

# Flyover of the Winged Squadrons

*Chris Cathrine salutes the arrival of some noisy winter visitors*

The overhead cacophony of geese and swans is the quintessential sound of autumn in Scotland. These migratory birds return from their summer breeding grounds further north in autumn, to spend winter in Scotland where conditions are less harsh. Several species make use of Scotland during autumn, winter and spring, but pink-footed geese (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) are by far the most common and numerous migratory goose seen in the Doune and Deanston area; in fact, 500,000 pink-footed geese visit the UK over winter each year! We can also enjoy one of the largest migratory birds in the world locally: the whooper swan (*Cygnus cygnus*); the heaviest males can weigh as much as 15 kg (21/3 st).

Although it varies year on year, the best time to spot flocks, or 'skeins' of migratory geese and swans flying overhead tends to be around October and November in our corner of Scotland. These birds travel long distances from their northern breeding grounds to overwinter in our local area: the whooper swans migrate from Iceland, some 2,500 km (1,500 miles) away, while pink-footed geese arrive from both Iceland and Greenland (5,000 km or 3,000 miles)! On foggy nights geese and swans can become disorientated and you may hear them circling, trying to find their way.

Throughout autumn, winter, and spring geese and swans will commute at dawn from roost sites in wetlands to feeding grounds in agricultural fields, returning at dusk, offering romantic scenes. You can often see pink-footed geese and whooper swans flying over Flanders Moss National Nature Reserve, returning to their roost site at Lake of Menteith, with a backdrop of sunset and the Trossachs. The tower at the reserve offers truly awesome views of these birds. The Lake of Menteith is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for supporting an internationally important population of wintering pink-footed geese (around 5,000 birds), amongst other features.

When in flight geese and swans arrange themselves in a 'V' shape. This offers the birds several advantages. Flying slightly to the side and above the bird in front reduces air resistance. However, it has recently been discovered that birds using this formation also time the flapping of their wings to avoid turbulent air created by their leading companions! This ties in nicely with the second reason the 'V' flight formation is advantageous: communication and coordination. It is easy for individuals in these skeins to keep track of and in contact with their compatriots; military aircraft often use the same formation for this very reason.

During the day, our migratory geese and swans forage in agricultural fields, eating a range of crops including grass, grain spilled in stubble fields, sugar beet, carrots and potatoes, along with any wee bugs and beasties clinging on! Although known as skeins when in flight, groups of these birds are called 'gaggles' when on the ground, a fitting description of the sound they make, blethering away to each other! Gaggles of pink-footed geese are common in



*Pink-footed geese caught against an evening sky. Photo © David Devonport.*

the fields along the Carse throughout autumn. While the vast numbers of geese in a gaggle or skein are impressive in themselves it's always worth taking a closer look if you have a pair of binoculars or a spotting scope, as you may find another species of goose that's become separated from its companions in the past and is now tagging along!

If you would like to learn more about local wildlife check out the Stirling & Clackmannanshire Scottish Wildlife Trust Group <https://www.swtstirling.org.uk/>. Both the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT – <https://www.wwt.org.uk/>) and Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB – <https://www.rspb.org.uk/>) offer a wealth of information about Scotland's geese and swans on their websites. In addition, there is a lot of information available about wildlife in Scotland and beyond on the Caledonian Conservation Ltd web page <https://www.caledonianconservation.co.uk/>. You can see more of David Devonport's wonderful wild bird photography on the back cover of this issue and also at <https://www.daviddevonportphotography.co.uk/>.

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## **David McAlpine**

### **Building Services**

**All Building work undertaken**

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# Arrival of Autumn Visitors

*In late September, the first flocks of geese begin to arrive, their honking overhead a reminder that summer has ended. Doune is under the flight path of thousands of geese arriving from the far north to roost at Flanders Moss and the Lake of Menteith between now and the spring. The photos below show numerous pink-footed geese flocking in, along with some larger and less numerous visitors, the whooper swan. All photographs © David Devonport.*

