science project was sparked. Over a period of four nights hundreds of people across the UK reported hearing scoters flying over their gardens in the dark. This allowed a basic mapping of the scoters' movement on a scale not achieved before and gives a significant insight into the movement of thousands of these birds northwards over our country at this time of year.

Of course it's not just scoters that migrate at night. Many people will have heard the thin 'tseep' calls of redwing, a small thrush, on winter's nights as they return to the UK from their Scandinavian breeding grounds. Since first going out to listen to the scoters I have added eleven new species to my garden bird list, among them migrating waders such as whimbrel and oystercatcher but also some local birds – ducks, moorhens, coots

and even a little grebe.

All these birds I've heard quite clearly as they navigate their way in the dark but many birders are taking it a step further and actually recording the sounds over their house at night. This of course allows them not to be present and to simply analyze the recordings the following day. As a result there is a whole new body of data building as to the variety and numbers of birds flying overhead at night. It turns out that moorhens, coots and little grebes move around quite a lot – or at least are very noisy when they do!

Of course it helps if you are already familiar with these birds daytime calls and most of the time they sound pretty similar at night. However, many birds do have specifically nocturnal calls and that is where it can help to listen to others' recordings to identify what you heard. Inevitably it is never possible to identify every sound and I have a growing list of unknown calls – who knows, some of them might even be the local cat!

What is clear is that never before has there been a better time to explore this new frontier of birdwatching. With fewer trains and planes, quieter roads and streets, sitting outside at night under the stars has become more peaceful and tranquil than ever. If you find yourself unable to sleep one night give it a go! You may not hear any birds but I'm sure it will be therapeutic.