

# A review of the 1950–57 British rarities

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on behalf of BBRC*



'Free at last!'

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**ABSTRACT** A review of records of British rarities in the eight years from 1950 to 1957 has been carried out by a subcommittee of the British Birds Rarities Committee (BBRC). In total, 126 records of 67 of the rarest species and species pairs were reassessed and 71% of these were considered good enough to remain part of the national record. For records that were no longer considered to be acceptable, the counties and surviving observers concerned have been informed. The outcomes of investigations into extraordinary records from the post-war period for six species are noted and other such reviews are continuing.

## *Introduction*

In 1995, the Association of European Rarities Committees (AERC) decided to adopt 1st January 1950 as the standard date by which to differentiate between category A and B records for national lists. In the case of Britain, which had previously for this purpose used 1958 (the year in which the BBRC was formed), compliance with this decision entailed the examination of records of rarities published for the eight years prior to the formation of BBRC (1950–57).

It was soon apparent that the work involved in this review would be considerable and that, if BBRC members took on the task, it would affect the assessment of current records. Consequently,

in 1997, a subcommittee of past BBRC members was formed to undertake the review. The members of this subcommittee had not only the skills necessary for the review but also invaluable past experience and perspectives on the British birding scene. In the early 1950s, responsibility for the provenance of published records had lain with a mix of national, regional and county editors and, particularly where major rarities were concerned, with the editors of *British Birds*. The members of the 1950–57 subcommittee were, at various times, Rob Hume, Tim Sharrock, Keith Vinicombe, Grahame Walbridge and Ian Wallace, in addition to Colin Bradshaw and Mike Rogers, Chairman and Hon. Secretary of BBRC respectively.

### Scope of the review

From an initial exchange of views on this situation and what procedures were needed to cope with it, three main issues stood out. The first was the relatively large number of rarities recorded in Britain in the period concerned, while the second was a recognition of the careful attention that had already been paid to British rarity claims published in *BB* by successive editors during 1950–57. The third issue came into focus more slowly – a dawning realisation that much of the original supporting documentation for many of these records was irretrievable.

Taking all the above points into account, we decided that to review all the 1950–57 records might be not only impossible, because of missing data, but also unnecessary, given that many species regarded as rarities in 1950 have since proved to be relatively regular visitors to Britain, with well-defined patterns of occurrence (e.g. BOU 1971). All members of the subcommittee independently reviewed the 1950–57 records listed in Naylor (1996) and formulated opinions on the scope of the review. A series of options was then discussed at the BBRC AGM in 1998. At that meeting, it was agreed that the subcommittee would not review the total number of records (about 1,100) of all species classed as rarities in 1958 but would concentrate primarily on those species that had occurred fewer than 100 times by 1997. In addition, each member of the subcommittee produced a short-list of records which did not fulfil the above criteria but simply ‘looked wrong’. The most awkward of these were termed ‘sore thumb’ records and were also reviewed.

### Execution of the review

MJR retrieved all published accounts of 1950–57 rarities, together with county data where available and, occasionally, even resubmitted field notes and sketches. In most cases, however, we had to work from the published account alone as no further details could be obtained. The *BB* archives were not transferred with the sale of the magazine in the 1960s and they could not be found. The next stage was to assess the existing documentation and, in cases where it was deemed inadequate, to attempt to locate any further information that might be available. For example, a substantial number of records related to birds which had died and been preserved subsequently as museum speci-

mens. In most such cases, the specimens were photographed and images added to the file. In a few situations where this was not possible, a member of BBRC or relevant museum staff examined the specimen and provided a description for the file, even if, as in one case, the specimen was now a skeleton only. Other details came from various County Recorders, who searched their archives. Once the files were as complete as possible, the records were assembled into batches for circulation among subcommittee members. Each member voted on whether or not each record should continue to be acceptable.

Over the entire review, the process of record assessment was less straightforward than for modern records, in that we brought modern-day identification criteria to old claims for which the documentation could be well below standards that would prove acceptable today. Initially, therefore, we identified only those few records where present knowledge demonstrated clearly that a genuine mistake had been made. Two examples of this were a Greater Yellowlegs *Tringa melanoleuca* that had a white ‘V’ on its back and a Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola* that landed on water and swam (none of the international experts contacted had ever seen or heard of a pratincole swimming in deep water). Inevitably, as the review continued, there was debate on the quality of the written evidence of some records but nonetheless recirculations were rare. There was usually a ready and welcome unanimity on the revised judgements and we were relieved and pleased to find no evidence of falsification in any reviewed claim. Most non-acceptances stemmed from the unfortunate brevity of published accounts or the lack of features that we now know to be crucial diagnostic characters.

In those cases where a record was deemed no longer acceptable and surviving observers were found, CB wrote to them personally and explained the reasons behind the decision, inviting them to withdraw the record. One asked for his original notes back so that he could reassess his claim – sadly those originals had been lost – and otherwise only two observers declined to withdraw their claims. At the end of the review process, once the few recirculations were completed, MJR and CB reviewed all the judgements and annotated the relevant entries in Naylor (1996) with the revised decisions.

### Results of the ‘under 100’ review

For the 65 species and two species pairs concerned (those with fewer than 100 records prior to 1997), the historical register for all time up to 1957, as listed by Naylor (1996), contained 829 records. Of these, 206 had been reviewed earlier and rejected, again as noted by Naylor (1996). This left a balance of 623; of these, 126 had been claimed during 1950–57 and all were reviewed by the subcommittee. Following this review, 89 of the 126 records continue to be acceptable and 37 are now not acceptable. The overall rate of rejection was thus 29%, higher than the 21% evident from the prior scattered reviews (see again Naylor 1996). We hope that the reduced rate of acceptance will be taken as evidence for our careful application of modern disciplines and *not* as a slur on earlier observers’ competence or attitude. Many of the observers concerned were responsible for major advances in the development of field identification and the overall record of vagrancy. They were then at the cutting edge and it would be wholly inappropriate for us now to downplay or undermine their contribution to rarity recording.

For the 65 species and two species pairs reviewed in the batch circulations, there were between one and seven records each. For 38 species (and both species pairs), all the records were retained; for 20 species, just one record was removed (or demoted to species pair); for four species, two records were removed, and for just three species three records were removed. All changes in record status have already been notified to county recorders by MJR but, for the sake of clarity and to assist the revision of BBRC statistics, they are listed in Appendix 1.

### The merits of examining other pre-1958 records

We feel that a further effort to sanitise the history of other species, those that have been BBRC subjects since 1958, would smack of mere bureaucracy. Interpolation of the final rejection rate of the ‘under 100’ species indicates that we would be unlikely to change the overall number of accepted records in this other, larger group by much more than 1–2% of the total. Such a loss of records would be insufficient to disturb the long-established and often annually repeated patterns of occurrence. Any complete review would have to unearth nearly 1,000 claims, beginning with 77 Red-breasted Flycatchers *Ficedula parva*, and we see no justifica-

tion for the work involved.

We did, however, in addition to our main subjects, reappraise several ‘sore thumbs’. These included a putative White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* which broke into a chicken-run in a garden and stole a chicken, and the only late December record of Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*. Altogether, nine records of six species were considered not acceptable and details of these are given in Appendix 2. More serious and as yet unresolved was the unease felt by many on several extraordinary or unprecedented records in both ‘under-’ and ‘over-100’ categories in the immediate post-war period. Some of these were considered during the procedural stage of the review but, because they fell outside our time frame, they were ultimately not assessed. A good example is the 1946 Moustached Warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon* breeding record. Detailed arguments for its deletion from the British List have now been accepted by BOURC (see pp. 465–478).

Other particularly noteworthy revisions occurred in the cases of two former ‘firsts’: a frigatebird formerly accepted as Magnificent *Fregata magnificens* but upon separate review accepted as the first Ascension Frigatebird *F. aquila* for Britain (Walbridge *et al.* 2003) and the ‘Fair Isle sandpiper’ of 1956 (which until recently stood as Britain’s first Western Sandpiper *Calidris mauri*, and which is still under investigation; Garner 2005, Prowse 2006, Walsh 2006).

### Acknowledgments

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## Appendix 1. 1950–57 records no longer considered acceptable.

- Red-breasted Goose *Branta ruficollis*, Beaully Firth, Inverness-shire, 20th January 1957, probably since late September 1956
- Harlequin Duck *Histrionicus histrionicus*, Laggan River, Islay, Argyll, male, shot, 12th November 1954
- North Atlantic Little Shearwater *Puffinus baroli*, off Aberdaron, Caernarfon, 7th May 1951
- American Bittern *Botaurus lentiginosus*, found dead, Stratton, Cornwall, September 1953
- Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*, Brighton, East Sussex, 29th April 1951
- Great White Egret *Ardea alba*, Ridge, Wareham, Dorset, 5th August 1951
- Black Stork *Ciconia nigra*, Houghmond Hill, Shrewsbury, Shropshire, 20th May 1956; Canterbury/Dover area, Kent, September–November 1957
- Little Crake *Porzana parva*, Lundy, Devon, adult male, 12th–14th September 1952; Marton Mere, Lancashire, immature female, 31st May 1955; Fenwick, Northumberland, adult female, 29th–30th September 1956
- Baillon's Crake *Porzana pusilla*, Abberton Reservoir, Essex, 13th June 1953
- Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola*, Stanpit Marsh, Hampshire [now Dorset], immature, 13th September 1951
- Black-winged Pratincole *Glareola nordmanni*, Steart, Bridgewater Bay, Somerset, 15th June 1955 (accepted only as pratincole sp.)
- Western Sandpiper *Calidris mauri*, Fair Isle, Shetland, trapped, 28th May to 3rd June 1956
- Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla*, Lundy, Devon, 24th–26th September 1957
- Baird's Sandpiper *Calidris bairdii*, Billinge Green, Northwick, Cheshire, 27th–29th May 1955; same, Marston, Cheshire, to 5th June 1955
- Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*, Thorney, West Sussex, 22nd April 1951
- Greater Yellowlegs *Tringa melanoleuca*, Boddam Voe, Shetland, 26th–27th May 1953
- Laughing Gull *Larus atricilla*, Abberton Reservoir, Essex, adult, 20th December 1957
- Sooty Tern *Onychoprion fuscata*, Porthkidney, Leland, Cornwall, 31st July 1951; Isbister, Rendall, Orkney, 22nd April 1954
- Eurasian Scops Owl *Otus scops*, Tregonning Hill, Helston, Cornwall, 16th September 1952; Kilkhampton Wood, Bude, Cornwall, 14th October 1953; near Kendal, Cumbria, 18th December 1956
- Pechora Pipit *Anthus gustavi*, Fair Isle, Shetland, 2nd October 1951
- Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica*, Regent's Park, London, male, 23rd April 1951; Fair Isle, Shetland, first-year male, 8th–13th November 1951; Farlington Marshes, Hampshire, 18th September 1954
- Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti*, Marazion, Cornwall, female, 29th August 1950
- White's Thrush *Zoothera dauma*, Foulmartlaw, Belsay, Northumberland, two, 26th April 1952
- American Robin *Turdus migratorius*, Brampton, Cumbria, 2nd–6th March 1955; Braunton Burrows, Devon, 29th October to 7th November 1955
- Lanceolated Warbler *Locustella lanceolata*, Fair Isle, Shetland, 4th May 1953
- Moustached Warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon*, Eling Great Marsh, Hampshire, two, 13th August 1951; Cliffe, Kent, 14th April 1952
- Pine Grosbeak *Pinicola enucleator*, Charing, Kent, adult male, 7th April 1955

**Appendix 2. Other species with records reassessed during the 1950–57 review and now considered unacceptable.**

Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens*, Tiree, Argyll, immature female, 9th July 1953  
(reidentified and accepted as first British record of Ascension Frigatebird *F. aquila*)

White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*, Biddenham, Bedfordshire, immature, 1st May 1951

Ivory Gull *Pagophila eburnea*, near Giltar Point, Pembrokeshire, adult, 24th August 1950; Cuckmere Valley, East Sussex, adult, 19th November 1954

Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*, Tutbury, Staffordshire, 29th December 1953

\*Olivaceous Warbler *Hippolais pallida/opaca*, Skokholm, Pembrokeshire, adult, trapped, 23rd September to 3rd October 1951; Portland Bill, Dorset, trapped, 16th August 1956

†Little Bunting *Emberiza pusilla*, Beddington Sewage-farm, Surrey, one from 31st March to 21st April, another 3rd April, 1956

\* Both were rejected in a previous Olivaceous Warbler review undertaken by both BBRC and BOURC, but are reported here for completeness.

† One Little Bunting remains acceptable, from 31st March to 3rd April.