



The Carl Zeiss Award 2013

The Carl Zeiss Award (CZA) was created in December 1991 (*Brit. Birds* 84: 589), when it was announced that: ‘Carl Zeiss–Germany, sponsor of the Rarities Committee, is offering an annual prize of Carl Zeiss 10×40 B/GAT Dialyt or 7×42 B/GAT binoculars to the photographer who supplies “the most helpful, interesting and instructive” photograph of a rarity, taken in the field in Britain... The winning photograph may be big, bright, sharp and beautiful, or be small, dull, fuzzy and admired only by the Committee, but it will have included details which helped to clinch the identification of the bird in question and it may well have added to ornithological knowledge of the species’ identification, ageing or sexing criteria.’ The aim of the award was to encourage the submission of potentially useful photographs for the purpose of record assessment, subsequent reference material and possible publication. The competition has continued ever since, with a short hiatus during 2006 and 2007 and a special competition to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the BBRC in 2008.

Before digital images came along, the voting procedure of the CZA often involved the review of a batch of prints over a glass of wine with the *BB* Editor or BBRC Chairman. Nowadays, like almost all of the Committee’s business, the process is fully electronic. An initial shortlist is selected by one or more voting members, the necessary material compiled by the Secretary and then all (or at least most) of the voting members select their top

five images. Whilst the social aspect of the decision process may have disappeared, it is not clear whether alcohol still plays a part...

We discussed the parameters and reasons for selection and award at the 2013 BBRC AGM. Candidate images are those judged to have been the most instructive in the record-assessment process during the previous year. There was a concern that the winning image in several recent years had involved a photographer who had not been aware of the significance of the photograph when the image was taken. We agreed, however, that this should not be an issue if the image met the criteria for being instructive to the Committee. There was some discussion regarding other potential categories such as the best written description, best sketch, etc., and it was agreed that it would be useful to publish these in *BB* or on the BBRC website, but concluded that the CZA would retain its focus on photographic images.

The shortlisted images in 2013 continued the high standards of recent years, particu-



Paul Sullivan

291. Fifth Female Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe h. hispanica*, Frampton Marsh RSPB reserve, Lincolnshire, 12th June 2012.



Rob Fray

292. Fourth Chestnut-eared Bunting *Emberiza fucata*, Virkie, Shetland, 23rd October 2012.

larly in terms of the rarity of the bird in question. Some of the records concerned are still being assessed at the time of writing and will be subject to acceptance by BBRC (and in some cases BOURC). As well as the top five, described in more detail below, other images that received support from some voters in the provisional selection are as follows (listed according to alphabetical order of the photographers): Martin Cade's

images of a Siberian Stonechat *Saxicola maurus* in Dorset, in combination with DNA analysis of a discarded feather, attributed this bird to the form *S. m. stejnegeri* and may help with the development of plumage criteria to support the genetic data, which suggests that *stejnegeri* is distinct from nominate *maurus* (the photos also helped to establish that the same individual had previously spent time in the Netherlands, giving an insight into the movements of such vagrants); Gavin Chambers's photograph of an amazingly brightly coloured stint (potentially a Semipalmated

Sandpiper *Calidris pusilla*) in Dumfries and Galloway, a record that members felt would certainly not have been acceptable without supporting photos; Brian Clasper's images of an Orphean Warbler *Sylvia hortensis* in Cleveland, which were considered invaluable in allowing this individual to be assigned to the nominate (western) race; Nick Littlewood's photograph of a Black Scoter *Melanitta americana* in North-east Scotland



Jon Irvine

293. Third Eleonora's Falcon *Falco eleonora*, Porthgwarra, Cornwall, 11th August 2012 (the inset shows an enlarged image of the bird).

(it is a significant achievement to get a photograph of this species in UK waters, and this is the first time a first-summer bird had been identified); and Steve Young's images of a putative Western Sandpiper *C. mauri* in Cheshire & Wirral, which were considered the best photographs of this bird. This last bird caused great debate and the record remains under review. Whatever the conclusion of the assessment of the two problem stints in this list, we shall undoubtedly learn more about their variability and identification in the process.

And so to the final shortlist. Fifth place in 2013 was awarded to Paul Sullivan for his shots of a female Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica* from Frampton Marsh RSPB reserve in Lincolnshire. Although the bird was identified after the event, the images were good enough not only to confirm the identification, but also to assign the bird to the nominate (western) race, not an easy task with female vagrants in many cases.

In fourth place was the Chestnut-eared Bunting *Emberiza fucata* at Virkie, Shetland, photographed by Rob Fray. The story of this bird, like many in this year's competition, shows how the value of online communication has become so important and supportive in assisting with the identification of vagrants.

There was a real battle between the top three images this year, with each of the three receiving much support from voters. Third place was awarded to Jon Irvine for his photographs of an Eleonora's Falcon *Falco eleonora* at Porthgwarra, Cornwall. The bird was quite distant so the shots were relatively poor quality, but were nonetheless sufficient to clinch the identification of a species that has a poor track record in terms of its acceptance rate with BBRC. The images were also sufficient to dispel doubts that arose subsequently over the record's veracity.

A worthy winner in many years would have been Pete Saunders's images of a Pale-legged Leaf *Phylloscopus tenellipes* or Sakhalin Leaf Warbler

P. borealoides at Portland, Dorset. This bird provided another example where the photographs were instrumental in establishing the identification, at least as one of this difficult species pair. The likelihood of vagrancy by either species may have seemed somewhat fanciful only a decade or two ago, before it became clear that the Baikal watershed is not an insurmountable barrier after all. This record involved some first-class field observers and their initial conclusions about the identification of this bird (that it was either an Eastern Crowned *P. coronatus* or an Arctic Warbler *P. borealis*) were entirely understandable in the circumstances. It was only upon close examination of the images that the bird's true identity was revealed. The photos, whilst tantalising in representing a rarity that departed before its enormity was fully appreciated, are a salutary lesson for both seekers and assessors of rarities to broaden their horizons and consider species (and cryptic species-pairs) that hitherto were thought to be well and truly off the radar.

Edging just ahead of the competition were this year's winning images, taken by Tom Lowe, of a Thayer's Gull *Larus (glaucoides) thayeri* at Elsham, Lincolnshire. Although subsequent images by other observers provided better quality and more insight, it was felt that Tom's original shots were the catalyst that generated the interest around this instructive bird. There was widespread



Pete Saunders

294. Second Pale-legged Leaf *Phylloscopus tenellipes* or Sakhalin Leaf Warbler *P. borealoides*, Portland, Dorset, 22nd October 2012.

Tom Lowe



295. Carl Zeiss Award 2013, winner Juvenile Thayer's Gull *Larus (glaucoides) thayeri*, Elsham, Lincolnshire, 3rd April 2012.

comment that photographic images are essential for the assessment of claims of Thayer's Gull. Note that the submissions for both the Lincolnshire Thayer's Gull and the Dorset Pale-legged Leaf/Sakhalin Leaf Warbler remain under consideration at the time of writing, so in both cases the bird's identity is only provisional at this stage.

Tom Lowe is thus the 21st recipient of the CZA (the award was shared in 2003) and will be presented with a pair of Zeiss 8x42 Conquest HD binoculars in the Events Marquee at the British Birdwatching Fair, at Rutland Water, at 3.30 pm on Friday 16th August. A selection of previous winning images

can be viewed on the BBRC website (www.bbrc.org.uk), along with links to the previous competition write-ups in *BB*.

Acknowledgments

BBRC is grateful to all those observers who submit their photographs for consideration, either directly to the Committee or via our arrangement with websites (BirdGuides www.birdguides.com and Rare Bird Alert www.rarebirdalert.co.uk). It is always a pleasure to review the images, although one voter described the decision process for selecting a winner as more difficult than determining the identification this year! Chris Batty and Nigel Hudson were again instrumental in pulling together the shortlisted images and this year all voting members selected their top five. 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



BBRC is sponsored by Carl Zeiss Ltd and the RSPB

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