



# The Carl Zeiss Award 2011

The Carl Zeiss Award, established in 1991, is awarded for a photograph, or set of photographs, judged to have been most instructive for the BBRC's assessment of difficult species (or subspecies) during the previous year. Following the successful format established last year, a shortlist of the more instructive photographs submitted was prepared and the voting members of BBRC (rather than a selected panel) used a points system to choose the winners of the award. The shortlist included several particularly informative images of challenging and difficult species, together with those that provided categorical proof in support of a record that otherwise might not have been accepted.

It is interesting to note that half the images within the top six are of birds still subject to acceptance by the Committee. Although some may say this is evidence that BBRC takes too long to come to their decisions, it is undoubtedly the case that the species and subspecies concerned all represent extremely difficult identifications, and the photographs illustrate poorly known plumages. We welcome such challenges, since they promote research that allows us to broaden our existing knowledge. The inclusion of several birds still to be accepted among the shortlisted images confirms the importance of photographic evidence when

evaluating such claims and in informing decisions of where the boundaries of acceptability lie. This is a key area of BBRC's work and the recognition of these photographs is entirely justified.

A total of 17 images were considered by the judging panel to have been particularly instructive and these comprised our shortlist. From these, photographs of Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* in Suffolk, Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus* in Norfolk, Semipalmated Sandpiper *Calidris pusilla* in Cumbria, Brown-headed Cowbird *Molothrus ater* in Co. Durham, Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus* in Cornwall and Eastern Olivaceous Warbler *Hippolais pallida* in Shetland were highly commended and particularly useful in establishing the identification.

A series of images of two birds were tied in fifth place: those by James Grecian of a Fea's-type petrel *Pterodroma madeira/feae* photographed at sea near Grassholm, Pembrokeshire, in July; and those by Adam Hutt of a putative first-winter female Collared Flycatcher *Ficedula albicollis* at Spurn, Yorkshire, in late August. The story behind James Grecian's photographs emphasises just why the images were so valuable. BBRC member Steve Votier found the bird while travelling on a jetboat to Grassholm, to carry out research at the Northern Gannet *Morus*



James Grecian

256. Carl Zeiss Award 2011, equal fifth: Fea's-type petrel *Pterodroma madeira/feae*, at sea near Grassholm, Pembrokeshire, July 2010.

*bassanus* colony there with a party of post-graduate students. Because of the sea state, all the optics and cameras were packed away, so the bird was observed only with the naked eye. After several minutes Steve realised that James, his PhD student, had his digital point-and-shoot camera in his pocket, and James managed to take a series of images by hanging onto the fast-moving boat with one hand and taking the pictures with his other. Although the images may not be visually perfect, they formed an important component of the documentation of the record. Adam Hutt's in-the-hand images of a putative Collared Flycatcher at Spurn provided a valuable reference set for an extremely challenging identification. The photos illustrate known identification characters, but even so the separation of this species from Pied Flycatcher *F. hypoleuca* is fraught with difficulty.

Confirmation of the identification may yet be clarified by genetic analysis, which is still ongoing. If the bird does prove to be acceptable as a Collared Flycatcher, the images will help us to appreciate what this species *might* look like in the autumn.

Readers who are familiar with BBRC member Martin Garner's blog *Birding Frontiers* ([www.birdingfrontiers.com](http://www.birdingfrontiers.com)) will already be aware of the Spurn flycatcher, and will also know of our fourth-placed entry. Martin took these images of a Great Grey Shrike



Adam Hutt

257. Carl Zeiss Award 2011, equal fifth: Putative first-winter female Collared Flycatcher *Ficedula albicollis*, Spurn, Yorkshire, August 2010.



Martin Garner

258. Carl Zeiss Award 2011, fourth: Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*, perhaps *L. e. homeyeri*, Blacka Moor, Hathersage, Yorkshire, November 2010.

*Lanius excubitor*, which appeared to show features associated with the subspecies *L. e. homeyeri*, in Yorkshire in early November. This record is in its early stages of assessment and it is too soon to say whether it will prove to be acceptable to BBRC and BOURC. But the images are truly representative of the spirit of the competition, supporting a case for consideration by the Committee and a springboard for us to question our knowledge of the identification of the taxon concerned. As with the images of the Fea's-type

Steve Arlow



Steve Arlow

**259 & 260.** Carl Zeiss Award 2011, third: Putative adult Thayer's Gull *Larus (glaucoides) thayeri*, Pitsea landfill, Essex, November 2010.

petrel, they confirm that this competition is not about high-quality photographic images, but those that assist the Committee most in the assessment process.

Steve Arlow's name will be familiar to those who study gulls on rubbish dumps, and gull images on the internet. His series of images of a putative Thayer's Gull *Larus (glaucoides) thayeri* at the Pitsea landfill site in Essex in November reinforce the value of a camera when confronted with such a potentially challenging identification. This bird was observed for only a matter of minutes, but during that time Steve captured sufficient detail to make a strong case for the identification. This included a photograph of the

spread wing showing the all-important primary pattern, which is a prerequisite for acceptance. As this taxon is not yet on the British List, the level of detail must satisfy both BBRC and BOURC – and this is another record still under consideration at the time of writing.

This year's second-placed entry is one of those records that could so easily have got away. In the past, BBRC has received many claims of rare birds in gardens but these are typically supported by only rudimentary details, making it impossible to accept the record. Most lack sufficient documentation, several involve cases of mistaken identity, and, in one case, we were able to establish

that the record was faked. In this case, however, Ian Reynolds' photographs of a stunning male Dusky Thrush *Turdus eunomus* in his front garden in Leigh, Greater Manchester, leave no room for doubt. The story behind Ian's discovery has already been told elsewhere (*Birdwatch* 225: 55, March 2011). It is unfortunate that there was no opportunity for this stunning bird to be enjoyed more widely. The last long-staying and accessible Dusky Thrush was at Hartlepool, Cleveland, in 1959, so very few of today's birders will have seen this species in Britain; let's hope we don't have to wait another 50 years for the next one.

Ian Reynolds



**261.** Carl Zeiss Award 2011, second: Male Dusky Thrush *Turdus eunomus*, Leigh, Greater Manchester, December 2010.



Adrian Kettle

Adrian Kettle

**262 & 263.** Carl Zeiss Award 2011, winner: Juvenile Baikal Teal *Anas formosa*, Essex, October 2010.

Maintaining the theme of birds that were unavailable to the wider birding community, this year's winner by a clear margin was Adrian Kettle's series of images of a juvenile Baikal Teal *Anas formosa* in Essex in October. This bird was discovered during a bird race by bicycle and was only on view for an hour before it took flight and was never relocated. Each of the observers submitted detailed descriptions and copies of field sketches, which helped the Committee's deliberations greatly, but it was Adrian's images that provided significant additional detail and secured the identification, ruling out the pitfall of hybrids and lookalikes. He will be presented with

a pair of 8x32 Zeiss FL binoculars at the Birdfair on Friday 19th August 2011.

**Acknowledgments**

The Committee remains grateful to all those observers who submit their photographs for consideration or who post images on websites (especially BirdGuides [www.birdguides.com](http://www.birdguides.com) and Rare Bird Alert [www.rarebirdalert.co.uk](http://www.rarebirdalert.co.uk)), in so doing helping the Committee to assess records. These images continue to improve our collective knowledge of rarity identification. Chris Batty and Nigel Hudson compiled the initial shortlist of images to be considered, while Chris Batty, Chris Bradshaw, Paul French, Martin Garner, Nic Hallam, James Lidster, Mike Pennington, Richard Schofield and Steve Votier cast the votes. We are extremely grateful to Carl Zeiss for their continued support of the Committee and this award.

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**BBRC**

British Birds Rarities Committee



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