



FROM THE RARITIES COMMITTEE'S FILES

Identification of pale Paddyfield Warblers



On 24th September 1993, Kevin Shepherd found an unusual, unstreaked *Acrocephalus* warbler at Sheringham, Norfolk. At first glance, it seemed to show a prominent supercilium and relatively short wings, which suggested Paddyfield Warbler *A. agricola*, but all thought of that was dispelled by the concolorous, cold greyish-brown upperparts, which were, at times, noticeably washed olive and clearly lacked rufous. Steve Votier was called, and the bird was quickly caught in a mist-net. The warbler was carefully examined in the hand and a detailed description and a series of photographs was taken. The bird was identified as a Blyth's Reed Warbler *A. dumetorum*, following careful reference to Svensson (1992) and Lewington *et al.* (1991), on a combination of biometrics, uniformity and colour of upperparts and more especially the wing, a supercilium widest in front of the eye and the absence of a dark line above the supercilium. A full description of the bird, including all relevant biometrics and a pair of sketches (fig. 1), appears below.

Upper mandible horn-grey with pale horn cutting edge, the pale cutting edge broadest just the distal side of nostril. Lower mandible wholly pale horn with a small area of grey suffusion 2 mm short of the bill tip. Entire upperparts from forehead to upperside of tail almost uniform greyish-brown with a slight olive cast to entirety. Uppertail-coverts slightly warmer-coloured than rest of upperparts, being pale brown with a buff tinge. No rufous on upperparts. Supercilium broad and white with very slight buff suffusion, broadest in front of eye and fading behind eye to finish level with rear of ear-coverts. No dark upper edge to supercilium. Iris dull greyish-olive. Lores with grey-brown suffusion. Ear-coverts wholly greyish-brown, with restricted buff feathering below eye. Chin white. Throat white with restricted buff tipping. Breast white with more extensive buff tipping than throat, most buff on side of breast. Belly white. Flanks with extensive buff extending to sides of uppertail-coverts, where most buff. Undertail-

coverts off-white, tips suffused buff. Wings uniform pale greyish-brown with buff tinge. All wing feathers with pale buffish-brown fringes, broadest on tertials and most narrow on all feathers of alula, hence alula looking darker. Primaries diffusely tipped off-white, less than 0.4 mm at broadest tip (i.e. almost nothing there). Primaries all fresh. Tertials slightly worn (typical for first-winter *Acrocephalus*). Tail moderately worn with lots of castellations (typical for first-winter *Acrocephalus*). Legs pinkish-grey; rear of legs paler. Soles pale yellow; claws mid grey.

Full biometrics were included. Details of the more relevant biometrics included a wing length of 61.5 mm, emarginations on 3rd, 4th and slight on 5th; wing-point 3rd = 4th; 2nd primary = 6th; notch on 2nd = 3.8 mm less than secondaries; notch on 3rd = 8th/9th; 1st primary = 3.45 mm longer than primary coverts; bill 15.8 mm to skull, 10.4 mm to feathers; tail 54.5 mm.

The bird was released, details were phoned in to 'Birdline', and a crowd of observers gathered to watch this 'first' for Norfolk, which showed well in the field for the first time. It quickly became apparent that many observers questioned the identification. In the field, the supercilium was fairly obvious, and there was a clear dark line above it which had not been visible in the hand. Some observers were convinced that the bird was a Paddyfield Warbler, and SV, later, agreed with this; KS was more cautious, preferring to wait until the photographs were

returned and could be used to check the identification. Eventually, a combination of the biometrics and photographs left neither of the original observers in any doubt that this was indeed a Paddyfield Warbler, and it was accepted as that species by the British Birds Rarities Committee (*Brit. Birds* 88: 538, plate 182).

We can sympathise completely with the observers' feelings, described by KS in his original BBRC submission: 'For a long, long time we had both dreamed of finding a new species for Norfolk. To find one and then completely "mess up" the identification is an experience neither of us wants to go through again. Following a day of suicidal despair, we both decided the only way to overcome it was to get out there and find something better. We hammered the site and were justly rewarded with Lanceolated Warbler *Locustella lanceolata* (another county first) only five days later and Black-throated [Dark-throated] Thrush *Turdus ruficollis* in October. We feel much better now!'

Several lessons can be learned from this tale. First is the fact that field characters are not necessarily in-hand characters. Many fairly obvious features in the field change considerably when a bird is observed in the hand or close up. Most observers are aware of how 'jizz' changes when close to a bird; for instance, how small Great Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* and Long-eared Owl *Asio otus* can look when close up, yet how large Mistle Thrush *T. viscivorus* can appear. Plumage features also vary. The classic example of this is the wing-bar of Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides*. This species often shows good wing-bars in the field which can 'disappear' when the bird is caught. A similar thing happens to the dark shadowing above the supercilium of Radde's Warbler *P. schwarzi*, and Peter Lansdown (*in litt.*) reports in-the-hand Firecrests *Regulus ignicapillus* appearing to have no supercilia. In general, head patterns are more obvious on birds in the field than in the hand and subtle differences in shading, which are obvious when a bird is seen from a distance, can be missed from close up. The dark mark above the supercilium of this bird was not obvious in the hand (plates 18 & 19), but was clearly visible in the field and in some of the photographs, though it is not visible in others. Both observers feel that they missed this because they examined the bird too closely and they expected the feature to be more obvious than it was. In addition, the supercilium was considered to look more obvious in front of the eye and not to flare out behind the eye.

Two other important lessons are that once one gets on the wrong track with an identification it can be very difficult to get back on the right track, and that even very good and careful birders can still make mistakes. The two observers involved, from their past track record and the details submitted with this record, definitely fall into the category of top-class birder. They are to be congratulated for allowing us to 'go public' on this record. They are also to be congratulated for documenting the record with such detail that they were able, retrospectively, to confirm the identification from all the data they had already gathered.

Perhaps the most important lesson, however, is that birds do not always look like you expect them to. This cold grey-brown Paddyfield Warbler was different from any that the observers had previously seen or read about. The literature available at the time suggested that Paddyfield Warbler was generally a rufous bird which, even at its most dull, showed rufous on the rump, and which showed a striking head pattern. This bird had no hint of rufous in its cold grey-brown plumage. Whilst in the hand, it was compared directly with the illustrations of

Waybourne 24/9/93 bird ring at 1w Blythe Reed

nothing like Fagany Cliff bird! or
Too many feathers, wing per Paddy? ^{not} _{not}

hooge super dark border above
pale/square ended super. prob only
shaded effect when
worn raised
(500 water)

face almost
V-shaped like face
some angles

faintly bright
buff wash to rear flanks
ranging white w. a. end.

Direct Sun
4pm

feet dark grey
legs pale brown

not centre
pale fringed
rather than
dark contrast

brownish smudge
in tip of lower mand.

in shade
(amongst Joligge
late Jan)



sp. proj faintly short obviously shorter than had
looked v. short winged with floppy tail in
flight almost like Wagtail w.
Two extremes of impression shown

Fig. 1. Colour sketches of Paddyfield Warbler *Acrocephalus agricola*, Norfolk, September 1993 (Martin Elliott)



▲ ► 15-17. Unidentified warbler, perhaps Paddyfield Warbler *Acrocephalus agricola*, Kazakhstan, June 1984 (C. Bradshaw)



▼ 18 & 19. Paddyfield Warbler *Acrocephalus agricola*, Norfolk, September 1993 (Kevin Shepherd)



Blyth's Reed and Paddyfield Warblers in Lewington *et al.* (1991): it was very similar to the former, but bore no resemblance to the illustration of Paddyfield Warbler.

This, however, is not an isolated event with this species. In June 1984, a group of birders, including CB, trapped a strange warbler at Tselinograd, Kazakhstan, USSR. The bird was in a scrub area with breeding Blyth's Reed Warblers and Booted Warblers *Hippolais caligata*. The bird was examined quickly, photographed and released. No biometrics or wing-formula were taken by the ringer who handled the bird. It was identified as Booted Warbler, with everyone happy about the identification. All the other Paddyfield Warblers in the area were a pale chestnut or pale tawny-brown. When the photographs were returned, however, both CB and Alan Dean, who had also been present, became suspicious that the identification was incorrect, as the bill seemed too big and dark, the undertail-coverts perhaps too long, and there was no sign of white on the outer tail feathers (plates 15-17). It was difficult to be sure what species it was, but the very short wings and relatively prominent supercilium suggest that it may have been a Paddyfield Warbler, and one photograph (plate 16) showed the tail-cocking typical of the species. Once again, this bird showed uniform grey-brown upperparts with no sign of any rufous in the plumage or dark tertial centres, and neither the eye-stripe nor the dark line above the eye was particularly prominent, although there was a dark spot in front of the eye.

Conclusions

Neither bird should have been bleached at the respective times of year, as the Norfolk bird was a first-year and the Kazakhstan bird should have completed its pre-breeding moult one month earlier (Cramp 1992), although Williamson (1976) suggested that adults can be faded to a grey-brown, retaining warmth only on the rump, by mid June. No other Paddyfield Warbler seen in Kazakhstan around this time approached this individual in plumage tones. A somewhat similar episode concerning a pale adult Paddyfield Warbler, on St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, during 30th September to 15th October 1974, was described in detail by D. S. Flumm and N. A. G. Lord, with photographs by D. B. Hunt (*Brit. Birds* 71: 95-101). It seems unlikely that these three were 'freak' birds, and we presume that pale Paddyfield Warblers showing reduced or no rufous, uniform upperparts and a less obvious head pattern occur regularly, though infrequently. Svensson (1992) alluded to this, but *BWP* suggests that Paddyfield Warbler should always show dark-centred tertials and, at least, rufous on the rump. Perhaps this shows, as demonstrated previously by Pine Buntings *Emberiza leucocephalos* (*Brit. Birds* 86: 378-386), that there are gaps in our collective knowledge of the range of variation of plumage of lesser-known species, particularly those exhibiting marked geographical variation.

Identification of Paddyfield Warbler is usually relatively straightforward, with a combination of prominent supercilium flaring behind the eye, a dark shadow above the supercilium, short wings and rufous-toned upperparts, particularly the rump and base of the tail, with marked contrast between dark tertial centres and pale rusty edges. First-winters are frequently paler, as are individuals of the races *septima* from the Black Sea area and *capistrata* from Central Asia, although there

seems some doubt as to whether colour differences for *capistrata* are caused by more rapid wear of plumage rather than genuine pigment differences. If an observer were confronted with one of these pale Paddyfield Warblers, however, identification would be much less easy. The combination of structure, head pattern and thrush-like bill would seem to be the best features, but it is, perhaps, doubtful that a sight-only record would be acceptable.

We would be pleased to hear opinions about the identity of the 1984 bird and details of any other variant Paddyfield Warblers.

Acknowledgments

The Rarities Committee is indebted to Kevin Shepherd and Steve Votier for allowing it to use their notes and photographs, and to discuss their record fully. We have tried to 'open up' the workings of the Committee with several similar cases in the past, but have been thwarted by observers who have refused permission to use their records as examples of problems of identification or assessment. We understand observers' natural reluctance to have their mistakes published, but feel that, because of this, Kevin and Steve are to be congratulated for allowing this rather painful experience to appear in print. We are also indebted to Martin Elliott for the use of his excellent sketches.

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EDITORIAL COMMENT There is further discussion of Paddyfield Warbler identification in a letter from Lars Svensson and reply by Dr Colin Bradshaw & Jimmy Steele on pages 152-158.