

A review of the status and identification of American Wigeon in Britain & Ireland

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ABSTRACT The numbers of American Wigeons *Anas americana* recorded in Britain & Ireland have increased significantly since the establishment of BBRC in 1958, and records ceased to be considered by the Committee from 1st January 2002. The status and distribution of the species is analysed here, and its identification discussed. Although male American Wigeon in breeding plumage is very distinctive, the identification of other plumages is much more problematic.

Records of American Wigeon *Anas americana*, previously considered a rare vagrant to Britain & Ireland from North America, have increased considerably since the mid 1980s, and there were 462 accepted records by the end of 2001 (Rogers 2002; P. A. Fraser *in litt*; note that Irish records until the end of 2000

only were available). From 1st January 2002, records of American Wigeon ceased to be assessed by BBRC, since the criteria for its removal from the list of species considered had been met: more than 150 individuals had been recorded in the previous decade, with at least ten in eight of those years. With this in mind, it

seems timely to document the status and distribution of the species, particularly given the problems of separating genuine vagrant wildfowl from escapes. In addition, although male American Wigeon in breeding plumage is a relatively easy bird to identify, the identification of females and non-adult males has only recently been approached in a rigorous manner which befits their subtlety (Harrop 1994a). Furthermore, frequent hybridisation between American Wigeon and Eurasian Wigeon *A. penelope*, or Eurasian Wigeon and Chiloe Wigeon *A. sibilatrix*, as well as of American and Eurasian Wigeon with other species of ducks in the genus *Anas*, can produce extremely variable hybrids (Carey 1993; Harrop 1994b; Jiguet 1999), providing major identification pitfalls.

In this paper we review all the accepted records of American Wigeon in Britain & Ireland since the formation of BBRC in 1958, presenting data on annual totals, timing and distribution of records, as well as age and sex composition. We also present a distillation of current identification criteria based on a combination of our own observations, published material and BBRC files. The aim of this review is to provide a clear picture of the status and occurrence of one of the most regularly occurring North American vagrants to Europe and, with its removal from the BBRC list, to provide local and county records committees with a convenient reference to help them assess future records of this species.

Status and distribution

American Wigeon breeds throughout northern North America, from Alaska to Hudson Bay, and south through the Prairies to the eastern seaboard (Cramp & Simmons 1977; Madge & Burn 1988). The majority of the population are highly migratory, wintering across the southern United States and Mexico, through the Caribbean and into Central America and northern South America (Madge & Burn 1988; Ogilvie & Young 1998). One of the most numerous dabbling ducks in North America, its breeding population has oscillated around the long-term average of 2.8 million birds, although the population increased from a 40-year low of 1.8 million in 1987 to over 3 million in 1998 (Ducks Unlimited www.ducks.org).

American Wigeon is a rare, but regular, visitor to Europe. Combining data requested from the Association of European Rarities Committees (AERC) with information from Lewington *et al.* (1991), we have established its status in Europe as follows. There have been regular records in Iceland (112, up to and including 1999); Finland (38, up to 2000); the Netherlands (35, up to 2001); France (31, up to 2000); Spain (18 accepted records up to 2000, involving 27 individuals); Belgium (14, all 1986-2000); Sweden (12); Norway (11, up to 2000); Azores (9); Channel Islands (3); Germany (12) and Denmark (n/a). The majority of European records, however, are from Britain & Ireland.

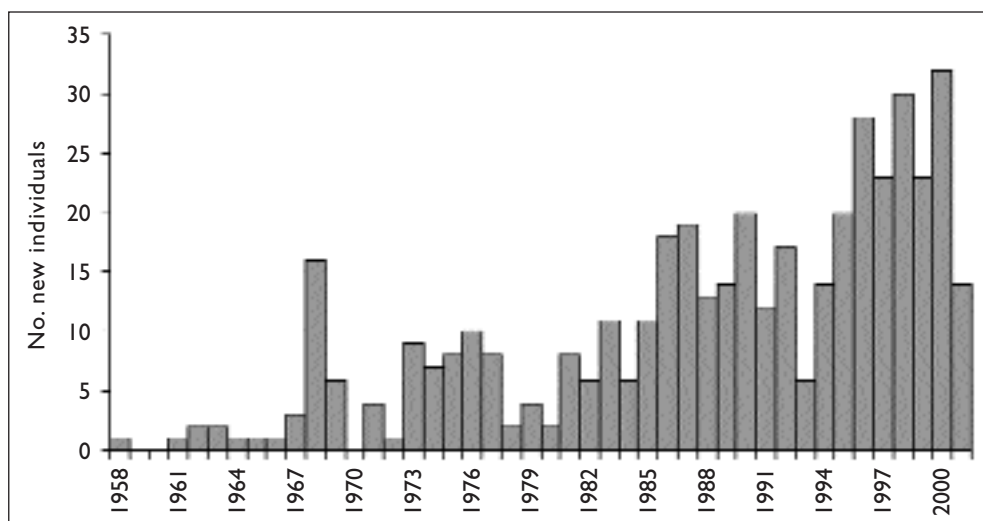


Fig. 1. Numbers of newly arrived American Wigeons *Anas americana* in Britain & Ireland, 1958-2001. The increase in numbers is statistically significant (linear regression: $r^2=0.67$, $F_{1,42}=87.0$, $p<0.001$).

Table 1. Flock size and composition of groups of more than two American Wigeons *Anas americana* in Britain & Ireland, 1958-2001.

	males	females	total flock size
Co. Cork 1986	3	-	3
Co. Cork 1996	3	-	3
Fife 1989	2	1	3
Orkney 1995	2	1	3
Berkshire 1985	2	2	4
Cornwall 1981	4	1	5
Shetland 2000	6	4	10
Co. Kerry 1968	>2	>2	13

Status in Britain & Ireland

Prior to 1958, there were just 22 records of American Wigeon in Britain & Ireland, but between 1958 and 2001 there was a total of 440 accepted records. During this period, the number of new birds recorded each year showed a steady, consistent (and statistically significant) increase (fig. 1). The only marked deviations from the trend were in 1968, when 16 new arrivals were reported (including a single flock of 13 individuals in Co. Kerry), and in 1993 when only six new birds were recorded. Although it is possible that a number of records may relate to the same wandering individuals, local observers, recorders and BBRC have attempted, wherever possible, to eliminate the

problem of double-counting. Certain individuals have returned to the same location for several consecutive winters, and this high site fidelity may reduce the likelihood of between-site duplication.

The majority of records constitute single birds associating with flocks of Eurasian Wigeon; all American Wigeons which returned to the same sites in consecutive winters were associating with Eurasian Wigeons. Several American Wigeons appear to have formed inter-specific pair bonds with their Eurasian counterparts, and there have also been at least 13 pure pairs of Americans, as well as six records of two males together. A number of larger flocks have been seen (table 1), the most notable being flocks of 13 in Co. Kerry in October 1968 and ten in Shetland in October 2000.

The significantly higher numbers of American Wigeons recorded in Britain & Ireland in recent years may be attributed to a number of different factors. Given the increasing numbers of observers and the increasingly sophisticated nature of modern birdwatchers, it is clear that more and more rarities (of many species) are now being found and identified in Britain & Ireland. All things being equal, the numbers of American Wigeons found are likely to increase accordingly. It might be speculated that records have increased because observers are now able to identify the more subtle female and imma-

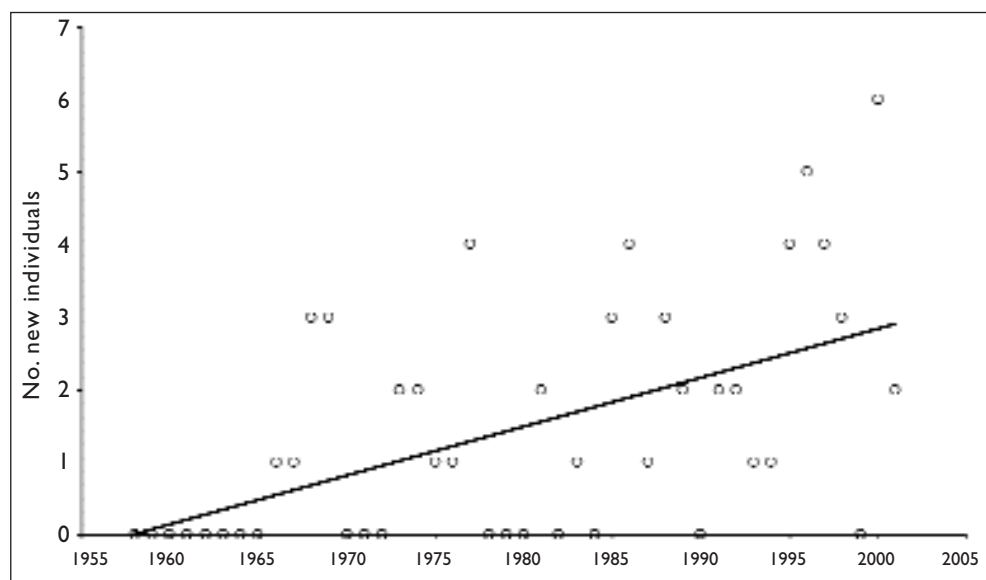


Fig. 2. Accepted records of new female and unsexed immature American Wigeons *Anas americana* in Britain & Ireland, 1958-2001 (linear regression: $r^2=0.29$, $F_{1,42}=16.86$, $p<0.001$).

ture plumages, since the number of accepted records of females and immatures increased significantly between 1958 and 2001 (fig. 2). Nonetheless, females and immatures are still relatively scarce, and cannot really explain the overall increase in records (fig. 1). While the North American population has fluctuated considerably in the past 50 years, there has been a steady increase since the mid 1980s. The number of British and Irish records does not, however, correlate with the North American population estimates¹. It seems that vagrancy patterns are influenced by many factors, which cannot be easily separated.

Distribution and timing

American Wigeons have been recorded in a total of 77 counties or recording areas in Britain & Ireland, with records from 76 counties/areas between 1958 and 2001 (Appendix 1). There is a broad spread of records, with the greatest numbers in Ireland and the Northern Isles, but also with relatively large numbers in counties with both high levels of observer coverage and sizeable wintering populations of Eurasian Wigeon. Twelve counties have recorded American Wigeon on ten or more occasions: Shetland (30), Co. Cork (25), Co. Kerry (25), Cornwall (17), Norfolk (16), Orkney (16), Cheshire (14), Lancashire & North Merseyside (14), Northeast Scotland (13), Dorset (12), Co. Wexford (12) and Cleveland (11).

The greatest numbers of American Wigeons appear in October and November (fig. 3). The number of new arrivals declines in December, but new birds continue to be recorded throughout the first four months of the year followed by a further peak in May, suggestive of northbound spring migrants which arrived in Europe the previous autumn. Combining the analysis of timing and distribution, we grouped records into three-monthly seasonal blocks – winter (December–February), spring (March–May), summer (June–August) and autumn (September–November) – and plotted the numbers for each season by county (fig. 4). This reveals

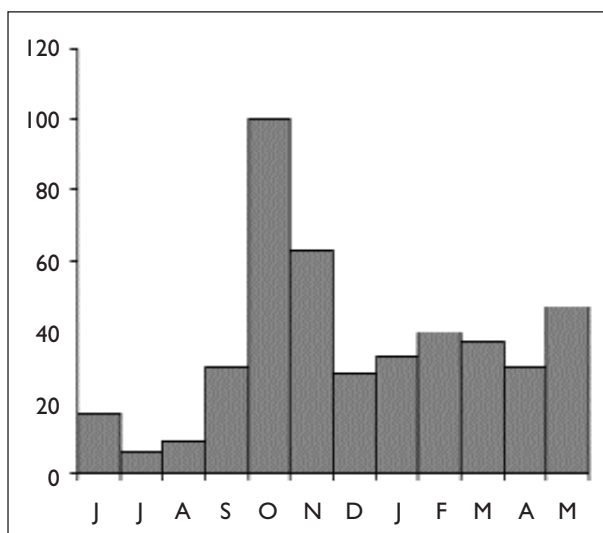


Fig. 3. Arrival dates of American Wigeons *Anas americana* in Britain & Ireland, 1958–2001 (presumed returning birds are excluded). The greatest numbers arrive in October and November, although there also appears to be a pronounced passage during spring.

that most new arrivals in autumn occur on western and northern coasts. This pattern fits in well with the typical arrival dates and locations of most North American vagrants (Cottridge & Vinicombe 1996). In addition, while many American Wigeons do occur with flocks of Eurasian Wigeons, the majority of Britain & Ireland's wintering population of the latter species arrive later in the winter (fig. 5). Winter records are more widely spread, with no clear geographical pattern, but once again a close association with wintering Eurasian Wigeons is apparent. Spring passage seems to show a bias towards counties bordering the North Sea, as well as the Northern Isles. This trend, that of birds migrating north after an Atlantic crossing the previous autumn is also apparent in Scandinavia where American Wigeon is virtually unknown in autumn, and almost all of the records have been in spring (Lewington *et al.* 1991). Midsummer records are few and generally widely scattered. Some June records, mostly in northern Britain, may involve late migrants, whereas summering individuals at inland sites may be of uncertain provenance.

Age and sex composition

The vast majority (86.5%) of American Wigeons recorded in Britain & Ireland have been males, with the bulk of these being adult males (table 2). Of those females recorded so

Footnote:

¹ Linear regression: $r^2=0.003$, $F_{1,41}=1.74$, NS

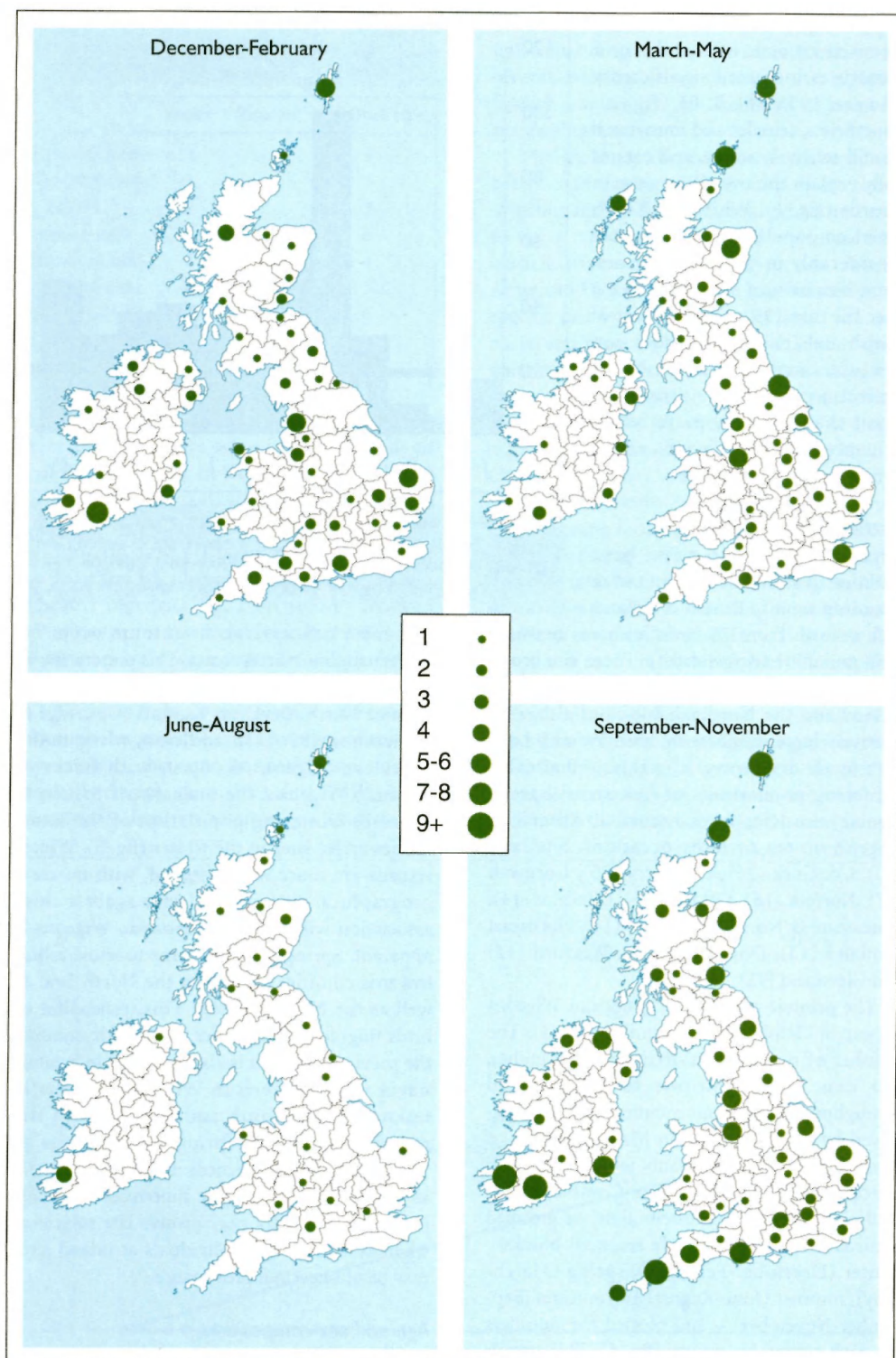


Fig. 4. Numbers of newly arrived American Wigeons *Anas americana* recorded in Britain & Ireland 1958-2001, grouped by county and by season. Records are widely scattered in summer and winter; but autumn records are predominantly in the west, while spring records occur mainly in the east and north.

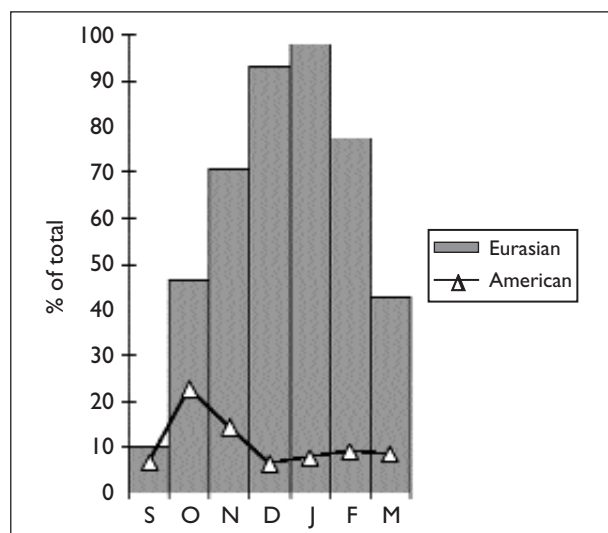


Fig. 5. Arrival patterns of American *Anas americana* and Eurasian Wigeons *A. penelope* in Britain & Ireland. The data for American Wigeon show the percentage of new arrivals in each month during the period 1958–2001. The data for Eurasian Wigeon are from Wetland Bird Survey counts, expressed as a percentage of peak counts (averaged over winters 1994/95 to 1998/99 inclusive). The graph illustrates that the peak arrival of Eurasian Wigeon is considerably later than that for American Wigeon.

far, only 22 were found without the additional presence of a male of the same species (19 were part of a pair and a further 11 were part of larger groups). In addition, although the sample is very small, the details of ringed American Wigeons recovered in Britain & Ireland suggest that more females occur than are being reported (Appendix 2). Combined with the extreme difficulty of identifying female American Wigeon, these factors indicate strongly that females are being consistently overlooked.

While this bias towards males may be largely explained by the difficulty of identifying female American Wigeon, a similar pattern emerges for a number of other vagrant wildfowl with more distinctive female plumages (e.g. Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris*), and it may be speculated that the males of such species are more prone to vagrancy.

under the circumstances described above are genuine vagrants, although the true status of escapees is admittedly very poorly understood.

Identification

The identification of adult male American Wigeon in breeding plumage is straightforward, although in eclipse plumage they are more subtle and require more careful examination. The identification of females and immatures is much more problematic: subtle or subjective features combined with a high degree of variability mean that such individuals require critical scrutiny and prolonged views. Furthermore, *Anas* ducks hybridise quite freely and mixed parentage can produce a bewildering array of plumage features. Because of these problems, observations are best made at close range with a telescope, in good, flat light conditions. It is also

Table 2. The distribution of various age/sex classes among American Wigeons *Anas americana* recorded in Britain & Ireland, 1958–2001. Data refer to new birds only. For some early records age/sex information is not available.

(i) Adult males	(ii) First-year males	(iii) Certain females	(iv) Females/immatures – excluding those in (iii)
328 (74.5%)	53 (12.0%)	52 (11.8%)	7 (1.6%)



Ian Fisher

1. Adult male American Wigeon *Anas americana* (centre) with Eurasian Wigeons *A. penelope*, Cresswell, Northumberland, December 1991. Most American Wigeons recorded in Britain & Ireland associate closely with Eurasian Wigeons.

essential that observers are aware of the high degree of variability of female Eurasian Wigeon, and also of possible hybrids or variants. Accurate identification relies upon careful observation of the upperwing-coverts and underwing-coverts, for extended periods and not simply in flight. Until recently, the critical examination of feather tracts, considered crucial to the identification of such diverse groups as passerines and waders, was not applied to wildfowl. A number of authors have recently advo-

cated a more critical approach, however, which has increased our knowledge of wildfowl in general (Madge & Burn 1988; Harris *et al.* 1989), and American Wigeon in particular (Harris *et al.* 1989; Harrop 1994a, b).

Moult, ageing & sexing

When attempting to identify an American Wigeon, ageing and sexing is an important starting point. The moult strategy is similar to that of Eurasian Wigeon, with adults under-



Anthony McGeehan

2. Adult male American Wigeon *Anas americana*, Vancouver, December 1997.



Ian Fisher

3. First-year male American Wigeon *Anas americana*, Druridge Bay Country Park, Northumberland, May 2000. The greyish centres to the otherwise white median coverts are lacking in adult birds.

going a complete post-breeding moult in summer, quickly followed by a pre-breeding moult during autumn and early winter. Juveniles replace a variable amount of body feathers after leaving the nest, before commencing a further body moult in the autumn of their first year. During the latter moult, young males begin to resemble adult males, while young females look essentially similar to adult females but retain more juvenile feathers than do males.

As with most wildfowl, juvenile and first-winter American Wigeons can often be aged in the hand by the presence of abraded tips to the rectrices, producing a 'V' pattern. In the field, however, first-years can be identified when showing a combination of the following features: (i) rather short, brown- or buff-tinged tertials; (ii) the feathers of the upperparts having narrow fringing, lacking the paler internal bars typical of adults; (iii) median and lesser coverts with duller, less crisp fringes than those of adults; (iv) rounded centres to the undertail-coverts, compared with more arrowhead-shaped markings of adults; and (v) (given very close views) pale tips to the breast producing a faintly scaled appearance. First-year females may also lack the obvious black tips to the greater coverts shown by other ages, as well as displaying a somewhat reduced amount of white in the outer webs of these feathers (but see 'Upperwing pattern', below).

Midway through their first winter, young males appear similar to adults but may still retain short and brownish- or buff-tinged tertials and, most importantly, the median (upperwing) coverts have extensive dark centres giving a scaly appearance; the median coverts appear

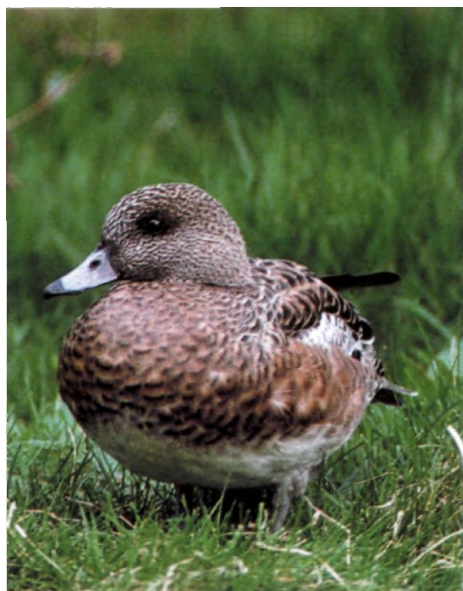
entirely white in adult males.

Eclipse males appear broadly similar to females and immatures. The presence of an extensive white forewing flash, and a head pattern showing, albeit faintly, the pattern of adult male plumage will separate eclipse males from these different sex/age groups.

Upperwing pattern

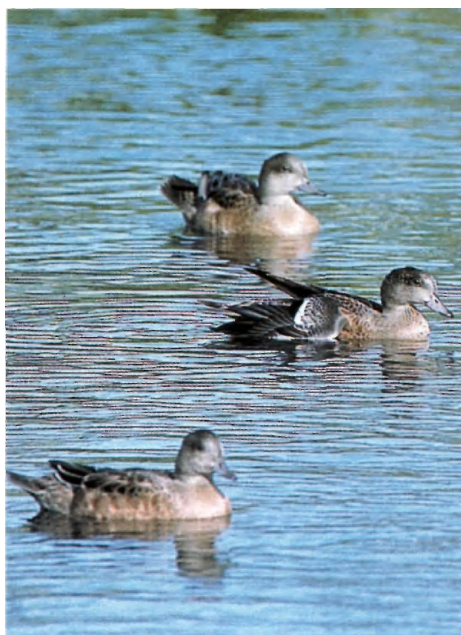
At all ages except for adult male, the precise pattern of the upperwing-coverts is of vital importance for separating American from Eurasian Wigeon, and any claim of a non-adult male American should include detailed information on the upperwing (as well as the underwing).

Typically, female/immature American Wigeon differs from Eurasian in having extensive white outer webs and broad black tips to the greater coverts, which form a distinctive white bar across the wing (plates 5 & 7; fig. 6). In Eurasian Wigeon, the outer webs show less white and the dark tips are narrower and duller, making the wing-bar appear less striking. In first-year female American, however, the outer web of the greater coverts can be similar to Eurasian, lacking extensive white markings and being rather greyish overall. The distinctive all-white forewing patch of male Eurasian is shared by adult male American. On close inspection, however, the forewing patch of American is somewhat reduced compared with Eurasian (fig. 6), owing to the broader black tips to the greater coverts on American. This difference is largely academic, however, given other more obvious plumage characters.



Colin Bradshaw

4. Adult female American Wigeon *Anas americana*, in captivity, Northumberland, April 1992. This individual shows the classic pale head with coarse flecking throughout, contrasting with the warm-toned breast and flanks. The extensive white in the forewing of some female American Wigeons can resemble the pattern of males.



Colin Bradshaw

5. Juvenile or female American Wigeons *Anas americana*, New Brunswick, Canada. August 1993. The white central bar to the greater coverts is distinctive in most juvenile or female American Wigeons.



Ian Fisher

6. Female American Wigeon *Anas americana*, in captivity, Washington, Co. Durham, February 1997. The pale internal patterning of upperparts feathers, glossy tertials and arrowhead markings on the undertail-coverts suggest an adult, but the broad, grey subterminal bar across the otherwise white greater coverts is a feature more commonly found in young birds.

American Wigeon

Eurasian Wigeon

Adult Cf

Adult Cf



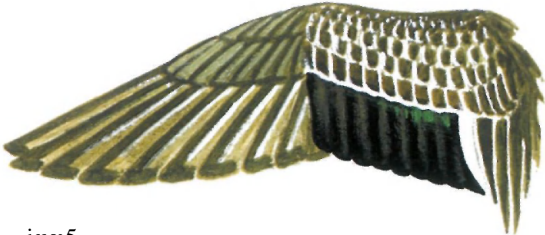
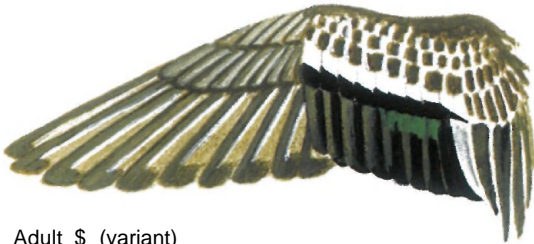
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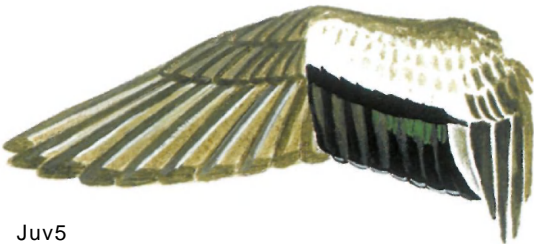
Adult \$

Adult \$



Adult \$ (variant)

juv5



Juv5

Hybrid juv 2



Fig. 6. Upperwing pattern of American Wigeon *Anas americana* and Eurasian Wigeon *A. penelope*.
John Wright

Bernie Zonfrillo



7. Female American Wigeon *Anas americana*, Springburn, Glasgow, October 1996. Note the extensive white wing-bar on the outer greater coverts. The dark portions of the otherwise white base to the outermost feathers suggest that this may be a first-year.

Stephen Votier



8. Female American Wigeon *Anas americana*, California, USA, March 1997. Many birds lack the dark line at the base of the bill which, if present, is diagnostic of American Wigeon.



Colin Bradshaw

9. Female American Wigeon *Anas americana* (front), and female Hooded Merganser *Lophodytes cucullatus*, New Brunswick, Canada, August 1993. The peaked forecrown of American Wigeon is sometimes strikingly obvious.



Colin Bradshaw

10. Female Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*, Marden Quarry, Northumberland, March 1998. Many female Eurasian Wigeons are coarsely marked about the head, but typically show a warm ground colour that does not contrast with the warmly coloured flanks.



Anthony McGeehan

11. Adult female American Wigeon *Anas americana*, Newfoundland, Canada, January 1994.

Underwing pattern

It is essential to obtain details of the axillaries and the pattern of the median underwing-coverts to reliably separate American from Eurasian Wigeon, and also to eliminate some hybrids. The pattern of the underwing is variable in both American and Eurasian, but does not overlap between the two species. Lighting and viewing conditions can alter the appearance significantly in the field, however, and only with prolonged views, preferably while a perched bird is wing-stretching, can the precise pattern be determined.

In American, the axillaries are entirely white, and combine with the all-white median underwing-coverts to produce a striking white bar across the whole of the underwing. Upon close inspection, many American Wigeons show some very fine greyish speckling to the distal part of the axillaries; in addition, the outermost greater underwing-coverts may be off-white, but are never grey. In Eurasian, the axillaries are white but typically heavily peppered with grey or brown, while the median underwing-coverts are grey, not white. We do stress that during brief or flight views, or simply in bright conditions, the axillaries of Eurasian Wigeon, especially males, can appear virtually white, with the pale grey median coverts also appearing rather

paler than they really are. The importance of prolonged views of these feather tracts during wing-stretching cannot be emphasised enough.

Head pattern

The head pattern of adult male American is striking, and quite different from that of male Eurasian. The face and head are pale and heavily peppered with dark throughout, with a broad, glossy green post-ocular stripe, extending on to the nape. The extent of the green tends to vary somewhat, with the most well-marked individuals having a solid green patch, while others have a duller stripe partially invaded by darker speckling. The creamy-white forehead and crown ends in a point on the upper nape. The forehead patch tends to be rather richly coloured, almost yellowish-cream when freshly moulted, but typically becomes more creamy-white by the end of the winter.

Apart from the pattern of the wings, the most useful pointer to a putative male American in non-adult plumage is the presence of a distinctly grey, coarsely marked head, contrasting with rather richly coloured breast and flanks. The head of comparable Eurasians typically has rather warm tones and is poorly peppered. In juvenile and eclipse male Americans, the ground colour of the head is virtually white, with coarse



12. Female American Wigeon *Anas americana*, Springburn, Glasgow, October 1996. Same bird as in plate 7. This individual shows only a slight contrast between the head and the underparts, which is typically more obvious in female American. Note the extensive white in the upperwing in plate 7.



Colin Bradshaw

13. Female Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*, Cresswell, Northumberland, February 1989. Female Eurasian Wigeons commonly show rather grey tones to the head, but such birds typically lack contrast between the head and similarly cold-toned breast and flanks.

speckling throughout, which contrasts with rich orange- or coral-coloured breast and flanks. In addition, the streaking coalesces around the eye forming a darker patch, while the forehead may be distinctly paler, ghosting the pattern of adult males. In some, the ground colour of the head is much less white and has a distinct buff tinge, recalling paler-headed Eurasians. The more grey-headed Eurasian Wigeons should always be similarly coloured on the breast and flanks, however, thus lacking a contrast between the head and these two areas (plate 13).

Bare parts

Many American Wigeons have a narrow black band bordering the base of the upper mandible, a feature which is lacking in Eurasian. In juveniles and some females, however, this feature can be lacking or significantly reduced. In some male Americans the bill appears strikingly pale, which may be an artefact of the black band at the bill base (if present).

Size and structure

Structurally, American and Eurasian Wigeons are essentially very similar, with most biometric measurements largely, or completely, overlapping (table 3). On average, American tends to be somewhat heavier and bulkier, which is reflected in the mean weights for this species being slightly greater than for Eurasian. Bear in mind, however, that while some vagrant American Wigeons may appear large compared with accompanying Eurasians, others will show little or no difference, and this is not a consistent identification character.

Following the moult to adult breeding plumage, the tail of American Wigeon is strikingly long, sometimes noticeably longer than that of Eurasian, with the result that the wing-tips fall well short of the tail tip. American Wigeon tends to appear larger-headed with a more pronounced forecrown compared with Eurasian. This difference is most obvious in males, where the pale forehead may accentuate

Table 3. Tail length and weight of American *Anas americana* and Eurasian Wigeons *A. penelope*. Given values for tail length are: mean, range (in parentheses), standard deviation and sample size (Cramp & Simmons 1977); data for weight are means (Madge & Burn 1988).

	American	Eurasian
Tail length		
Adult male	116 mm (101-126), sd=7.23, n=6	106 mm (102-119), sd=3.84, n=19
Adult female	96.3 mm (96-97), sd=n/a, n=3	90.7 mm (86-95), sd=2.5, n=13
Weight		
Adult male	770 g	720 g
Adult female	680 g	640 g

this appearance. In some cases, the bill of American Wigeon may appear smaller than that of Eurasian Wigeon. This difference may be a result of the larger, more bulbous head (and possibly even the black outline at the bill base).

Calls

Male American Wigeons have a more subdued, wheezing, three-note call, compared with the ringing, disyllabic whistle of male Eurasian. Although this is unlikely to be a useful identification character, a vagrant female American in Cornwall in 1991 was shown to respond to taped calls of male American, while not responding to the calls of Eurasian Wigeon (Harrop 1994a).

Additional identification features

The following plumage characters *may* prove useful in separating American from Eurasian Wigeon. Note that, in all cases, they are highly variable and when attempting to make a firm identification it is far more important to describe those characters listed above.

- **Outer web of the innermost secondary**
American has this feather variably grey, with a narrow white outer fringe. By contrast,

male Eurasian has the outer web white, narrowly fringed black, while females and immatures show grey outer webs but a more extensive white fringe. This character shows much overlap and is difficult to observe in the field.

- **Eyelids** American Wigeons have strikingly pale or whitish eyelids which contrast with the dark eye-patch, while the eyelids of Eurasian are pale fawn (Larkin 2000; personal observations).
- **Tertials** While the buff-fringed juvenile tertials are similarly patterned in both species, they may appear different following the post-juvenile moult. In general, the outer web of each feather is blacker and more broadly tipped white in American than in Eurasian (Wallace 1980). Again, this difference is highly variable and there is much overlap; it is at best only a contributory feature.

Other characters, including the pattern of the uppertail-coverts and the pattern of the mantle and scapulars, have been mooted as possibly diagnostic, but because of the high degree of variability they are really of little use.



14. Female American Wigeon *Anas americana*, and male Eurasian Wigeon *A. penelope*, St John's, Newfoundland, Canada, April 1995. Although the breeding ranges of these two species do not overlap, mixed pairings may still occur because pair bonds are formed on the wintering grounds.

Hybrid A - Eurasian Wigeon-type



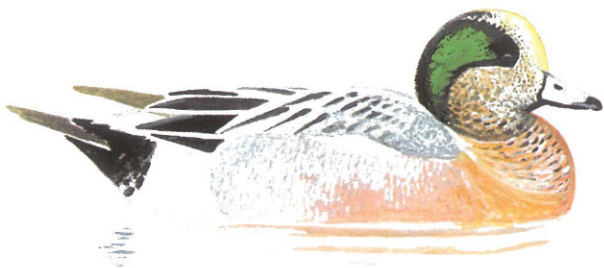
Hybrid B-American
Wigeon-type



American Wigeon



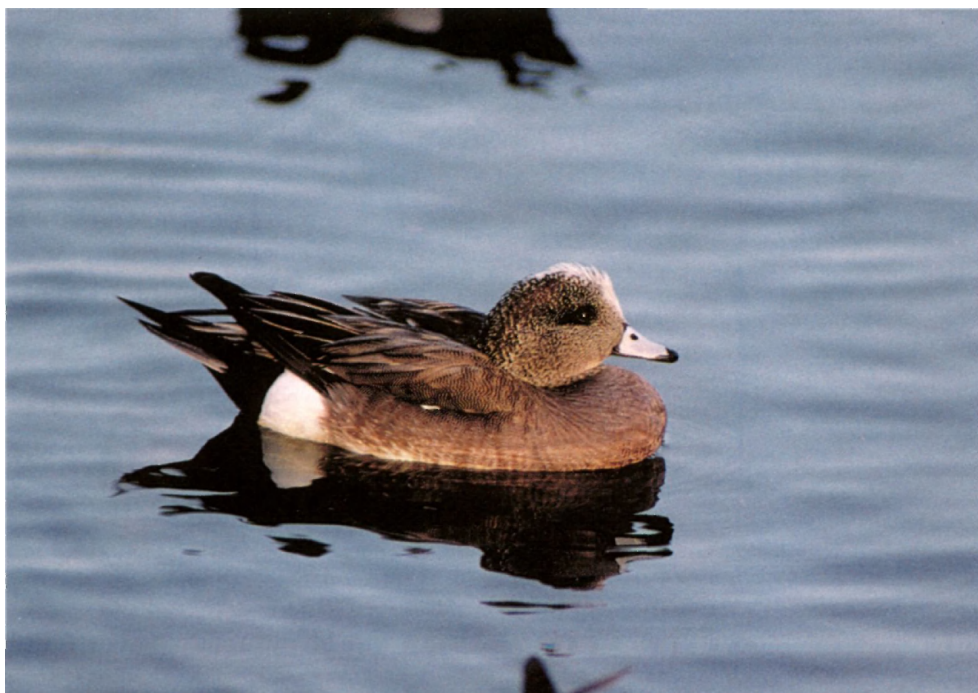
Chiloe x Eurasian Wigeon



Variant Eurasian Wigeon
(extreme individual)



Fig. 7. Male hybrids and variants which may prove pitfalls when considering the identification of American Wigeon *Anas americana*.
John Wright



Stephen Votier

15. Possible hybrid male American Wigeon *Anas americana* × Eurasian Wigeon *A. penelope*, California, USA, March 1997. Hybrid wigeons can be encountered at several sites in western North America. The rufous feathering behind the eye suggests some Eurasian Wigeon genes in an otherwise 'classic' American Wigeon.



Stephen Votier

16. Hybrid male Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope* × American Wigeon *A. americana*, California, USA, March 1997. This individual closely resembles a Eurasian, but the pink tones to the flanks and darker eye-patch reveal some American parentage.

Hybrids and variants

Both wild and captive pairings have resulted in a variety of hybrids which have caused identification problems in the past, and which need to be considered before claiming a vagrant American Wigeon. As well as hybrids between American Wigeon and Eurasian Wigeon (Bailey 1919; Watson 1970; Hubbard 1971; Aubry 1981; Shiota 1987; Carey 1993; Merrifield 1993; Harrop 1994b; Jiguet 1999; Randler 2001), and between Eurasian Wigeon and Chiloe Wigeon (Harrison & Harrison 1968; Harrop 1994a), which constitute the main pitfalls, other potentially confusing hybrid combinations have included Eurasian Wigeon × Eurasian Teal *A. crecca*, Eurasian Wigeon × Falcated Duck *A. falcata*, Eurasian Wigeon × Gadwall *A. strepera*, Eurasian Wigeon × Mallard *A. platyrhynchos*, American Wigeon × Falcated Duck, American Wigeon × Gadwall, American Wigeon × Mallard, Chiloe Wigeon × Gadwall, Chiloe Wigeon × Falcated Duck, and possibly American Wigeon × Chiloe Wigeon (Gillham & Gillham 1996; Harrop 1996; Mackay 1996; Gillham & Gillham 2002). It is impossible to give an account of all the possible outcomes of such pairings, but it is feasible to show some of the recurring (stereotyped) plumage patterns. It is also necessary to take into account variant and aberrant plumages which do not result from hybridisation.

Likelihood of occurrence

In the USA and Canada, both Eurasian Wigeons

and hybrids are recorded with increasing frequency on the Pacific coast. Although estimates vary, there has been a steady increase since the 1970s, leading to recent counts in excess of 200 Eurasian Wigeons from British Columbia (Jon King *in litt*). On the Atlantic coast, there has been a corresponding increase in the number of Eurasian Wigeons recorded since the late 1980s, thought to involve birds from Iceland (Bruce Mactavish *in litt*). Hybrids remain relatively rare on the Atlantic coast and in the Pacific Northwest, but are more commonly recorded in California (David Sibley *in litt*). As the number of American Wigeons in Europe has also increased, there is a growing likelihood of wild hybrids occurring. Hybrids of captive origin also occur occasionally, though less frequently. While the number of hybrids at large is much smaller than the number of pure American Wigeons, they do occur sufficiently frequently to represent a genuine potential pitfall.

Male hybrids

The most frequently encountered male hybrids which resemble American Wigeon are Eurasian × American. Based on a sample of 21, Gillham & Gillham (2002) found 11 different appearances, but two main types predominate and, at the risk of wishful grouping, their division of these into 'Eurasian Wigeon-type' and 'American Wigeon-type' will be followed here (fig. 7).

'Eurasian Wigeon-type' hybrids (plates 16, 17) typically have a yellowish forehead and



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17. Hybrid male Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope* × American Wigeon *A. americana*, in captivity, England, date unknown.

crown similar to male Eurasian; a chestnut-brown post-ocular stripe, sometimes with a little green admixed (the stripes on either side of the head merge on the nape); lores and cheeks variably pale brownish-grey with dark peppering; and mantle, scapulars and flanks predominantly grey with variably prominent pinkish-brown feathering admixed. The axillaries and underwing-coverts may have extensive grey patterning similar to Eurasian, or barely more than is normal in American.

'American Wigeon-type' hybrids (see plate 15) typically have a pale yellowish-cream forehead and crown; a striking green post-ocular stripe similar to that of true American; greyish-brown lores and cheeks, with variably prominent dark peppering; and mantle, scapulars and flanks predominantly grey (similar to Eurasian). A small number of presumed Eurasian \times American hybrids documented by Carey (1993) and Shiota (1987) have resembled pure American much more closely, in some cases differing only in having a reddish wash on parts of the head and in calling like Eurasian. Such birds, which represent a major, although infrequent pitfall, are unlikely to be identified correctly unless they are subjected to prolonged study at close range.

The other male hybrid resembling American Wigeon which has been recorded with some frequency is Eurasian \times Chiloe Wigeon. Such birds may have a dark-based upper mandible,

variably pale whitish or yellowish forehead which ends above the eye or quite squarely on the crown, an extensive green post-ocular stripe, grey lores and cheeks with dark peppering, predominantly grey mantle and scapulars (the latter with prominent dark centres, unlike either American or Eurasian), pinkish-orange flanks, and extensive white on the rump.

Female hybrids

Female hybrids, not surprisingly, are recorded much less frequently than males, and are most probably overlooked. Gillham & Gillham (2002) recorded only five female Eurasian \times American hybrids, compared with 53 males; and two female Eurasian \times Chiloe (which do not closely resemble American Wigeon), compared with ten males. The photographs in Jiguet (1999) are a useful reference for female Eurasian \times American hybrids. Such birds are unlikely to be diagnosed correctly unless they are studied for long periods at close range.

First- and second-generation hybrid females may have a chestnut head like Eurasian, or a much greyer head like American (though their heads do not normally contrast with the breast as sharply as in pure American); the axillaries vary between heavily patterned (like Eurasian) and virtually pure white (like American); and the greater coverts (fig. 6) may resemble those of Eurasian (with brown centres) or American (with whitish-grey centres). Fortunately, most



18. Male American Wigeon *Anas americana*, Seattle, Washington, USA, December 2001. Variant with pale cheeks and lores.

individual hybrids do not combine all the characters of a pure bird and, statistically, an individual which has all the typical features of American is much more likely to be the genuine article than a hybrid. Seeing all these features in the field is, however, seldom easy!

Variant and aberrant plumages

Before concluding that a bird is a hybrid, variation within apparently pure birds should also be considered. As already mentioned, female Eurasian Wigeons are highly variable, leading some authors (e.g. Baker 1993) to advocate recognition of four morphs of two colours (namely grey and rufous, plain or barred). Males of both Eurasian and American Wigeon also show more variable head patterning than is widely recognised. Male Eurasians regularly have a small area of green feathering behind the eye, occasionally have extensive green behind the eye, and (rarely) have an extensive green post-ocular stripe resembling that of male American (fig. 7). Since birds of these types show typical Eurasian features in all other respects, they are much more likely to be variants than hybrids. A few male Eurasians have atypically pale lores formed by an extension of the yellow-buff forehead, which may sometimes be combined with green feathering behind the eye. Male Americans have also been recorded with atypically pale lores and cheeks (Sibley 1994; plate 18), and the colour of the crown-stripe varies between whitish and yellowish-cream. True hybrids are likely to show several intermediate characters, though second-generation and subsequent offspring may be more problematical and in some cases impossible to identify in the field.

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Appendix 1. Numbers of newly arrived American Wigeons *Anas americana*, by county. Note that when the same individual was recorded in two (or more) counties, it is recorded twice (or more) in this dataset.

Anglesey	3	Gwent	2
Angus & Dundee	3	Hampshire	9
Co. Antrim	3	Hertfordshire	3
Argyll	5	Highland	9
Co. Armagh	1	Kent	9
Avon	3	Co. Kerry	25
Ayrshire	2	Lancashire & North Merseyside	14
Berkshire	4	Leicestershire	4
Borders	2	Co. Limerick	2
Caernarfon	2	Lincolnshire	7
Caithness	3	Lothian	3
Cambridgeshire	5	Moray & Nairn	7
Carmarthen	1	Norfolk	16
Central	2	Northamptonshire	3
Ceredigion	2	Northeast Scotland	13
Cheshire	14	Northumberland	9
Co. Clare	2	Nottinghamshire	3
Cleveland	11	Orkney	16
Clyde	3	Outer Hebrides	6
Co. Cork	25	Oxfordshire	3
Cornwall	17	Pembrokeshire	1
Cumbria	6	Perth & Kinross	5
Co. Derry	8	Scilly	4
Devon	8	Shetland	30
Co. Donegal	6	Co. Sligo	1
Dorset	12	Somerset	6
Co. Down	7	Staffordshire	3
Co. Dublin	2	Suffolk	9
Dumfries & Galloway	3	Sussex	1
Co. Durham	1	Co. Tipperary	1
Essex	1	Co. Tyrone	1
Co. Fermanagh	3	Warwickshire	2
Fife	8	Co. Wexford	12
Co. Galway	3	Co. Wicklow	2
Glamorgan	2	Wiltshire	2
Gloucestershire	5	East Yorkshire	3
Greater London	4	North Yorkshire	4
Greater Manchester	1	South Yorkshire	2

Appendix 2. Details of American Wigeons *Anas americana* ringed in North America and controlled in Britain & Ireland.

Female, shot Shetland October 1966, ringed as a chick near Sheffield, New Brunswick, Canada, August 1966.
Male, shot Co. Kerry October 1968, ringed Jemseg, New Brunswick, Canada, August 1968.
Female, shot Co. Galway October 1977, ringed Prince Edward Island, Canada, August 1977.
First-year, trapped Fair Isle, Shetland, ringed New Brunswick, Canada, August 1986.
First-year female, shot Co. Wexford, November 1986, ringed Washington DC, USA, 1986.

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