

From the Rarities Committee's files

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Yellow-browed Bunting in Orkney The following details were submitted to the Rarities Committee:

SPECIES Yellow-browed Bunting *Emberiza chrysophrys*

PLACE North Ronaldsay, Orkney

DATES 22nd-23rd September 1992

DURATION OF OBSERVATION approx. 1 hour

OBSERVER Peter J. Donnelly

Who first found and identified it? PJD

OTHER OBSERVERS Martin Gray, Ian Jones, K. Wilson, K. Woodbridge, A. Duncan, and about 49 others.

OPTICAL AIDS 10 × 40 BGAT Zeiss W and 20 × 60 Nikon ED

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE OF SPECIES Nil

EXPERIENCE OF SIMILAR SPECIES Reed *E. schoeniclus*, Rustic *E. rustica*, Little Bunting *E. pusilla*

RANGE down to 3 m

PRESENT FOR COMPARISON ALONGSIDE Reed Bunting, Ortolan Bunting *E. hortulana*

PHOTOGRAPHED BY Rob Wilson

WEATHER Wind NE 3, decreasing. Cloud 8 oktas. Light conditions good, up to 400 m. Visibility good. Rain just stopping.

DISCOVERY

The previous night's forecast showed a good stream of northeasterlies far into central Russia (CIS). The weather system already had provided us with 'hors d'oeuvres' in the form of eastern migrants, and there was an air of expectancy on the morning of 22nd September. The dark clouds and heavy rain that hung over the island that day did their best to prevent even the most determined birder from going out. At about 15.00 GMT I had just about given up the chance of getting some birding done, when I noticed a bedraggled Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* sitting on a sheltered window sill. Thoughts immediately came to mind of wading through flocks of windswept migrants. I wasted no more time and shot out.

The skies were heavy and black, but the rain soon slowed down to a fine drizzle. I headed around the back of the house towards Antabreck. The idea that I might find vast numbers of migrants was soon knocked on the head when after about 15 minutes I had nothing other than two Song Thrushes *Turdus philomelos*. I decided to persevere, heading towards Antabreck's 'tattie patch' roughly central to the island. I thrashed the oatfield just to the west of the 'tattie patch' with little to show, then at about 15.30 I went into the west-end of the 'tattie patch'.

As I walked slowly along the drills, there seemed to be a good concentration of Skylarks *Alauda arvensis* and Reed Buntings which flew off ahead of me. I walked farther in when a small bunting with white outer tail feathers flew on to some barbed wire some 5 m away, arousing my suspicions.

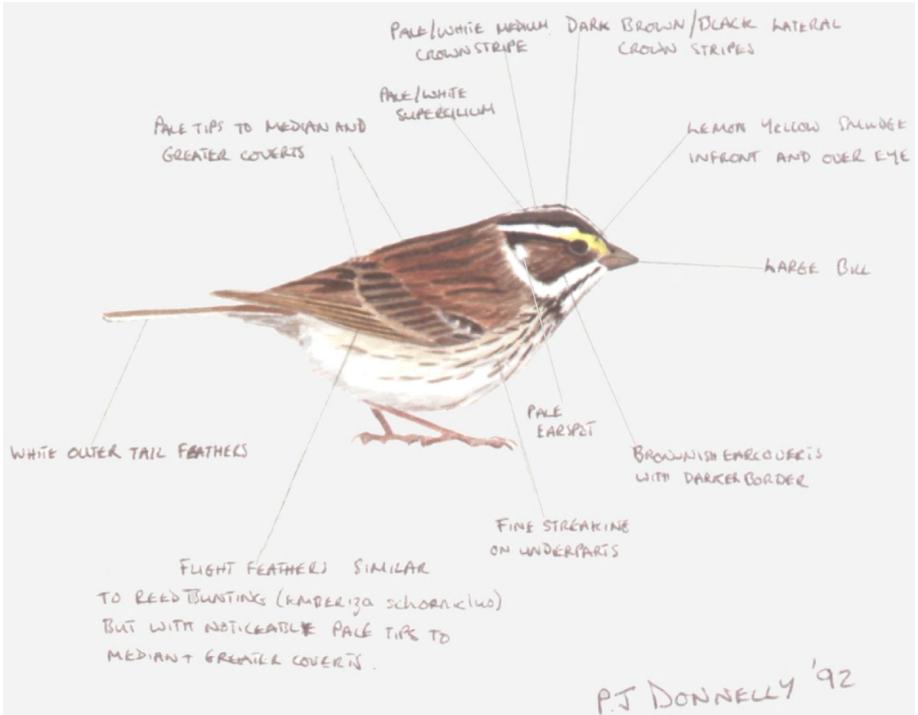


Fig. 1. Yellow-browed Bunting *Emberiza chrysophrys*, North Ronaldsay, Orkney, September 1992 (Peter J. Donnelly)

I checked through my bins to find to my amazement an *Emberiza*-type bunting with a striking black-and-white head pattern and a smudge of bright lemon-yellow in front of and over the eye. I knew instantly that it was a Yellow-browed Bunting *E. chrysophrys*, the third for Britain! I just stood and watched it perched on the fence as though I had looked Medusa in the eyes. I felt the blood slowly run out of my body and my legs turn to jelly: this Eastern gem was perhaps the most sought-after of all the buntings on the British List and I knew why.

I regained my composure and slowly backed off, keeping my eye on the bird all the time. I knew I could contact Martin Gray and the Bird Observatory at North Manse, the nearest house some 200 m away. Leaving the bird still on the fence, I bolted across to North Manse: Linford Christie eat your heart out!

Fortunately, Martin was in and, after overcoming the initial shock of what I was trying to tell him, he was out of the house doing a good impression of a shire-horse at the gallop (and I thought I could run!). When we arrived at the 'tattie patch', I was amazed to see the bird still on the fence and, after an anxious few seconds pointing it out, MG finally saw it. Unfortunately, no sooner had he got his bins on it than it flew some 500 m away. I turned and looked at MG's panic-stricken face. He said that he had no idea what that

was, but that he had never seen one before; but, owing to the brevity of his view, he was unable to detect any yellow on its supercilium.

We both headed off to relocate it when the bird-observatory crews arrived with tripods and arms hanging out of the cars. We searched the immediate area, but were unable to relocate it. After a frantic search and a barrage of questions, Ian Jones shouted out with a cry of delight that he saw the bird heading back to the 'tattie patch'. We all carefully made our way there, and, after patiently waiting, the bird appeared briefly to everybody's delight. Everybody managed to get identifiable views, although not wholly satisfactory, but, with the diminishing light, we decided to wait until the next morning.

We put the word out as soon as possible and decided to meet at first light to relocate the bird. The next morning the bunting gave better views, but never for any length of time, and fortunately remained faithful to the 'tattie patch' for those lucky enough to get to North Ronaldsay that day. An additional bonus of a Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella certhiola* ensured a vast interest, but, unfortunately, the Yellow-browed Bunting was last seen flying south that evening and, although an extensive search was made, it was never relocated.

DESCRIPTION

Initial appearance

Slightly smaller than Reed Bunting, but more bulky, like Rustic Bunting. White outer tail feathers ruling out American sparrows. With the advances of modern field guides, identification obvious.



Fig. 2. Yellow-browed Bunting *Emberiza chrysophrys*, North Ronaldsay, Orkney, September 1992
(Kester Wilson)

Head

Very striking black lateral crown-stripes. White median crown-stripe not obvious at first. Broad white supercilium with bright lemon-yellow in front of and over the eye; interestingly, this feature was in fact difficult for a lot of people to see. Ear-coverts dark brown with pale ear-spot not easy to see. Black eye-stripe and dark brown/black moustachial stripe giving darker border to ear-coverts. White/pale submoustachial stripe running around ear-coverts. Dark malar stripe running to distinct malar patch. Pale/white throat.

Upperparts

Chestnut upperparts with dark centres on mantle, chestnut not as bright as on Reed Bunting. Tertiaries same colour, with dark 'thumb mark'. Greater coverts: dark centres with chestnut edgings and pale tips. Median coverts: dark centres with pale tips. Median coverts' tips paler than greater coverts' tips. Whole impression giving two faint wing-bars, unlike Reed Bunting. Lesser coverts not seen. White outer tail feathers.

Underparts

Pale white underparts with dark brown/black streaking. Black malar stripe with black malar patch. Streaking fine on breast, becoming bolder on flanks, and some slight buffish wash on flanks.

Bare parts

Large bill pale, with darker culmen. Pale legs horn colour.

A very approachable bird down to a few metres then flying off a short distance. Difficult to find in the stubble owing to its habit of crouching close to the ground. At first when flushed would alight nearby and stay for some time. Very loyal to the area in which it was found. I can't be certain, but at least two of us heard a call slightly higher-pitched than the 'tic' of a Little Bunting. By all accounts, a brighter and better-marked individual than the Fair Isle bird of October 1980 (*Brit. Birds* 75: 530).

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Peter Lansdown (Chairman, British Birds Rarities Committee) has commented as follows: 'Only high-quality rarity-record submissions are chosen for this series, and Peter Donnelly's Yellow-browed Bunting record is no exception. The submission included not only the details which are requested on the front of the Rarities Committee's Record Form, and a full description of the bird, but also some splendid paintings. Furthermore, Yellow-browed Bunting is an extreme rarity. More even than that, however, was provided by Peter's account of his discovery of the bird. His evocative narrative starts with the doom-and-gloom that every hopeful migrant-watcher has experienced, but all of this is blown away as the bird is found. After that, the excitement bursts through and it was refreshing for Rarities Committee members to encounter so much pure enjoyment in a record submission.' EDS