



The Carl Zeiss Award 2017

Since 1992, The Carl Zeiss Award has been presented to acknowledge exceptional submissions to the British Birds Rarities Committee. Currently, the award is given for the best overall submission for which assessment has been completed during the previous 12 months. Each and every record submitted to BBRC is automatically entered for the award, and BBRC voting members nominate submissions of particular merit for the shortlist as and when they are assessed. The voting process is carried out 'blind', with all the voting members reviewing the final shortlist and giving each of the contenders a score from zero to five, without knowing the score given by their colleagues. The scores are then simply tallied to give an overall winner. This year, the voting members were joined by Andy Stoddart, the BBRC Vice Chair, and Gerry Dobler from ZEISS, to give a panel of 12 assessors.

There are no hard and fast rules about what constitutes a good submission and all members have a slightly different view about which aspects of a submission they give priority to. However, summing the scores from a relatively large team of voters gives what we believe is the fairest system of finding a winner. The final shortlist for 2017 was composed of six entries. All of the submissions making it to that final shortlist were excellent in one way or another, but the votes cast showed that there was a very clear winner this year. In taxonomic order, the five runners-up in the 2017 award are as follows.

Zino's/Fea's Petrel, off Lambaness, Unst, Shetland, October 2016, by David Cooper

We start with a rarity among submissions nowadays, namely one without photographs. Dave Cooper has already made a name for himself as one of Shetland's top bird finders in the relatively brief period that he's been living on Unst, and this bird will do that reputation no harm at all. Voters were divided, perhaps understandably, on the merits of this

submission, but overall the passionate and evocative account was a huge attraction. All too often, submissions sent to BBRC fail to capture the thrill of finding a top-drawer rarity but this was not the case here. The narrative is full of the drama and emotion of the event while the succinct written description captures the essence of the bird extremely well (fig. 1). The description was backed up by a couple of simple sketches (which the observer acknowledged were not done in the field) and the Committee believed it was an entirely plausible account given the conditions. Cases like this demonstrate that BBRC can be collectively, and positively, responsive to birds seen on a seawatch that prove impossible to photograph. On the negative side, some voters felt that since little could be added to our collective knowledge of this species pair, and since there could be no attempt to differentiate Fea's *Pterodroma feae* from Zino's Petrel *P. madeira*, this description should not score as highly as others. Nonetheless, reading this description should provide anyone with an incentive to keep on seawatching, even in the most unlikely of locations, for rare seabirds.

Hybrid Hen x Pallid Harrier, Cambridgeshire, October 2011 to February 2012, by Richard Thomas

This submission would not have featured in this competition, or indeed the BBRC report, until recent times. The account of a hybrid Hen *Circus cyaneus* x Pallid Harrier *C. macrourus* from Cambridgeshire by Richard Thomas was submitted as a pdf of an article published in the 2011 *Cambridgeshire Bird Report* (CBR), and that reflects a recent change in BBRC policy. Back in 2011, we did not seek records of known or putative hybrids, but that approach changed last year and it is pleasing to see a record of this individual submitted retrospectively. There were some decent photos and some attractive sketches presented in the CBR article, which sets out the admirable detective job by Richard and the

Please try to cover

1. Circumstances of finding the bird (if applicable) but keep it brief
2. Plumage, bare parts etc and call (if possible)
3. Jizz (that 'indefinable something' about the way it behaved)

Description:

Having read pre-dawn on the 30th October about 19 Pomarine Skuas and 91 Sooty Shearwaters passing North Ronaldsay on the 29th October I spent the early morning at Lamba Ness seeing a large northerly movement of Fulmars but little else apart from a few Gannets and Auks in light rain and poor visibility. Not long after returning home I saw the news of a "Fea's/Zino's Petrel flying NW past North Ronaldsay at 9.13am plus 4 Pomarine Skuas and a Little Auk". After initial thoughts of "bugger it, why couldn't that/they have flown past Lamba Ness!" it then proved sufficient encouragement for me to head back down there...

The rain had stopped and the visibility had improved and I'd seen a Sooty Shearwater within a minute, 3 Sooty Shearwaters, 2 blue Fulmars and a Bonxie within 5 minutes, and 40 minutes later at 11.30am (GMT) with the tally being 7 Sooty Shearwaters, 9 blue Fulmars and 4 Bonxies... I was scanning through my telescope when a fast flying, long-winged, streamlined seabird flew into view... I was immediately struck by the striking contrast between its snow white underbody and primarily black underwings and just how long-winged and narrow-winged it appeared. Its flight was strongly undulating... I was confident that I knew what I was looking at from the moment that I saw it, but for the initial first few seconds, I kept telling myself that it would prove to be only a blue Fulmar, wouldn't it? ... even though in the benign weather and sea conditions the many hundreds of passing similarly-sized but far more robust-looking stiff-winged Fulmars were just 'plodding along' flying low to the surface of the water, flap-flap-flap, glide... However, the bird in question very soon sharply banked upwards and I saw the white inner leading edge to its underwings almost forming 'triangles of white' at the bases of its otherwise jet black underwings and I truly knew that it was a Fea's/Zino's Petrel !!

Simply stunning! Whilst never close, being at something like a kilometre out, it was brilliant all the same especially as I'd picked it out well round to the south so enjoyed uninterrupted views for what felt like at least a couple of minutes as it headed north at 11.30am. Despite the near-calm conditions its flight was so undulating, arcing and banking so effortlessly on its long pointed wings and the sharp contrast between its primarily jet black underwings and snow white underparts was breathtaking – the contrast, in life, far exceeded my expectations in that all of those images I'd looked at over the years had somehow failed to convey it to its true extent!

It was then a case of trying to see as many features as was possible, I wanted to see them all... I thought I'd prepared long enough for this moment having made three August trips to the Bridges of Ross that spanned virtually a month on site there...! Whilst its flight was strongly undulating, being viewed from my elevated position near the tip of Lamba Ness, it never broke above the horizon line so my views were entirely obtained against the backdrop of the sea. Every time that it revealed its underparts, WOW, the contrast between black underwing and white underbody hit me, a snow-white torpedo-shaped underbody lacking any darker breast band. Whereas its upperparts rather lacked contrast appearing a rather uniform dark grey; I looked for, but didn't get a sense of, a 'dark W' across its upperwings, so perhaps it was just too distant, its upperwings simply appeared just slightly darker than its upperbody. A check of the upperside of its tail and there was a smooth pale grey upperside to its pointed tail, certainly paler than the rest of its upperparts, but again, lacking the contrast that I'd anticipated one might show, pale grey it was, but it had to be looked for. So, how about gaining an impression of the size and structure of its bill, being perhaps the single most-important feature when trying to separate Fea's Petrel and Zino's Petrel, in all the excitement, I didn't think to attempt to scrutinise its bill – in all honesty it was probably way too distant but annoying not to have at least tried.

Unfortunately I'm no artist, and I don't pretend that I made these sketches at the time, but I've photographed these 'back of the envelope' sketches so that I could then adjust the contrast in an attempt to make them best-represent the features that I could see based on the views that I obtained:



Sketch of its underparts showing the striking contrast between primarily black underwings and snow white underparts and then of its upperparts when suddenly it lacked contrast save for the pale grey upperside of its tail that, even so, had to be looked for.

David Cooper

Fig. 1. Zino's/Fea's Petrel *Pterodroma madeira/feae*, off Lambaness, Unst, Shetland, October 2016.

Footnote

All the written submissions in this article are shown as submitted to BBRC and have not been edited before reproduction here.



Steph Hicking

Fig. 2. Hybrid Hen *Circus cyaneus* x Pallid Harrier *C. macrourus* ('Hellid' – or Hell-ID – harrier), Cambridgeshire, December 2011. This page from Steph Hicking's notebook shows some of the bird's key features. The rather rounded wing shape and five 'fingers' (clearly visible in photographs) are both features of Hen Harrier, while the under-primary barring fits Hen rather than Northern Harrier *C. hudsonius*. The well-marked pale neck collar and dark boa, plus pale tips to the underside of the inner primaries are pro-Pallid features.

other observers (fig. 2). The identification was accomplished while the bird was still present in Cambridgeshire, with the help of online resources and through seeking expert feedback, and the critical features were laid out clearly. This record shows the benefits of looking at familiar species just that little bit more carefully; sometimes, you never know just what might be lurking below the surface.

Northern Harrier, Orkney, April–June 2016, by Brian Ribbands

Another shortlisted submission to feature a harrier concerned a remarkable record from Orkney in the spring of 2016, when what eventually proved to be a Northern Harrier *C. hudsonius* was the subject of a failed breeding attempt (with a Hen Harrier). Brian Ribbands' submission is a good illustration of how, in some circumstances, a correct identification can be established only over time – in this case, a key reason for the delay was the concern not to disturb breeding Hen Harriers unduly. Ultimately, however, a series of photographs allowed the application of recently established identification criteria for Northern Harrier, at the same time showing that light variability (and/or camera technicalities) can render this process less than straightforward (plates 261 & 262).

Iberian Chiffchaff, Sheringham, Norfolk, October 2016, by James McCallum

A non-singing Iberian Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus ibericus* is a real 'birder's bird', and this repre-

sents the first acceptable record of this highly subtle species in autumn. The submission contained a pleasing mix of evidence, both 'old and new'. The photographs were not conclusive (as they could never be in autumn, at least on current knowledge), although they certainly supported the identification. The beautiful and comprehensively annotated watercolours captured the essence of the species from an observer renowned for being able to convey jizz in his drawings (fig. 3). Finally, the sound files and sonograms, which accompanied the visual evidence, nailed the identification. This groundbreaking identification by James McCallum and Ash McElwee of an autumn Iberian Chiffchaff had the full works, including a nice background story to the initial discovery, and has added greatly to our knowledge of this species in autumn.

Siberian Stonechat, Spurn, Yorkshire, October 2016, by Matt Slaymaker

This 'Stejneger's Stonechat' *Saxicola maurus stejnegeri* featured high on the lists of several voters, and Matt Slaymaker was congratulated on producing a comprehensive submission that contained a good selection of instructive photos (plates 263 & 264). The description was concise but thorough, with key details included as bullet points (fig. 4). Certain features were highlighted as contradicting recent literature (e.g. the rump was not strikingly pale, the underwing-coverts were not black and the longest uppertail-



Brian Ribbands

261 & 262. Male Northern Harrier *Circus hudsonius*, Orkney, April–June 2016.

James McCallum

Iberian Chiffchaff, Sheringham, 29th Oct - 13th Nov 2016 - close views through 20xW scope during inactive periods of preening and sunning. JRMCC



Fig. 3. Iberian Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus ibericus*, Sheringham, Norfolk, October 2016.

Head Pattern - significantly different to Common Chiffchaff - more similar to a *thrists* in terms of tones and contrast i.e. Eyering not very prominent feature of face, lower eyering hardly contrasting with cheek, eyering and cheek/ear covert surround again not strongly contrasting so in the field the dark eye was quite prominent - the face therefore could give a Bonelli's or *Hippobolais* impression. Supercilium slightly broader than an average C. Chiffchaff - pale yellow behind eye but bright yellow above eye and on entire fore-supercilium.

Matt Slaymaker



Steve Young/Birdwatch

Description:

Three of my own photos are included in this description; all have been cropped but otherwise have not been edited or adjusted in any way. Numerous other photos are available online which give a good impression of this bird in a variety of lights and viewing conditions.

The birds' colours varied with the light but overall impression was always of a bird paler than European Stonechat.

Size, shape, etc. as European Stonechat.

Age/Sex:

- Sexed as a female based on relatively pale underwing coverts (cf. Photo stej 6) and limited/no dark markings on face (extent/presence variable depending on light).
- Bird unaged but likely a first winter based on primary covert pattern with narrow buff/white edging.
- No moult limit visible in the greater coverts in field or photos (cf. Photo stej 2). Possible limit in median coverts visible in some flight photos which, if genuine, would suggest 1st winter bird.

Head:

- Pale supercillium, apparently meeting above the bill. A pale buff colour (similar to underparts) and most distinct behind eye.
- Lightly dark-streaked crown.
- Brown mottled ear coverts, in some lights and photos a slightly darker 'shadow' is apparent behind and below eye (cf. Photo 2_MS). In brighter conditions, colour consistent with rest of head/upperparts (cf. Photo 1_MS).
- No dark or black markings around face, or dark feather bases (cf. Sex)

Bare Parts:

- Bill stout and dark. Indistinguishable from Stonechat/Sibe Stonechat based on field views. Deeper base (quoted in various sources) not apparent in photos but difference potentially tiny.
- Iris dark.
- Legs/feet dark.

Underparts:

- Distinct pale throat patch, sharply demarcated by brown ear coverts and with richly coloured buff breast below.
- Pale, buff orange breast/belly extending onto vent. On some views and images, colour slightly more saturated on the breast.
- Completely clean, unmarked flanks. Same colour as rest of underparts.

Upperparts:

- Rump - A rich orange colour, darker than normally expected for Sibe stonechat.
- Rump patch restricted in size, reaching between T2 and T3 at upper limit (cf. Garner, 2014)
- No dark shaft streaks visible on field views or photos (cf. Hellström & Norevik, 2014).

Tail:

- Tail all dark, no white visible at the bases of outer tail feathers (cf. 'Caspian' stonechats).

Matt Slaymaker

263, 264 & fig. 4. First-winter 'Stejneger's Stonechat' *Saxicola maurus stejneri*, Spurn, Yorkshire, October 2016.

coverts lacked any streaks or dark centres), and this submission has certainly helped the Committee become more familiar with *stejnegeri* and move closer to the point of being able to identify individuals for which there are no genetic data. The icing on the cake for this submission was the fact that a usable sample of DNA was obtained from droppings and proved its identity as *stejnegeri*, putting this bird into the rarified category of field identifications that can be backed up by DNA results.

The Carl Zeiss Award 2017 winner **Brown Shrike, Out Skerries, Shetland,** **October 2016, by Michael McKee**

Our winner of the 2017 award is a veritable masterclass of the photographic submission genre (fig. 5). While many 'traditional' birders bemoan the death of the field notebook, there is no denying that most keen birders now carry a camera and know how to use it, and that this has replaced the notebook in many cases. Michael is far more than just a 'record-shot photographer' and his use of a camera and presentation of the images as a recording tool is second to none. We have witnessed this method of submission before (and also from this observer), but it is always interesting to see what information is highlighted. In this case, the selection of chosen

images illustrated this Brown Shrike's *Lanius cristatus* changing appearance in a range of lights and poses, as well as pointers to all of the classic identification features of the species. This was the only submission that featured in the top three of every voter, and was the top choice for half of the voters, thus making it the stand-out winner of this year's award.

Michael has featured prominently in this award before, being shortlisted a number of times, and runner-up in both 1997 and 1999. This year, he will be presented with the winner's prize, a pair of the exceptional ZEISS Victory SF 10 × 42 binoculars, at the British Birdwatching Fair at Rutland Water on Friday 18th 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*.

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.

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BBRC

British Birds Rarities Committee



BBRC is sponsored by Carl Zeiss Ltd and the RSPB

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Vice-Chairman Andy Stoddart • Archivist Nigel Hudson • Genetic Consultant Martin Collinson

Museum Consultant Brian Small • Summariser Reg Thorpe



Michael McKee

Fig. 5. Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus*, Out Skerries, Shetland, October 2016.