

The Carl Zeiss Award 2003



The photographs which BBRC receives as supporting evidence for written accounts of rarities are an important, often critical, source of information; frequently, they make the task of record assessment both more enjoyable and, importantly, easier. In recognition of the significance of photographs and the photographers who take them, Carl Zeiss Ltd, the sponsors of BBRC, presents each year a pair of Carl Zeiss binoculars to the photographer judged to have taken the most instructive photograph or set of photographs. For this award we do not necessarily look for photographic excellence, but make our decision based on whether the photographs either show a key identification feature which is rarely seen (as in the winning suite of photographs of a female Collared Flycatcher *Ficedula albicollis* in 1999:

Brit. Birds 94: 536) or have a crucial influence upon the decision made by BBRC. One of the more challenging tasks of the Committee in 2002 was to develop criteria for the assessment of field records of Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum* and our initial short list contained series of photographs of three individuals of this species. There were also photographs of two Greenish *Phylloscopus trochiloides* and one Arctic Warbler *P. borealis*, two Oriental Turtle Doves *Streptopelia orientalis*, and one of a Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica* which permitted the bird to be assigned to the western race *hispanica*. Over the course of the evening, and several bottles of wine, the judges whittled down this initial selection to a short list of six entries, listed below in Voous order.

Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus*
Oriental Turtle Dove *Streptopelia orientalis*
Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia*
Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum*
Blyth's Reed Warbler *A. dumetorum*
Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides*

Richard & Rob Fray
Dick Hewitt
Robin Harvey
Andy Middleton
Nick Lowton/Bryan Thomas
Russell Wynn

The images of the Long-billed Dowitcher on Foula, Shetland, in September 2002, taken by Richard and Rob Fray are particularly interesting, as they show a richly coloured individual which might possibly, under some circumstances, have been mistaken for a Short-billed Dowitcher *L. griseus* (plates 382 & 382).

The series of excellent photographs of the Thrush Nightingale on the Farne Islands, Northumberland, in May 2002, by Robin Harvey demonstrates just how the breast pattern of this species can change with variations in light. It also enables a critical examination of the closed wing, and of the colour contrast between the tail/rump and the mantle,

which are also important fieldmarks when ruling out Rufous Nightingale *L. megarhynchos* (plates 384 & 385).

The Greenish Warbler which was found onboard the R. V. *Kommander Jack*, northeast of Shetland in August 2002, had been mooted as a potential 'Green Warbler' *P. t. nitidus*, but, after studying the detailed photos taken by the finder, Russell Wynn, it became clear that the enriched plumage colour apparent in some images was caused by changes in the background (plates 386 & 387).

Good contenders though all these three were, our third short list in the course of a long evening contained the remaining three sets of



Richard Hewitt

376 & 377. Joint winner of **The Carl Zeiss Award 2003:** Juvenile/first-winter Oriental Turtle Dove *Streptopelia orientalis*, Portmahomack, Easter Ross, Highland, November 2002.



Richard Hewitt

photos, including two of different Blyth's Reed Warblers. The images in an excellent series of the Scilly bird from two photographers, Nick Lowton and Bryan Thomas, were clear enough to allow us to analyse the wing formula, as well as demonstrating the effect of light on the apparent coloration of the bird (plates 380 & 381). Deciding the eventual winner of this year's competition was perhaps as difficult as any we have judged, but this last entry was not selected as the overall winner because it was clear that this bird had been seen so well that the identification would probably have been clinched without photos anyway. That was not so for the remaining two birds. The discovery of each of these provides an amazing story, topped by the photographs.

In early October 2001, an unstreaked *Acrocephalus* was discovered at Canary Wharf, in the Docklands area of Greater London. Andy Mid-

dleton and Ken Murray were fairly certain that it was a Blyth's Reed Warbler and Andy took extensive video footage of the bird (plates 378 & 379). Unfortunately, coming just after the 11th September terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York, and because Canary Wharf itself had already been mooted as a potential target for a terrorist attack, they were not allowed to release the news. The grabs from the video confirm that they had indeed found a Blyth's Reed Warbler.

On 9th November 2002, Dick Hewitt was driving along a country road in Easter Ross, on a goose count, when he noticed a dove feeding at the roadside. He thought initially that it was a juvenile Turtle Dove *S. turtur*, in itself a rare bird in this part of the world, particularly so late in the year, but he noticed that it looked large and dark. He grabbed his camera, fortunately handily placed on the seat beside him,



Andy Middleton

378 & 379. Joint winner of **The Carl Zeiss Award 2003:** Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum*, Canary Wharf, Greater London, October 2001 (from video footage).



Andy Middleton



Bryan Thomas/Nick Lowton



Nick Lowton

380 & 381. First-winter Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum*, St Mary's, Scilly, October–November 2002. We have chosen these two photographs to demonstrate the variation in both apparent colour with different lighting conditions, and shape with posture. The following features can, however, be seen on both photographs: the uniform wing with, in particular, little contrast in the tertials; the short primary projection; and the parallel supercilium extending to just behind the eye. There is a trace of warmth (perhaps a hint of rufous-brown) on both the rump and the edges of the remiges. This is quite compatible with the identification and, in fact, this warmth contrasting with a lack of such tones anywhere else on the plumage may actually be a positive feature.

and managed to take one photograph before the bird flew off, never to be seen again. At the time, although he thought it might have been an Oriental Turtle Dove, he assumed that he had little hope of confirming the record: he had watched the bird for a total of about 90 seconds! Fortunately, the photograph was to prove otherwise and shows an undoubted Oriental Turtle Dove, probably of the race *meena* (plates 376 & 377).

In both these cases, it is unlikely that the records would have been accepted without the photographic support, in the first case because of the inherent unlikelihood of the record, and in the second because the observer simply did not manage to record sufficient detail to confirm such a rare bird. We were unable to separate these two, and have decided to award them both joint winners of the first prize.

In recognition of the difficulties which the

judges had this year in separating the two winners, Carl Zeiss Ltd have generously provided two prizes from their brand new range of 'Conquest' binoculars, which were launched at the British Birdwatching Fair in August 2003. The four new Conquest models are in the 'mid-price' range of optics, although there seems to have been no compromise on features and technical properties. They are undoubtedly well made and appear to be robust, being nitrogen-filled, and thus waterproof, and fitted with easy-grip rubber



Richard Fray



Rob Fray

382 & 383. Juvenile Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus*, Foula, Shetland, September 2002.



Robin Harvey



Robin Harvey

384 & 385. Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia*, Farnes Islands, Northumberland, May 2002.

armouring. With ZEISS T* multicoating on the lenses, the image is clear and bright, and the binoculars feature high-eyepoint eyepieces and push-pull eyecups. The most remarkable thing about them, however, is their light weight. They are among the lightest quality binoculars available, with the 8 × 30 BT* weighing a mere 495 g, and the 10 × 30 just 510 g. If ever you wanted a pair of binoculars to hang round your neck comfortably for a

whole day in the field, these could be the ones. Zeiss have agreed that this year's winners can each choose between the 8 × 30 and the 10 × 30 models; the range also comprises 12 × 45 and 15 × 45 models.

Acknowledgments

Grateful thanks are due to Harry Scott for allowing us to use the sharpened digital version of Dick Hewitt's Oriental Turtle Dove transparency.



Russell Wynn




Russell Wynn

386 & 387. Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides*, sea area Fair Isle, 61°55'N 01°10'E, 110 km NE of Shetland, August 2002.

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 The British Birds Rarities Committee is sponsored by Carl Zeiss Ltd