

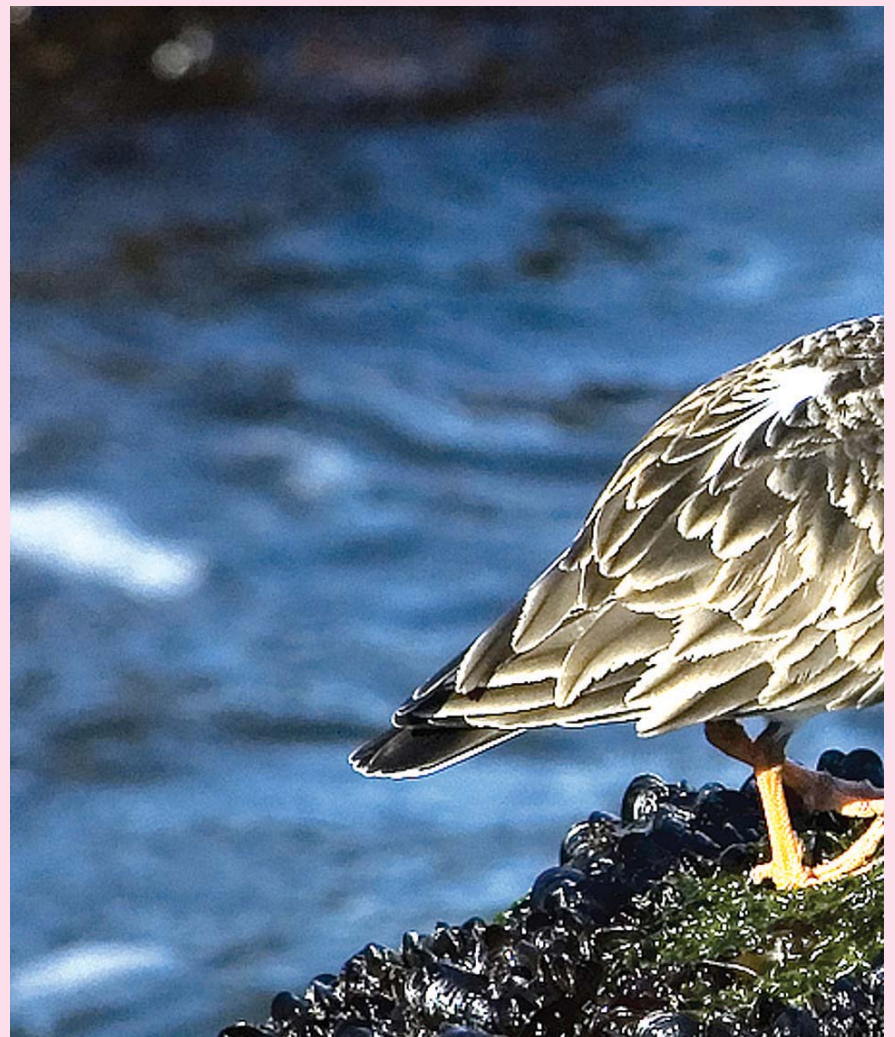
# Tide runners

*‘What are those fancy wee birds with the orange legs?’*

Those ‘fancy wee birds’ are, in fact, Turnstones : a delightful little wader that is a perennial winter visitor to the Oban foreshore from breeding grounds in Arctic Canada or (more probably) Greenland.

As many as 36 of these cryptically-plumaged birds return each year, to brave the cold winter months searching for invertebrates amongst the rocks and seaweed of the town’s esplanade beaches. Indeed, that’s how they get their name, as they are industrious birds, forever flicking over stones and other debris with their short, stubby beaks in search of their next meal.

Around 70,000 Turnstones over-winter in Britain each year and they are a common visitor to rocky beaches throughout Argyll and the isles at this time. Breeding on the rocky shores and tundra of northern Canada and Greenland, some Turnstones may rarely see human beings during the brief arctic summer. This may account for their remarkable tameness and, indeed, the party that frequent the Oban foreshore seem to have become particularly habituated towards man. It



has become an everyday occurrence in winter for this flock to be seen feeding within a few metres of pedestrians passing by on a busy George Street.

The fact is that these birds are not all that ‘fancy’, except for their bright orange legs and feet. In winter, a Turnstone’s feathers are at their dullest and it is not until spring-time that they moult into their beautiful tortoiseshell breeding finery. This plumage allows the incubating bird to blend in perfectly with the colours of the mosses and lichens found on the arctic tundra where they nest, affording them added protection against predators such as Arctic Foxes.

Turnstones, like the Oban flock, tend to live in stable parties of between 20-40 birds outwith the breeding season. These parties have a rigid social structure of dominance and subordination and a tremendous work ethic, based on team spirit. Take an opportunity the next

