



Plate 288. Three Twite, Barns Ness, Lothian, 5 November 2011. © Ian Andrews

## IDENTIFICATION SPOT: Linnet and Twite

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Linnet and Twite are small, seeding-eating finches which occur widely in Scotland through the year. For those of us who live away from the Highlands and Islands, the best chance of seeing Twite is along the coast in winter. This short article gives some hints as to how to separate them from their closest relative, the Linnet, at this season. In winter, both species are rather nondescript. Summer male Linnets are unmistakable and won't be covered.

Most guide books say that the Twite is similar in size and shape to a Linnet. However, its head is smaller and the bill is neat and noticeably stubbier. These, together with a small eye, give the Twite a more petite look. If the Linnet is 'dumpy' then the Twite is 'slimmer.' Twite also has a distinctly longer tail with a deeper fork.

Twite often give their presence away by their distinctive calls. They give a variety of calls, including twittering noises that are similar to Linnet's except that they are significantly more nasal and harsh. A buzzing, upward inflected 'zhwee-ee' call is distinctive of Twite and is a good one to familiarise yourselves with. Flocks of Twite are very tight-knit, either sitting close together along fence wires or bouncing along in lively flocks, always uttering their twanging calls.

Habitat can also be a good indicator. Twite tend to be found mostly in saltmarshes and coastal dunes and fields, whilst Linnet is much the more likely species to be found inland, except on the upland margins where Twite may gather in hay fields or stubble fields in the autumn.



**Plate 289.** Twite (left) with four Linnets, Musselburgh, 27 December 2015. © *Ian Andrews*. This individual is noticeably smaller than the adjacent Linnets. The yellow bill and buff throat and face are clear, as is the overall darker, more streaked appearance.



**Plate 290.** Twite, Fair Isle, 13 October 2013. © *Ian Andrews*. In flight, Twite are darker than Linnets with less white in the wings and tail. Spring males have a striking pink rump, but this individual is a female or immature.



**Plate 291.** Twite, Barns Ness, Lothian, 5 November 2011. © *Ian Andrews*. Twite have less white in the wings than Linnets.



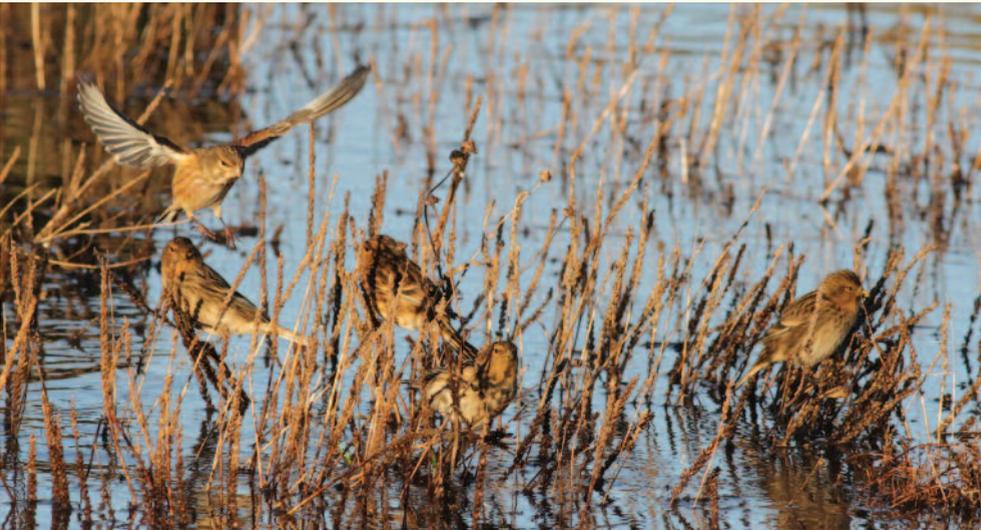
**Plate 292.** Twite, Fair Isle, 23 September 2014. © *Ian Andrews*



**Plate 293.** Twite, Musselburgh, Lothian, 30 November 2010. © *Ian Andrews*. With the light reflecting off snow, this bird looks unusually pale, but shows off the throat and bill colouration.



**Plate 294.** Twite (third from left) with Linnets, Musselburgh, 27 December 2015. © *Ian Andrews*. The male Linnets (far left and towards the right) show greyish heads, chestnut on the wings coverts and a hint of pink on the sides of the breast. The others are plainer, but still the Twite stands out as being darker with an unstreaked buff throat.



**Plate 295.** Linnets (landing) with Twite, Musselburgh, 27 December 2015. © *Ian Andrews*. Some pink on the sides of the Linnets's breast is evident and the pale spot on the ear coverts below the eye is also clear.

There are several features that clinch the identification of Twite in winter: (a) a yellowish bill, (b) an unstreaked warm mustard-coloured throat and face (also described as a rich buff or orangey), (c) lack of contrast between the head and upperparts and (d) lack of pink on the breast and chestnut in the wings. In comparison, a winter Linnets will have a grey bill, a paler, streaked throat and a greyish head that contrasts with a brown back (more so in males). Even in

winter, male Linnets show some signs of pink in the breast and the wing coverts are chestnut coloured (Plate 294). Linnets also have a subtle pale spot just below the eye on otherwise plain ear coverts (Plate 289). In Twite, the ear coverts are darker. In fact, the whole bird is generally darker than Linnets.

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