

The Carl Zeiss Award 2004



One of the difficulties for the judging panel of the Carl Zeiss Award, for photographs of rarities assessed by the BBRC during the preceding year, is that we have to think of something new to say in our report each year. This year it was easy, in fact it was a landmark year for the judging system. For the first time, the vast majority of photographs were submitted as digital images; consequently, the judging was carried out indoors, around a table with a com-

puter, rather than sitting in the garden drinking wine and reviewing a large file of prints and slides. In addition, since the marginal cost of extra frames is nil when using a digital camera, we often had 10-15 images of a particular rarity from a photographer, while in previous years 2-3 was the norm.

The judging brief is to decide on the most instructive photograph, or set of photographs, of a British rarity. We are thus not looking for artistic merit but for whether an image shows (for example) a rarely seen identification feature or can have a significant influence upon the decision made by BBRC. Carl Zeiss Ltd, sponsors of the BBRC, award a pair of Carl Zeiss Victory binoculars to the winner of this competition, in recognition of the importance of photographs and photographers to the record-assessment procedure.

The process of selecting a shortlist from the many images submitted with records begins during the record assessment itself, as BBRC members flag up anything that strikes them as appropriate for the award. It is fascinating that passerines or non-passerines seem to predominate in different years, and it is rare that we



Les Bird



Les Bird



Les Bird

310-312. Syke's Warbler *Hippolais rama*, Beachy Head, East Sussex, August 2002.

have a mixed bag. This year was no exception, and only passerines made it onto our shortlist, although Gary Bellingham's American Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica*, photographed while taking off and showing the whole of the underwing, and the first-winter Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida* by Dave Walker came extremely close. Both of these photos will be in the BBRC annual report next month. Nonetheless, four sets of photographs were finally established as comprising our shortlist, featuring the following species: Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos* of the eastern race *hafizi* (Colin Bradshaw); Lanceolated Warbler *Locustella lanceolata* (Michael McKee); Sykes's Warbler *Hippolais rama* (Les Bird); and Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides* of the east Asian form *plumbeitarsus*, generally referred to as 'Two-barred Greenish Warbler' (Bryan Thomas). The photographs of the Lanceolated and Two-barred Greenish Warblers were superb, and both sets not only showed the key identification features but were also aesthetically pleasing. In another year, either may well have won the competition, although it would also be true to say that both of these records would probably have been accepted even without these photographs. The Lanceolated Warbler series showed the all-important undertail-covert markings, the pattern of the tertials, and the nature of the streaking on the underparts, while the Two-barred Greenish photos highlighted the similarity of the facial pattern to Arctic Warbler *P. borealis* and the double wing-bars.

The Zeiss Award was, however, really designed for images such as the two remaining



Colin Bradshaw

313. Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos* of the eastern race *hafizi*, St Agnes, Scilly, October 1987.

sets of photographs. Neither *hafizi* Common Nightingale nor Sykes's Warbler are species that BBRC feels particularly confident in assessing. The photos of the St Agnes nightingale not only show the supercilium and greyish coloration typical of this race, but they also emphasise the rangy shape, somewhat reminiscent of a Rufous Bush Robin *Cercotrichas galactotes*, the wing-bars and, most intriguingly, pale crescent-shaped tips to the uppertail-coverts – a feature that we have subsequently found on all photos of this race that we have been able to track down, no matter what the age. While the submitted descriptions of this bird are compelling, we are in no doubt that this record would not



Michael McKee



Michael McKee

314 & 315. Lanceolated Warbler *Locustella lanceolata*, Out Skerries, Shetland, October 2003.

Bryan Thomas



Bryan Thomas

316 & 317. Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides* of the east Asian form *plumbeitarsus*, Bryher, Scilly, September 2003.

have been accepted but for the photographs.

BBRC have found the assessment of in-hand records of Sykes's Warbler problematic, as the key differences between this and Booted Warbler *H. caligata* are relatively small and (in

the case of bill dimensions at least) difficult to measure. Les Bird's photographs of the Beachy Head Sykes's Warbler suggest, however, that the sum of these minor differences may produce a subtly distinctive jizz which may possibly make

it easier to identify this species in the field than the hand. The photographs show a consistently long-billed, long-tailed and short-winged *Acrocephalus*-like warbler, completely lacking the more gentle, *Phylloscopus*-like characteristics of Booted Warbler, with uniform upperparts and wings, and an indistinct facial pattern. Once again, excellent though the descriptions were, we have little doubt that it was the photographs that made the crucial difference in this case and allowed this record to be accepted. As such, this set of photographs of Sykes's Warbler is a worthy winner of the Carl Zeiss Award 2004.

We are, as always, grateful to Carl Zeiss Ltd for their sponsorship of BBRC and of this competition.


Tim Loseby



318. Presentation of the Carl Zeiss Award, at the *British Birds* stand at the British Birdwatching fair, Rutland Water, August 2004. Sadly, the winner, Les Bird, was unable to attend owing to a family wedding during the birdfair weekend here, but his prize was received on his behalf by BB editor Roger Riddington. Pictured here, from left, Roger Riddington, John Cockerill (Carl Zeiss Ltd), Chris Kehoe, Colin Bradshaw and Adrian Pitches, the latter three comprising this year's judging panel. Note the contrasting styles of footwear, reflecting the Rutland weather.

Colin Bradshaw, Chris Kehoe and Adrian Pitches
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