



FROM THE RARITIES COMMITTEE'S FILES



Two reports, selected for this feature as examples of high-quality submissions, coincidentally concerned the same species: Lanceolated Warbler *Locustella lanceolata*. One relates primarily to in-the-hand examination and the other to field observations. Both are given here in full, with only very minor subeditorial changes.

The BBRC congratulates Stephen Votier and Andrew Moon on the excellence of the following accounts. (We have taken this opportunity also to include relevant photographs by Robin Chittenden and K. B. Shepherd, and drawings by Peter A. Dennis.)

Lanceolated Warbler in Norfolk

SPECIES Lanceolated Warbler. AGE First-winter.

PLACE Sheringham, Norfolk.

DATE 29th September 1993; 07.50-18.45 — intermittently; total duration 50 minutes.

OBSERVER Stephen C. Votier.

FIRST FOUND BY D. Riley, K. B. Shepherd. FIRST IDENTIFIED BY SCV. OTHER OBSERVERS About 500 visiting birders.

OPTICAL AIDS Habicht 10 × 40.

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE OF SPECIES None.

EXPERIENCE OF SIMILAR SPECIES Seen about 30 Grasshopper Warblers and handled about 40.

DISTANCE In hand and down to ranges of 5 feet (1.5 m) in field.

SPECIES PRESENT FOR COMPARISON ALONGSIDE None.

RINGED BY SCV. RING NUMBER OF0454.

WEATHER Wind SE2. Cloud 6/10. Light conditions: diffuse sun. Angle of sun to observer: not constant, but generally behind.

The morning of 29th September dawned with overcast skies; a cool southeasterly breeze and the definite smell of rare birds! I arrived at Dead Man's Wood just before dawn, and met up with KBS, who had just finished erecting mist-nets in the small coastal wood. We both wandered down to the sea, where we met up with DR, a visiting ringer from the Northwest who had popped in to 'check out' the local patch that I had bored him about on many an occasion.

We all stood seawatching for a while, noting a nice passage of Little Gulls *Larus minutus*, and commenting on the apparently arriving or arrived Goldcrests *Regulus regulus* that we could hear calling away from the wood and nearby hedges. KBS and DR then wandered back up to the wood to do the first net round. After they had been gone for a while, I noticed a familiar shape come bounding along the cliff-top: a Hoopoe *Upupa epops*. The bird had arrived on the cliff-top late the previous night, but had rapidly moved off, and we naturally assumed it had gone. However, it took up residence on the cliff-top, feeding around two of our cliff-top net sites—where it looked easily catchable. So I dashed up to the ringing hut in the wood to get the necessary nets, and also to tell DR of the bird's reappearance since he had not seen it.

My arrival back at the ringing hut coincided with that of KBS and DR, complete with large numbers of birds: there had clearly been an overnight or

dawn arrival. As I messed around getting the nets together, KBS and DR began ringing away and KBS calmly asked me if I wanted to see a Grasshopper Warbler that DR had just extracted from the bottom shelf of a mist-net on the most northerly fringe of the wood. I was keen to see the bird, and as he passed it to me DR said, in a slightly shaky voice, 'I think it's a bit small!'. As I pulled the bird out of the bag, I could scarcely believe my eyes; it was clearly a very small streaked *Locustella*, and was it ever streaked!! I looked firstly at the tertials, then the undertail-coverts, upperparts and the breast and underparts: I could see no reason why this bird was not Norfolk's first Lanceolated Warbler.

The next 15 minutes were some of the most stressful of my life. Only five days earlier, KBS and I had totally cocked up another first for Norfolk, the Paddyfield Warbler *Acrocephalus agricola*, so the pressure to get the ID totally spot on was enormous. So, armed with pen, paper, ruler, 'Svensson' and 'Lewington *et al.*', we sealed the bird's fate. There was also the added pressure to do the whole procedure quickly, so as to reduce the handling time. After a total of about 20 minutes, the bird was photographed and then released about 200 m away in a grassy cliff-top ravine, and then the news released.

The bird was not released into the wood, simply because it would probably never have been seen again. Fortunately, it remained on the cliff-top for the remainder of the day, where, amazingly, virtually everybody who came got excellent views of this 'massive skulker'.

Views in the field varied from hurried flight views, to perching on open cliff, inches away in bushes and even the obligatory moving between birders' legs. The bird was seen to go to roost that night, but, after a very clear night, was totally absent the following day.

Description

The following description consists of the detailed description in the hand and notes from field observations.

BIOMETRICS

Weight 11.7 g. Wing (maximum chord) 56 mm (both left and right wings). Tail 46.5 mm. Head & Bill 30.0 mm. Maximum tarsus 21.2 mm. Bill width (proximal nostril) 3.50 mm. Bill to skull 13.85 mm.

WING FORMULA

Emarginated 3rd. Wing point 3rd. Notch on second primary 6.55 mm. Position of secondaries relative to primaries = 4th. Length of first primary = longest primary covert.

The following description was that made in the hand; and concentrates purely on plumage.

UPPERPARTS Forehead and crown greyish olive-brown with broad matt-black centres to all feathers. Most narrow on the forehead, and broadest on the mid-crown. Black centres, although varying in width, all showed the black reaching the tip of each feather, thus produced bold and well-defined streaking.

Nape similarly greyish olive-brown, also with matt-black centres, although black *not* reaching the tip of each feather and therefore appearing far less heavily streaked than the crown.

Mantle and scapulars same colour as the

crown and nape, and also showed prominent matt-black/dark-grey centres to all of the feathers. The mantle and scapular feathers varied somewhat in the exact patterning of the dark centres, some feathers showing the dark reaching the tip of the feather, whereas other feathers showed a narrow buff tip to each. The effect was to create rows of virtually unbroken, thick blackish streaking down the mantle. The scapular feathers tended to show the broadest buff (olive) tips, hence reducing the effect of streaking there (fig. 1).



Plates 124 & 125. Lanceolated Warbler *Locustella lanceolata*, Norfolk, 29th September 1993 (above, K. B. Shepherd; below, Robin Chittenden). The inclusion of plates 124 & 125 was subsidised by Carl Zeiss Ltd, sponsor of the British Birds Rarities Committee.



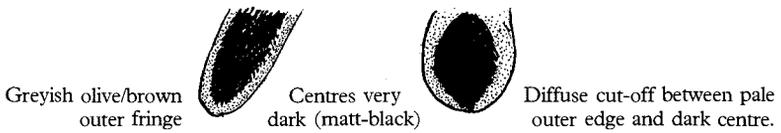


Fig. 1. Variation in mantle/scapular patterning.

Rump and uppertail-coverts were patterned similarly, again showing greyish olive/brown ground colour with dark feather centres. The central feathers showed black virtually reaching the tip of each feather, the side uppertail-coverts had more reduced black centres, not reaching the tip of the feathers.

Tail quite long and rounded, although individual feathers appearing quite pointed; mid/dark brown in colour with a greyish cast. Tips and outer webs fractionally paler.

WINGS Primaries and secondaries basically dark grey with paler, brown fringes. Second primary showed outer web much paler, almost whitish. Primary projection beyond the tertials very short, not measured, but equal to about one quarter of the length of the exposed tertials.

Greater and median coverts brownish with a grey cast with well-defined dark-grey/matt-black centres.

Tertials very well marked (summarised in fig. 2).



SHORTEST Very dark brown, almost matt-black centres, contrasting very well with sharply cut-off buff/white surround.

Buff/pale, broader on outer web than inner



MIDDLE Again, very dark (blackish) centres, contrasting sharply with buffy-white surround. Showed a distinct, but restricted in-cut, on the dark of the tip of the inner web. Pale surround quite narrow, although most narrow on the outer web.

Note in-cut of dark on the inner web

Really dark centres



LONGEST As the other tertials, although the in-cut on the inner web not so apparent. Also showed well-demarcated buff outer contrasting with dark centre, but buff becoming whiter towards tip of feather, therefore enhancing the effect of contrast.

Pale surround very obvious

Becoming whiter (from buff) towards tip

Fig. 2. Examples of three tertials.

IN SUMMARY All tertials showing very distinct and sharp contrast between dark grey/brown to matt-black centres, and pale buff outer edge. When the base of each tertial was looked at closely, it revealed that the cut-off point between the dark and pale was more diffuse than on the rest of the feather, and therefore more like a typical tertial shown by Grasshopper Warbler.

UNDERPARTS Chin buff. Lores, ear-coverts and supercilium all olive/brown, with lores and eye-stripe behind the eye slightly darker grey, producing the effect of a paler supercilium, also accentuated by dark crown-streaking.

The whole of the throat and upper breast essentially buff-white, with a slight yellowish cast, finely but distinctly streaked, forming a neat and well-marked gorget of streaking extending as far as level with the fold in the wing. Streaking at its finest on the throat,

becoming bolder on the upper breast.

The rest of the underparts were buff/white with a very faint yellow cast (certainly much less so than on the 'usual' Grasshopper Warblers that I have seen). The flank feathers were clearly very fluffy, retained juvenile feathers (apparently some 'Lanceys' suspend moult before they complete the post-juvenile moult) washed grey and with more than eight feathers showing long, diffuse streaks to the centres on lower flanks.

Belly buff, with the most extensive amount of yellow.

UNDERTAIL-COVERTS The whole of the undertail-coverts were washed buff-brown, with the individual feathers variously streaked very dark grey/brown. The four main types are shown in fig. 3 (each feather was examined *carefully* to the base).



SHORTEST

Dark clearly *not* reaching base of the feather



SIDE

Well-demarcated 'spot'



MIDDLE

Faint dark smudge



LONGEST

Quite extensive dark streak, although never reaching base of feather. Each feather showed a paler buff/white tip, contrasting with brownish base

Fig. 3. Undertail-coverts.

UNDERWING-COVERTS Washed pale buffy brown.

BARE PARTS Bill quite stout. Upper mandible dark grey with pale cutting edge. Lower mandible orangey-pink with a pale grey smudge towards the tip. Gape flanges quite

apparent, being yellow. Eye quite large and beady-looking (because of plain face?), iris dull grey-brown and pupil black.

Legs and feet quite big-looking (in proportion to the bird) and bright pink. Claws pale.

Views in the field clearly offered no more plumage details than those shown in the hand, although it afforded an opportunity to see structural features and also those plumage features most readily viewable in the field.

Jizz and structure

Clearly a *Locustella*, with fairly short wings and long broad tail often trailing behind in flight. On the deck, a fairly flat-backed bird with long legs, definitely adept at running about at some speed, and apparently reluctant to fly at times. Compared with Grasshopper Warbler, it looked tiny, the size of a Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*, but with perhaps a longer tail and shorter wings, although these differences in size seemed less obvious to me than several people suggested.

Plumage features

Although excellent views were obtained in the field, many features required even better views; the ones most visible and useful appeared to be (in rough order of relevance):

1. Throat-streaking and breast-streaking forming neat gorget, flank-streaking not readily visible in the field.
2. Tertial-patterning apparent even at some range.
3. Crown-streaking very well defined and easy to see.
4. Mantle-streaking seen well on the very best views, but clearly no exact feather detail.
5. Coloration: I'm not 100% certain how reliable this is, and how it compares to 'Eastern Gropers' especially, but I have not seen such a 'grey/brown-and-white' Groppe before, they have always been more olive-and-yellow.

Note that, despite some pretty amazing prolonged views in the field, the bird was not about to show off its lovely undertail-coverts.

Stephen C. Votier

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Lanceolated Warbler in Shetland

SPECIES Lanceolated Warbler. AGE First-winter.

LOCALITY Sumburgh Head, Shetland.

DATE 27th September 1993, observed 16.00 hrs to 18.00 hrs, but present until dusk.

FOUND BY P. A. Dennis. IDENTIFIED BY A. V. Moon. OTHER OBSERVERS Steve Webb and Colin Stephens initially, then Paul Harvey, Hugh Harrop, John Clifton, Chris Donald, Bob Proctor and about 30 others.

WEATHER Wind SW 1-2. No cloud; bright sunshine (but, after the initial sighting, all the closest views were in shadow alongside a wall).

OPTICAL AIDS Leica Trinovid 10 × 42 BA; Questar at c. 80 × (AVM); Bausch and Lomb Elite 10 × 42; Kowa TSN4 20 × 60 (PAD).

EXPERIENCE Third individual seen in Britain, previous ones seen in 1982 and 1990 on Fair Isle; also 10-15 seen in winter in Thailand (1978/79 and 1981/82) (AVM); one individual seen before in Britain on Fair Isle in 1989 (PAD).

DISTANCE Down to six feet (2 m) or closer—it almost ran over PAD's feet.

Despite the deluges and floods in England and elsewhere, Shetland generally defied all expectations, producing many sunny and still, even warm days. September 27th was just one of those days, without a cloud in the sky and hardly a breath of wind; however, despite thorough searching of the southern tip of the

Shetland mainland, we had hardly come up with any new birds—only a Merlin *Falco columbarius* as well as several Fieldfares *Turdus pilaris* and Redwings *T. iliacus*, with not a single warbler to be seen. A conversation with Paul Harvey on a previously still and rather birdless day produced the comment that often the best birds on Fair Isle arrived on sunny days with light southwesterlies . . . so we could not afford to give up just yet.

Early-afternoon news from Fair Isle produced just the inspiration we were looking for: a Pechora Pipit *Anthus gustavi* had been found, there must be *something* around. However, a long delay followed in the early afternoon as enthusiasts tried to get over to FI for the Pechora. Following a late lunch, it was mid afternoon before we re-entered the field. After checking several sites in the Sumburgh area, we eventually decided to head up to Sumburgh Head; as expected, there appeared to be virtually no new arrivals. We then headed down from the lighthouse to check the lower walls; it was at about 16.00 hrs when I noticed Pete Dennis intently watching something, but I could not see any bird so I assumed it must be out of my line of sight. I decided to walk slowly towards him to see what he was watching. As I was doing so, he looked up and beckoned me over; I slowly walked towards him in a large arc to avoid disturbing the object of his attentions. When I reached his side, he said he had a *Locustella* which was definitely not a Pallas's Grasshopper *L. certhiola*. I soon picked up the bird in question as it ran away from us on the grass at the base of the wall—it was a small *Locustella* and very active, and after a few seconds it dived into the stone wall. I said to PAD that it was essential to get good views of the tertials and undertail-coverts to establish its identity. Fears that it might have gone right through the wall proved groundless, as it suddenly appeared in the wall only 15 m away, giving excellent views of everything except its tail; it remained motionless in this position for a few seconds as it looked around nervously, allowing us good views through binoculars.

The combination of a rather plain face, fine streaking on the throat and breast, which was strongly suffused with pale yellow, and the neat, dark-centred tertials with thin pale buff fringes could belong to only one species. I said to PAD, 'It's a ***** Lancey!' We continued to watch it as it dropped down onto the grass, alongside the edge of the wall, and slowly scuttled away from us. By this time, Steve Webb was moving towards us, having noticed our concentrated observations, and asked what we were watching—I told him we had a Lanceolated Warbler. He soon joined us, but the bird then immediately dived behind another wall that ran at right angles to the first wall. Over the next hour or so, it gave frustratingly poor views as, by now, four of us gently followed it around the walls. On one occasion, it flew right away from the walls and we feared that we were about to lose it; on other occasions it went straight through the stone walls, emerging on the other side, necessitating long detours to get more views; during this time it was often out of view for 5-10 minutes.

During this period, I never managed to see the undertail-coverts very well (although they always looked virtually unmarked). I was particularly keen to see these well so as to be absolutely sure about the identification before releasing the news. On some occasions, particularly in bright sunlight, it seemed larger, longer-billed and much less dark brown than it had done originally, provoking fears that it might not be a Lanceolated after all. Nevertheless, at other times it looked

reassuringly small, dark brown and those tertials were undeniable. I decided at this stage, although not 100% sure of its identity, that, with only two hours of daylight left, it was sensible to get other birders onto the scene. I phoned several people, including John Clifton, Paul Harvey and Hugh Harrop, to let them know that we had a probable Lanceolated Warbler on Sumburgh Head.

Ironically it was quite by chance that we stumbled on the best way to view the bird before anyone else had arrived; it was by now moving up a long stretch of stone wall, with no right-angle sections to divert it, and with several observers at the bottom of the wall and the rest at the top, it proceeded to feed quite happily on the grass alongside the wall between the two groups of birders. When it reached one group it would turn around and head back the other way, frequently giving views down to six feet (2 m) or less (quite stunning through the Questar!). It proved to be a typically confiding individual, which eventually displayed its undertail-coverts to all and sundry. In retrospect, the undertail-coverts were sufficiently buff and plain to provide adequate confirmation of its identity quite early on, since the very fine pin-like streaking on each feather (except the longest two) was very indistinct, except on the closest views.

The bird stayed in the same area until dusk and was watched by 30-40 birders, including Paul Harvey, Hugh Harrop, Chris Donald and John Clifton. It was not present the next day.

Description

SIZE, STRUCTURE AND BEHAVIOUR No direct comparison with any other bird, but distinctly smaller than nearby Meadow Pipits *Anthus pratensis* and very much slimmer. At times, it

held its tail slightly cocked, with the wings drooped, giving it an appearance rather like a Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*; in flight, the short wings accentuated this impression. The shape

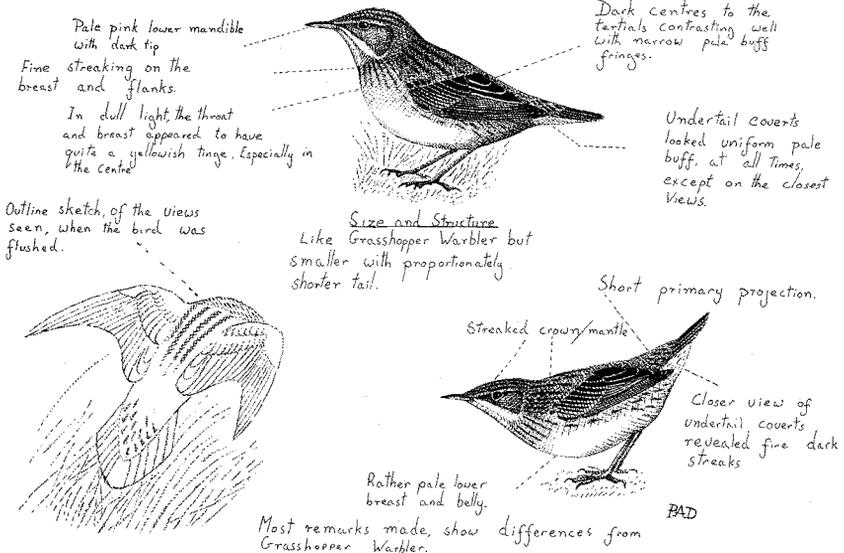


Fig. 1. Lanceolated Warbler *Locustella lanceolata*, Sumburgh Head, Shetland, 27th September 1993 (Peter A. Dennis)

was typical *Locustella* with its severely graduated tail, not to mention its mouse-like behaviour, as well as a very flat crown with virtually no forehead. Its actual structure was incredibly variable: when perched in the wall it was very compact and rather rotund, when alarmed it would stretch itself out and stick its head up giving it a much longer profile, when it was feeding on the grass it seemed for all the world like a small rodent running, even bounding, along with a typical horizontal stance. It was particularly adept at disappearing into thick clumps of grass. Although confiding given still observers, it was easily alarmed by movement and would run for 20-30 m before stopping to look around. More often than not, its normal feeding behaviour could be described as furtive and unobtrusive. Interestingly, a Grasshopper Warbler *L. naevia* seen very well in long grass a week or so later gave a profile of an *Acrocephalus* as it perched up on the grass stem with its tail cocked; by way of comparison with the Lanceolated, its tail was noticeably longer, the tertial pattern was still quite striking, but the fringes were distinctly wider and washed with grey and they formed a much less striking contrast to the rest of the closed wing. More critically, the undertail-coverts were definitely brown, not buff, and noticeably streaked.

UPPERPARTS Overall a rather rich brown tone to the plumage. Head: the face was rather plain with an indistinct yellowish supercilium from the base of the bill to just beyond the eye; the latter was dark with a fine, but quite obvious, pale eye-ring. Ear-coverts rather grey-brown, very lightly streaked darker, bordered above by a faintly darker eye-line and below by a thin rather yellowish submoustachial line with a dark malar stripe (see underparts). Bill: quite long for a Lanceolated, dark culmen, but rest of bill including cutting edge of upper mandible pale flesh-pink. Distinctly streaked crown, the

streaks forming a series of dark brown lines. At times, it revealed a greyish 'shawl' on the hindneck, but this was very dependent on neck posture and was not always obvious. The mantle was dominated by a series of bold dark tramlines, becoming less striking on the lower back. The uppertail-coverts, and to a lesser extent the rump, were boldly streaked dark brown, each feather having a dark central band on either side of the feather shaft (most striking on the longest pair of feathers), but stopping subterminally. The closed wing was rather club-shaped. The greater coverts and tertials were incredibly neat, with dark brown feather centres and thin, uniform, pale buff fringes, forming a strong contrast with the less richly coloured primaries. The primary tips fell well short of the tips of the uppertail-coverts and the exposed primary tips formed only one-third to one-half the length of the exposed tertials. The uppertail was dark brown, darker than the rest of the upperparts and markedly graduated (this was even obvious without the tail being fanned open).

UNDERPARTS Overall rather dirty greyish-white, but throat and breast strongly suffused with yellow (more obvious at certain angles and particularly in the centre of the throat and breast) and flanks, vent and undertail strongly suffused with buff. Throat and breast finely streaked dark brown, the streaking finest on throat, becoming wider and more striking on breast (the centre of throat was unstreaked and bordered by a dark malar stripe on each side and streaking below); this streaking continued along the flanks and vent, forming several lines on the flanks. Lower breast and belly was unstreaked. Undertail-coverts: two longest unstreaked (seen only at very close range), rest were unmarked except for a thin dark brown line (short-pin-shaped) in the centre of each feather.

LEGS Rather livid pink.

Identified as Lanceolated Warbler (all comparisons with Grasshopper Warbler) on small size, proportionately shorter tail, proportionately shorter primaries (only one-third to one-half length of exposed tertials, compared with nearly equal length in Grasshopper), extensive streaking on underparts, bold, and strongly contrasting, greater coverts and tertials and scarcely streaked buff undertail-coverts.

Identified as presumed first-winter on richness of plumage tones, as well as the evident freshness of the plumage and particularly the absence of apparent feather wear.

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