The Carl Zeiss Award 2016

Formerly awarded for the most instructive photograph, or series of photographs, supporting a rarity submission, the Carl Zeiss Award is now awarded for *the best overall submission* for which assessment has been completed during the previous 12 months. This year, 25 years after the inception of the award (*Brit. Birds* 84: 589), it is a pleasure to report that the overall quality of submissions has increased noticeably on those in previous years, although whether this is a direct reflection on the recent change in emphasis of the award is impossible to say. The very nature of bird identification and record submission means that this award will tend to be given to finders of birds that are particularly difficult to identify, but that generalisation doesn't always hold true. Last year, Mark Warren's third-placed submission of a Eurasian Scops Owl *Otus scops* trapped at North Ronaldsay Bird Observatory was proof that a relatively straightforward identification can still lead down an interesting path (*Brit. Birds* 108: 540–544).

Each and every record submitted to BBRC is automatically entered for the CZA, and the shortlist is compiled through the year by BBRC members, who nominate various submissions as and when they are assessed. The voting process is 'blind', with all BBRC voting members reviewing that shortlist and giving each of the contenders a score from zero to five, without knowing the marks given by their colleagues. The scores are then simply tallied to give an overall winner.

The shortlist for 2016 comprised nine submissions. The top four are described and illustrated in more detail below but first, and in no particular order, the five highly commended record submissions that just missed out on a podium finish were as follows:

Mark Darlaston and Mike Langman put together an excellent account of a Yelkouan Shearwater *Puffinus yelkouan* seen off Berry Head, Devon, on 29th July 2008. A great deal of background research went into their submission, which took a long time to make its way past both BBRC and BOURC, but earlier this year the effort involved was rewarded when that bird became the 600th species on the British List. A paper on this record appears on pp. 448–456 of this issue.

The record submission of a putative 'Steppe Buzzard' *Buteo buteo vulpinus* at Tunstall Forest, Suffolk, from 5th June to 30th August 2011, by M. T. and K. J. Cartwright was such a mammoth effort that it featured a contents page, as well as a series of photographs, a table and correspondence from one of Europe's most revered raptor specialists, Dick Forsman. The claim was ultimately found not proven, but it added greatly to BBRC's knowledge of what is required for an acceptable record of *vulpinus* in Britain.

Bob Flood's account of a Fea's Petrel *Pterodroma feae* off Scilly on 16th August 2015 was hugely evocative and superbly illustrated. It would surely have featured even higher on this year's shortlist had it been possible to allocate the bird to one of the two forms currently treated as subspecies of Fea's by BOU – nominate *feae* or 'Desertas Petrel' *P. f. deserta*.

The record submission by Ian Roberts of a Chinese Pond Heron *Ardeola bacchus* at Saltwood in Kent, in February–March 2014, contained impressive efforts to ascertain the bird's likely origin as well as a detailed account of the difficult and somewhat protracted identification.

Finally, the report of a Chestnut Bunting *Emberiza rutila* on Papa Westray, Orkney, in October 2015 by Julian Branscombe and Michael Schott featured a very honest account of their discovery and the subsequent identification process as well as an excellent series of images.

And so to this year's top selection. In fourth place was James McCallum's submission of a Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii* at Stiffkey, Norfolk, on 2nd October 2015. James's account described the difficult and protracted field identification of what is one of the hardest vagrant passerines to nail in

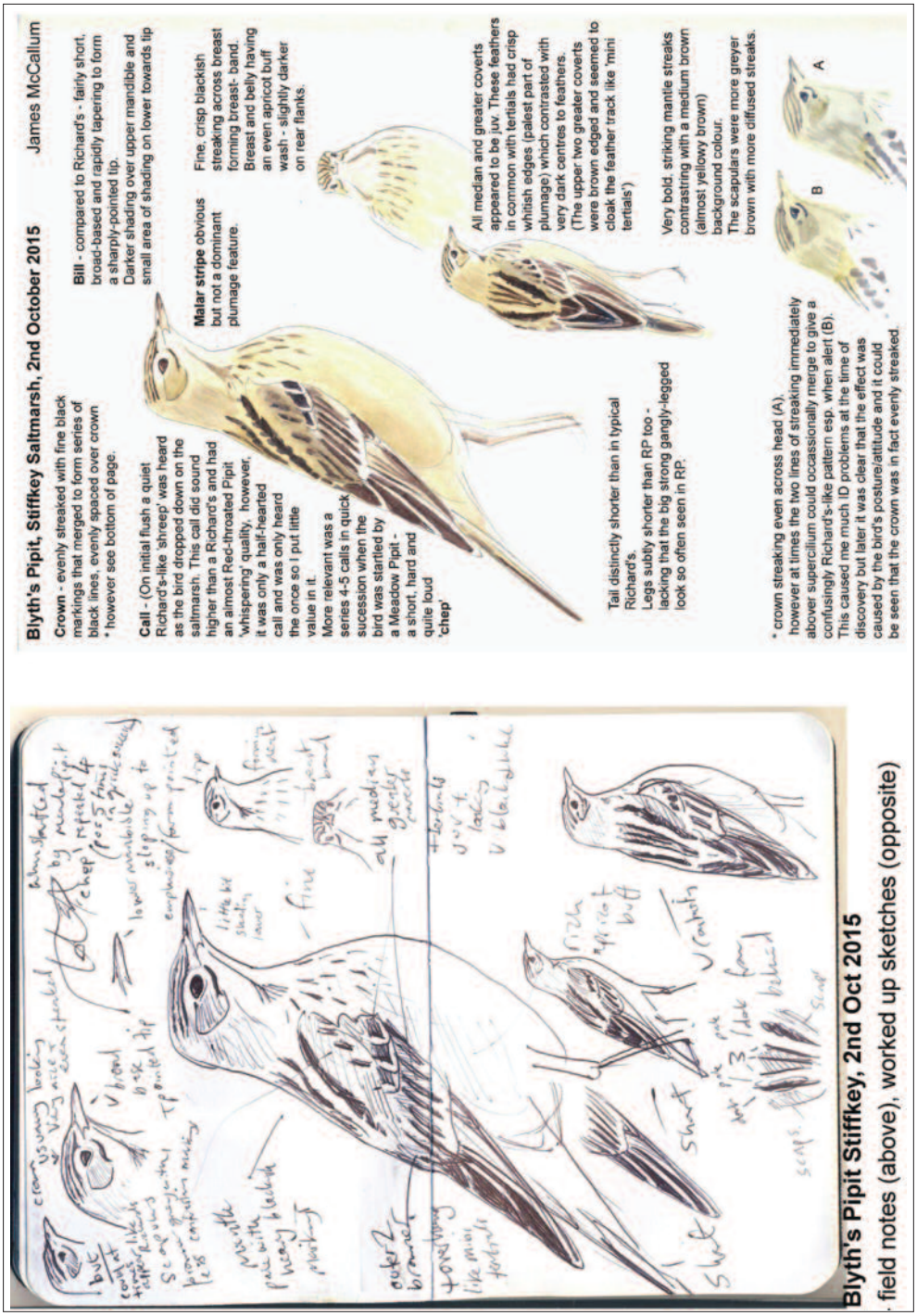
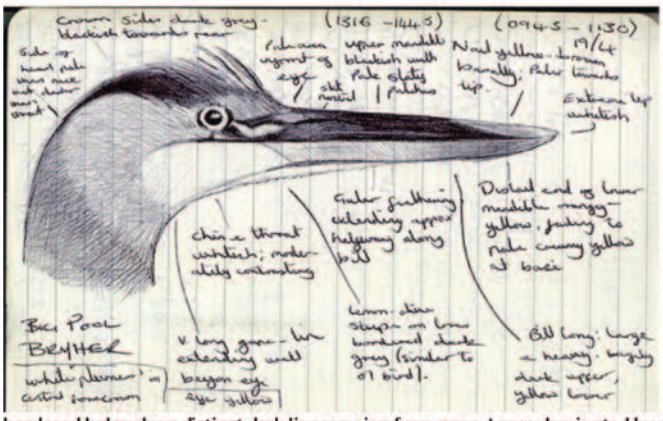


Fig. 1. Extract from James McCallum's record submission of a Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii* at Stiffkey, Norfolk, 2nd October 2015.



② Original field sketch, Bryher 19/04/2015.

Head: Forehead mid-dark grey. Feathers of forehead /forecrown occasionally held erect, creating ragged crest. Crown off-white centrally; blackish-grey' laterally – sides appearing darker towards rear forming distinct cap (cap usually paler in 1W *cinerea*). Head plumes blackish and relatively short, tapering to a moderate point on nape. An ill-defined greyish-white area was apparent in front of the eye. Ear coverts pale grey, bordered below by a distinct dark line running from gape. Lores dominated by a narrow, diamond-shaped area of pale yellowish-green skin, framed above and below in dark grey – very similar to the 07 bird. Chin, throat and area below ear-coverts off-white, moderately contrasting with remainder of head.

Figs. 2 & 3. Extracts from Ashley Fisher's record submission of a Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias* on St Mary's, Scilly, in April–May 2015.

Britain. Features that were thought to be anomalous were investigated and chased up in the field before the correct identification was finally made, and the field sketches were worked up into finished paintings, crucially showing the 'paper trail' of how the identification process played out (fig. 1).

In a tie for second place were the Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias* on St Mary's, Scilly, in April–May 2015 and a Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla* at Beachy Head, Sussex, on 27th October 2015. The Great Blue Heron was a second-calendar-year bird that was, remarkably, found in the same place and by the same observer as Britain's first, in December 2007. Ashley Fisher's account of the circumstances was followed by a detailed critique of the bird's appearance and a series of clear and informative images that showed all of the requisite features (figs. 2 & 3). Great Blue Heron remains a big call on this side of the Atlantic and there have been a couple of particularly difficult variant Grey Herons *A. cinerea* to test the mettle of observers in recent years. Ashley's description clearly ruled out that possibility and his efforts have provided an invaluable addition to the BBRC archives of this species.

Meanwhile, in Sussex, John, Doreen and David Cooper's description of a Short-toed Treecreeper tested the Committee's knowledge of the intricate wing formula and features of this extremely subtle species. Thankfully, John had laid out all the evidence in an admirably clear and methodical way with an excellent series of close-up and annotated photographs (figs. 4 & 5) accompanied by reference to published papers and articles, as well as other records of Short-toed Treecreeper in Britain and Sweden. The plumage and wing details were not, by themselves, completely diagnostic, but the call was noted on a couple of occasions and the Committee was confident the correct identification had been reached.

This year's (clear) winner was as much an account of an outstanding and unexpected ornithological event as a detailed critique of the identification of not one, but nine birds. Edward Hunter's record submission of a pair of Iberian Chiffchaffs *Phylloscopus ibericus* successfully breeding and producing two broods in Gower represents a new departure for this award, and an event that we do not expect to be repeated any time soon! This record was also reported to the Rare Breeding Birds Panel and constitutes the first confirmed breeding of Iberian Chiffchaff in the UK. Ed put in an estimated 60–70 hours of observation over a six-week period in the spring of 2015 and managed to establish beyond doubt that not only was there a singing male Iberian Chiffchaff at the site, but that it had managed to attract a mate that was also giving the distinctive down-slurred 'seuuu' call. The pair successfully reared not one but two broods, totalling at least seven fledged offspring. Details of the young

sighting. Tertials dull blue-grey, narrowly fringed/tipped a paler greyish-white. Primaries and secondaries blackish-grey.

Underwing: Seen very well on numerous occasions, as wings often raised/flapped when adjusting balance, or in flight. Lesser and median coverts blackish-grey contrasting noticeably with paler greater coverts. Underwing of *cinerea* appeared paler and uniformly grey, lacking such contrast.

④ Note the blackish-grey lesser and median underwing coverts contrasting with the paler grey greater coverts. The underwing of Grey Heron is more uniformly grey. Also note the relatively dark grey flank and the long, two-tone legs. Lower Moors, 03/05/2015.

Bare Parts

Bill: Larger, heavier and less evenly tapered than in most *cinerea*: Side-on, the culmen appeared almost straight, with the lower mandible running parallel to this for about two thirds of its length before noticeably curving upwards towards the tip, forming a fairly prominent gonydeal angle. The upper mandible was almost entirely blackish-brown except for the cutting edges and tip (about a sixth) which were a dull, dirty-orange: the lower mandible was pale yellow becoming distinctly more orange towards the gonys. **Eyes:** Yellow. **Legs:** Two-toned; yellowish with a diffuse, dirty blackish-brown wash on outside of knee and tarsus. Looked noticeably longer than *cinerea*, even without comparison.

Vocalizations

I heard the bird call on 11 separate occasions: mostly in flight, but in four instances, when approached closely by a fly-by Grey Heron. Anyone familiar with the alarm call of Grey Heron would recognize the call of Great Blue Heron as being different. It has a different quality; being louder, lower in pitch and perhaps a touch harsher. To my ears, it sounded similar, if not identical, to the [Great Blue Heron] track '*alarm croaks given when taking flight_MD*' in the Sibley Bird Guide app.

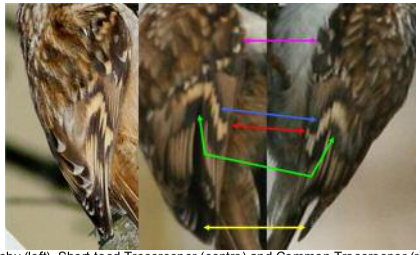
Regrettably, I did not make the effort to sound record this bird.

⑤ This image illustrates many of features of Great Blue Heron: The large head and heavy bill with angle at gonys; the disproportionally long neck with dark, rusty-hued, neck-sides and narrow grey foreneck streaking; the rusty, grey and white streaked 'epaulettes;' the rufous marginal and carpal coverts; the blackish-grey lesser & median underwing-coverts contrasting with paler greater coverts; the rufous streaked upper thighs (note the greater extent of tibial feathering here), and the long, two-toned legs.

Lower Moors 03/05/2015.

Figs. 2 & 3. Extracts from Ashley Fisher's record submission of a Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias* on St Mary's, Scilly, in April–May 2015.

It was helpful to find an online comparison of the wing pattern of both species and in order to compare critical detail of the wing pattern and wing formula we have added the Beachy individual (left).



Beachy (left), Short-toed Treecreeper (centre) and Common Treecreeper (right)

Italicised Captions below from http://10000birds.com/terror-from-the-trees.htm
(Bracketed comparisons below to JFC's images of the Beachy Head Short-toed Treecreeper)

***Pink**: the pale pattern on the alula is usually more extensive on the outer web on Common than on Short-toed, but there is considerable overlap. On the birds above, it's not really working.*

(Complete narrow pale fringe to the outer web of the alula is readily visible in some of JFC's images)

***Blue**: this is quite possibly the most important feature and the one most likely to be assessed without a photograph to analyze. The pale bars on primaries 6, 7, and 8 (counted from outside towards the center of the wing) overlap to almost equal extent in Short-toed, forming a "stairway". In Common, there is considerable overlap between primaries 7 and 8, but almost none between 6 and 7, forming a large right-angled blackish "corner" on the folded wing. Note also that the border of the pale bar towards the tip forms a more prominent saw pattern in Short-toed compared to Common.*

(Both the equal overlap of P6 & P7 and P7 & P8 and the 'stairway' is a very close match to that of the Short-toed Treecreeper thus lacking the pronounced right-angled blackish 'corner' of the Common Treecreeper. Perhaps just as important, if not more so, is the shape of the tips of the pale bars to P6 to P8 in narrowing to a (very) long point therefore being particularly saw-toothed at the tips and certainly not rectangular or rounded – this character increasingly appears in the captions to Short-toed Treecreeper images in Birding World (e.g. BW Vol. 24 No. 3).

***Red**: A small pale spot is usually present on the fourth primary in Common, but often lacking in Short-toed.*

(The size and position of outermost bar is also a neat fit to that of the Short-toed Treecreeper)

***Green**: the dark wing bar below the pale wing bar on the secondaries is quite evenly broad in Short-toed, but less well-defined and narrowing towards the primaries in Common.*

(Dark wingbar across outer four secondaries is consistently broad, even broadens, and certainly not narrowing)

***Yellow**: the visible spacing of the primaries 6 to 8 is rather even in Short-toed, but more uneven in Common, with the tip of p7 being very close to p8, and a big step between p6 and p7. This is sadly not visible on the pictures above due to an unfavourable angle on both pictures.*

(If anything, the pale tips to the primaries appear even more isolated, lacking hook-backs and are clearly smaller than those of the Short-toed Treecreeper in the comparison – certainly not more extensive as in the Common Treecreeper. Contra what appears in italics above, the wing formula of the Short-toed Treecreeper is in fact readily determinable in respect of the outer primary spacings and appears completely consistent with the Beachy individual albeit not as sometimes portrayed for Short-toed Treecreeper – see Wing Formula discussion below)

There are more features on the wings, e.g. regarding the exact shape of the pale primary tips and the contrasts between the outer & inner web and the tip of the largest tertial.

(Inner web of the longest visible tertial is clearly dark and therefore doesn't contrast with the outer web)

Description

Bill always appeared very long and decurved appearing fine when viewed from above but quite thick when viewed from the side (see images below). The long bill was the first character that JFC saw and all observers remarked on how long it appeared. It had a dark upper mandible with images revealing a very narrow pale cutting edge and a pale, slightly pinkish, lower mandible.

Its supercilium was a creamy-buff colour flaring from above and over its eye but narrowing towards its rear where particularly its upper border was rather ill-defined. In front of the eye its supercilium was far less prominent, darker and broken - so almost just rendering it an isolated oval-shaped 'loral spot' in front of its eye, appearing both inconspicuous and brown-washed. Supercilia clearly did not join above the base of the bill. It had a plain brown forecrown lacking the tiny narrow pale streaking to the remainder of its crown. Its nape was brown being a little less heavily streaked than the crown.

Mantle and scapulars a dusky brown with some more rufous tones with narrow pale greyish-buff streaking often arranged/coalescing to form almost a series of wavy vertical pale lines running down the length of its mantle (see image below). Close inspection of the images revealed the scapulars showed long pale shaft streaks.

Figs. 4 & 5. Extract from John and Doreen Cooper's submitted account of a Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla* at Beachy Head, Sussex, 27th October 2015.

learning the calls and even the song of the adults were given, and the whole submission was a masterclass of careful and methodical observation (fig. 6).

Ed will be presented with his prize, a pair of the exceptional ZEISS Victory SF binoculars, at the British Birdwatching Fair at Rutland Water on Friday 19th August. Further details will be posted on the BBRC website (www.bbrc.org.uk) in due course, where a selection of previous winning images can be viewed along with links to the previous competition write-ups in *BB*.

On 14th and 15th May 2015, while out birding in Gower, I could hear a song drifting to me distantly and intermittently; on the 15th, due to the wind, it was slightly clearer. Despite the distance it sounded like an "interesting" Chiffchaff. Intrigued, I returned later with more time to tackle the subject.

Male

By the next evening I had listened to the bird more or less continuously for a good 4–5 hours in dense cover and managed two close glimpses. On song the bird was to my ear an Iberian Chiffchaff as I had heard before, but I had not seen any real coloration or detail on the bird. Gradually, I learnt its song posts and its circuit and created a viewpoint below a tree that it visited occasionally.

Over the following days I eventually obtained views of the bird in slightly better light and was now convinced it was an Iberian Chiffchaff. I took video footage with a Canon Power shot digital camera which gave me sound recordings, and which I converted to WAV files and put through Audacity to produce sonograms which confirmed the three-part pattern of Iberian Chiffchaff, the frequency/pitch and length on paper as well as to the ear (ref : *The Sound Approach to Birding*, www.birdingfrontiers.com).

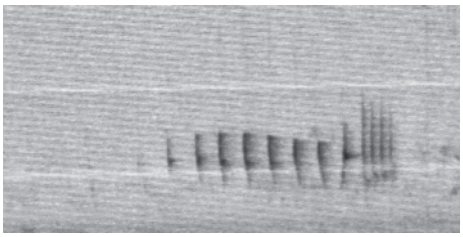
Juvenile

Over the coming weeks I visited the site as regularly as possible in an attempt to listen and record any song variants that occurred…

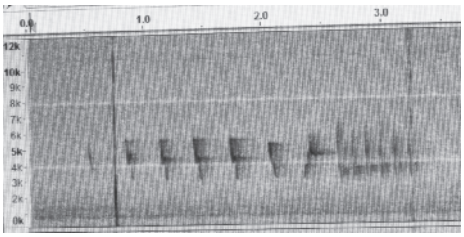
Sonograms

1. Typical song

This was the song given the majority of the time:



I



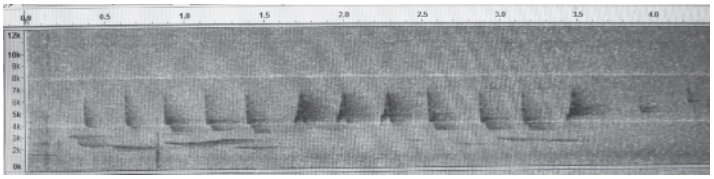
I

Generally, this bird seemed to use just one single upward middle-section note (I), usually followed by a long, repeated trill on the recordings I sampled. It fits the typical three-sector Iberian pattern, frequency and volume.

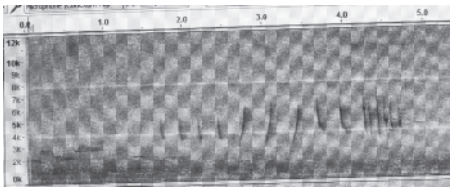
Fig. 6. Extract from Edward Hunter's record submission of a pair of Iberian Chiffchaffs *Phylloscopus ibericus* breeding in Gower, 2015.

Fig. 6. Sonograms *cont.*

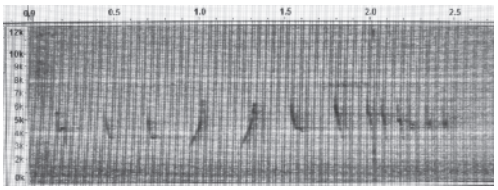
2. Interesting breeding song
The female greeting song
When the female came off the nest into the male's view his song changed.



2a Here the song shows a four-part structure, without the final cluster, the last being a single rising note.



2b Here a three-part structure but with three middle-section uprises, thus almost a four-section phrase, or with a two-part/staggered third section.



2c Here more of a four-section song but with two up-rises and again almost four parts.

Heard only on three occasions in the whole listening period, May to July, twice during the first brood and once during the second (when I recorded this and witnessed her show to the male). Do both races/populations do this? Could it potentially be a way to separate them if they are distinct subspecies?

Acknowledgments

BBRC is grateful to all those observers who submit their records of rarities 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). We are extremely grateful to Carl Zeiss for their continued support of the Committee and this award.

Paul French, BBRC Chairman, 1 Greenfield Bungalows, Easington, East Yorkshire, HU12 0TZ; e-mail chair@bbrc.org.uk

BBRC
British Birds Rarities Committee

ZEISS

rspb