



# The Carl Zeiss Award 2018

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. All records submitted to BBRC are automatically entered for the award, and BBRC voting members highlight submissions of particular merit for the shortlist during assessment. 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 (or six, seven, eight, etc., depending on the number of entries on the shortlist), without knowing the score given by their colleagues. The scores are then simply tallied to give an overall winner.

The final shortlist for 2018 was made up of seven entries. All of the submissions that made it to that final shortlist were excellent in one way or another, and the margins this year were very close, with the winner not being decided until the last votes had been cast.

The six runners-up in the 2018 award are presented below, in taxonomic order. Following a short introduction, selected extracts and illustrations from each account are reproduced here; apart from minor formatting changes and grammatical corrections, the accounts are shown as submitted.

## Pacific Diver

East Chevington, Northumberland,  
January to March 2017, by Alan Curry

This is another classic example of the increasing trend towards 'internet birding': the images posted online of a 'Black-throated Diver' off the Northumberland coast looked highly suggestive of a Pacific Diver *Gavia pacifica* to sharp-eyed Alan Curry. After a short run around it was finally found at East Chevington; fully armed with the key features, Alan made short work of the identification in the field. The increase in the

number of British records of Pacific Diver in recent years is striking, and the main features of birds in non-breeding plumage are now well known. However, Alan did not skimp on the description and presented a thorough and well-laid-out 'classical' submission, with detailed notes supported by excellent photographs to illustrate the identification essentials.

... I was positioned by the hide in the reedbed on the north shore and eventually the diver began to come a little closer although hugging the edge of the reeds and as a consequence often out of sight; then, unexpectedly, it appeared in a small bay directly in front of the hide and for a short spell gave itself up at a range of around 80 m.

After this showing, all the boxes were fully inked in: not only did it have consistently dark flanks, a dusky facial pattern, a faint dark throat strap and a slight bill structure, but when roll-preening a distinct dark vent strap was also on offer. A Pacific Diver for sure...

### Description:

#### *Size, structure and general appearance:*

Small and generally dark, about the size of a Red-throated Diver but without the 'white-faced' appearance and sporting a much more robust bill structure.

*Head:* *Contra* to most of the popular literature, the head was quite angular in shape with a notable steep lumpy forehead and in this respect quite 'Great Northern-ish'. The cheeks were distinctly dusky, interlaced with random white flecking and dark mottling under the eye. Without a sharp contour between the ear-coverts and the white throat, the bird had a distinctly hooded appearance at long range, in fact 'Brünnich's-like' would be a good analogy. There was a diffuse almost shadow-like dark strap across the upper throat that at times would simply vanish when the neck was outstretched. It



Alan Curry

**313.** Pacific Diver *Gavia pacifica*, Northumberland, January 2017.

had a notably dagger-shaped blue-grey bill, but of a much slighter build than a Black-throated, which was consistently held in the horizontal...

### Two-barred Greenish Warbler

Foula, Shetland, May 2017,

by Geoff and Donna Atherton

One voter described this as ‘an astonishing and unprecedented spring record, one which could so easily have “got away” but which was nailed by careful observation and good photographs. This is rarity finding at its most exciting.’ Resident islanders Geoff and Donna Atherton now have an impressive track record of finding rarities on Foula, and their independent identification of this bird will no doubt be among their highlights, especially considering that they do all this without the instant access to the internet that most of us now take for granted. A nice account of the circumstances and a good description of this Two-barred Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus plumbeitarsus*, the first for Shetland (and first spring record for Britain – the previous five were all in autumn), were backed up by an excellent series of images that left no doubt as to the bird’s identification.

Our initial thoughts were that it was going to be an Arctic or Greenish Warbler, and we set about distinguishing which one. A combination of features were vocalised as we binned the bird (small and compact like Greenish not Arctic... bill looked blunt and fairly substantial... legs grey). But it looked too ‘bright’ and the gc wing-bar was too striking and contrasting for Greenish. The possibility of Two-barred Greenish was mentioned but with no previous experience of this species we kept our options open.

We took some hurried camera shots and it was off again back to the original fence area. We crouched behind Mucklegrind dyke and watched it move between fence and ground. It then sat atop a wire fence and began to preen 10 m away! With superb views we could see that the supercilium didn’t appear to meet over the bill and a short, ill-defined, median-covert wing-bar was present.

After it flew around to the front of the croft house and out of sight, we decided to head home and get a positive ID. Within minutes the place was strewn with guide books opened at the *Phylloscopus* section...

**Size and structure:** Most similar to Greenish Warbler.

**Overall coloration:** Upperparts strong olive



**314.** Two-barred Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus plumbeitarsus*, Foula, Shetland, May 2017.

green. Underparts silky off-white (showing a pale lemon wash over undertail-coverts and breast). The combination of the above gave the bird a bright, contrasting look.

**Head pattern:** Mantle and nape subtle grey tones blended with the overall olive-green colour. Supercilium long (tapering at each end); distinct. Pale yellow (stronger yellow hue over eyebrow), stopping short of bill base. Eye-stripe dark... darkest in front of the eye and less so behind. Ear-coverts pale yellow (same tone as supercilium), some mottling.

**Wings:** Primary and secondary wing edges a shade brighter than upperparts. Greater-covert wing-bar long (extending to scapulars, and involving 7 gc tips): broad, uniform along its length and sharply demarcated.

Pale yellow/cream. Median-covert wing-bar small in length, weak and interrupted.

**Bare parts:** Bill blunt. Legs greyish and appeared to be slightly paler than mid-brown feet.

**‘Central Asian Lesser Whitethroat’**  
Filey, Yorkshire, October 2016,  
by Mark Pearson

Voters were impressed by a comprehensive account of this poorly known and probably under-recorded taxon, and Mark’s description gives lots of detail on the field appearance of this particular bird, as well as gathering opinions from other experts. Although it remains in circulation until the field identification of the Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca* complex is resolved and recog-

dition of the Central Asian race *S. c. halimodendri* can be established reliably, the learning process will undoubtedly benefit from detailed accounts such as this.

... The bird flew low and direct into the bottom of the nearest cover, a fairly small and insubstantial hawthorn bush, where after a short wait I was able to gain my first good views. Ruling out Asian Desert Warbler (unfortunately!) and now fairly sure – by process of elimination at least – that the bird had to be a subspecies of Lesser Whitethroat, it was nevertheless difficult to reconcile it as such on size, proportions, overall coloration and behaviour...

Forecrown, crown, nape and mantle a concolorous sandy brown. Note that this tone extended all the way to the base of the bill (quite unlike e.g. *blythi*-types I've encountered, where the brown tones variably fade on the nape and crown). The 'mask' around the ear-coverts was (very) poorly defined and limited to a small area of mid brownish-grey coloration above and behind the eye...

Primary projection extremely short, with primary tips 'bunched up', and extending less than half of equivalent tertial length. Tail – central tail feathers unmoulted, heavily worn and brownish, paler on fringes; remaining (fresh) tail feathers darker grey-brown overall. Pattern and extent of white on outer tail feathers – T6, T5 and T4 – studied closely and sketched in the field (see accompanying illustration), and also subsequently photographed (see photos): T6 strikingly clean white on both sides, and

extending across all of outer web and all of visible inner web...

Lars Svensson commented: 'While it is easy to say that this bird of yours is best labelled *halimodendri* (and in the website you mention most of the reasons, and the images confirm), it is far more difficult to say how this differs from *minula*. But *minula* is best eliminated on being unconfirmed west of China in summer and west of S Iran in winter. It breeds in the Tarim Basin and north to large parts of E Tibet, and it winters due south and southwest, in India and Pakistan and possibly also in S Iran. All winter-season records from Oman or the Gulf countries most likely refer to *halimodendri*.'

### Eastern Orphean Warbler

St Agnes, Scilly, October 2017,  
by Bob Flood and Ashley Fisher

This skulking *Sylvia* was initially found, and identified as one of the two Orphean Warblers, by Paul and Neil Wright, and the popular opinion at the time favoured Western Orphean Warbler *Sylvia hortensis*. So it is much to the credit of Bob Flood and Ashley Fisher that they not only disagreed, but managed to gather together enough evidence to establish that it was Britain's first Eastern Orphean Warbler *S. crassirostris*. The combination of detective work and well-presented reasoning, backed up by expert opinion from observers with much experience of these two closely related species, impressed the Committee. The fact that some images appeared to show certain features at odds with the identification just showed how important it can be

Mark Pearson



**315 & 316.** Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*, probably the Central Asian *S. c. halimodendri*, Filey, Yorkshire, October 2016.

to have a range of images to ensure that an identification in difficult circumstances can be established beyond doubt.

... The bird in question was very hard to pin down because of the location that it favoured. Not surprisingly, then, it was identified by the finders and several other Agnes birders as an Orphean Warbler sp. on 12th October 2017, the day that it was found. On 13th October, the day that we saw the bird, and subsequent dates on which the bird was sighted, bird information services reported it as Western Orphean Warbler. We did not agree with the identification because we had unquestionably seen dark centres to the three longest pairs of undertail-coverts, multiple times, which is typical of Eastern Orphean. Photographs of the St Agnes bird that we had access to did not show this

feature, presumably because of their poor quality, and we feared that ultimately BBRC would accept the bird as Orphean sp.

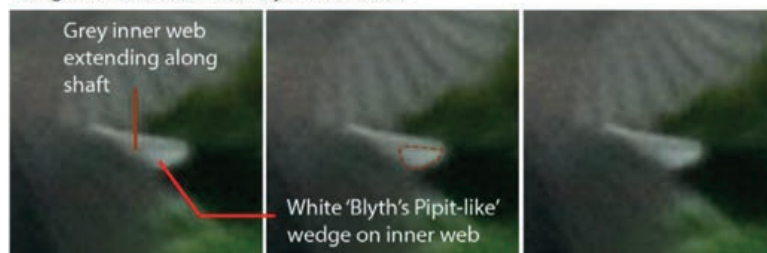
... Complicating matters, photographs apparently showed largely white outer rectrices (T6) and a pattern suggesting Western Orphean. Late in the day on 21st October, we saw a photograph by Adrian Webb that clearly showed the undertail-coverts as we had seen them in the field [fig. 1]. Further, close scrutiny of T6 showed the ghosting of a pattern more typical of Eastern Orphean.

... Ash made up a compendium of shots from Jim Almond's photos, annotated them accordingly, and placed them alongside photos of adult Eastern tails from Lars Svensson's article... [fig. 2]. In essence, Western typically has a pattern like Richard's Pipit (long white wedge running up the shaft of the inner web), while Eastern has a pattern like Blyth's Pipit (wide short white wedge).

... We sent [our] note to Lars Svensson to solicit his opinion, stating that our identification of the bird was Eastern Orphean. On 23rd October, Lars replied concurring with our identification, stating reasons for his opinion, and made it clear that he had no doubt that the bird was an Eastern Orphean...



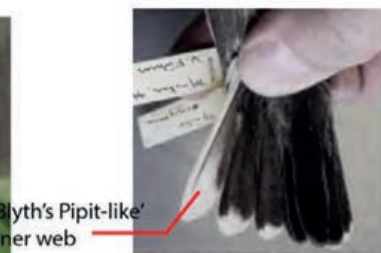
T6 right-hand side (Photos by Jim Almond)



T6 left-hand side



Ad Eastern from Svensson



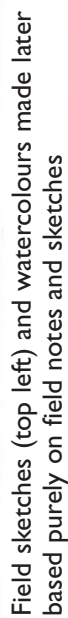
**Figs. 1 & 2.** Undertail-coverts and tail of Eastern Orphean Warbler *Sylvia crassirostris*, St Agnes, Scilly, October 2017. (photos by Adrian Webb, Jim Almond, Lars Svensson)



Very pale-looking bird showing one blunter-tipped centre to (at least) the outer median covert; fine and weak-looking malar; and very fine, indistinct breast streaking. The horizontal stance was obvious in this shot too. The overall freshness of the median and greater coverts and tertials suggests the bird is an adult and not a first-summer. I would expect to see at least one or two worn, immature, pointy centred median coverts on a first-summer bird, and much more wear on the greater coverts.



**Fig. 3.** Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii*, Bardsey, Caernarfonshire, May 2017. Steve Stansfield



overcast

### Blyth's Pipit

**Bardsey, Caernarfonshire, May 2017, by Steve Stansfield and Mark Grove** Carter Britain's first spring Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii* was always going to be a bold claim that required good documentation, and so it proved. A detailed and honest account of the finding and subsequent identification process was backed up with excellent annotated photographs that showed two of the major features to good effect: the adult median coverts and the short, curved hind claw. This remains a difficult identification to get right, but with perseverance and the right background knowledge, Steve and Mark have done a great job, both in the field and in the description. Voters also liked the diary-like feel to the description, with the rundown of 'back-up' birds on Bardsey building up nicely to the main event.

### Pine Bunting

**Felmingham, Norfolk, January 2017, by James McCallum and Ashley McElwee** This was another beautiful submission, showcasing the fabulous field-based artwork of James McCallum, and the Committee also enjoyed the storytelling behind the finding of this female Pine Bunting *Emberiza leucocephalos*. Although there was essentially nothing particularly new to learn, the annotated artwork and two sets of field notes backing up the artwork were greatly appreciated. With a third podium finish in as many years, James consistently sets a high standard for his submissions, and while not everyone can be a great artist, his careful observation and detailed note-taking set an example we can all aspire to.

### The Carl Zeiss Award 2018 winner Green Warbler

**Fair Isle, July 2017, by David Parnaby** Finally, we come to our winner – another wing-barred *Phylloscopus*. This submission of a Green Warbler *P. nitidus* from Fair Isle by David Parnaby just pipped its nearest rivals. This is a typically well-documented account from Fair Isle of a 'cutting edge' identification. The submission contains a nice mix of field observations, in-hand biometrics, photos taken in the field and in the hand, showing the bird's appearance in a range of

different circumstances; and, finally, DNA results. All of this detail, together with two other recent submissions from Shetland (*Brit. Birds* 110: 598–599), puts the Committee in a much stronger position for when the next Green Warbler turns up. It would have been far too easy to simply wait for the DNA analysis of a discarded body feather, but the submission (which, together with the identification of this bird, was very much a team effort by the Observatory, with input from several online commentators) documents the bird extremely thoroughly, using the DNA as confirmation of the other characters rather than a single silver bullet. Indeed, David compiled the submission before the DNA results were available. The only thing missing is the call, which the observers clearly tried hard to get! It is a worthy winner, and doubtless the ZEISS Victory SFs winging their way northwards will be put to good use.

For the first time in a while, the weather was calm enough for getting the mist-nets [at the Observatory] open, whilst we were also going full pelt at seabird monitoring (in fact, opening the nets at 8 pm on 4th July began a period of 24 hours without sleep as Storm-petrel ringing, Guillemot feedwatch, Puffin food-sample collecting, visits to colonies by boat, etc. kept us busy!). On a net round at around 8.50 pm, a phyllosc jumped up near the net. I pushed, it jumped into the net and all was well. On getting there, I was pleased to find that it not only had a large supercilium, but also a prominent wing-bar. A Greenish-type, but no ordinary Greenish. The wing-bar looked very prominent and there were faint pale tips to some of the median coverts as well. There was also a lot of yellow about the underparts and face...

[In the hand] we were unable to definitively identify the bird, but, as it had been processed and everyone at the Obs had seen it, it was released (around 20 minutes after being trapped).

[After] looking at various texts, photos, etc. we were still unable to say with 100% conviction what the identification was, and it was clear that many features and biometrics overlapped, although several features did seem to hint strongly towards the identification as Green Warbler.

David Parnaby



David Parnaby



**317 & 318.** Green Warbler *Phylloscopus nitidus*, Fair Isle, July 2017.

**Structure:** A mid-sized to smallish phyllosc, with a large head and quite long wings. The bill looked relatively strong for a Greenish Warbler, although this was hard to judge as the missing feathers at the base of the bill will have emphasised the size...

**Upperparts:** Quite a bright green, although thought to be in the range of Greenish, which is in itself a fairly bright bird (especially as our only immediate comparisons were some very scruffy moulting adult Chiffchaffs). The wing pattern was obvious, showing six greater coverts

with off-white, square tips, the tips extending onto the inner web on the inner two feathers. This was more prominent than in typical Greenish Warbler and gave the wing-bar a subtly different look...

**Underparts:**

The underparts were yellow, although the extent to which this appeared to vary depending upon the views and light was rather notable. In the hand, the bird was obviously yellow across its entire underparts, although the wash across the belly and chest was weaker. In the field, the underparts appeared surprisingly pale at times, looking off-white, although a yellow wash was always apparent on the undertail-coverts and around the face and throat...

During the following days, there was some online discussion about the identification and, although several people expressed an opinion that Green Warbler was the likely identification,

there was clearly very little that could prove such an identification conclusively. The observers listed at the start of this description came to the conclusion that Green Warbler was the most likely identification and, whilst we hoped that DNA would back this up, we were prepared to submit a description even if we did not have that extra level of proof (in fact, most of this description was written before the DNA results came back, as I was confident that there were no pro-Greenish features and several pro-Green features, although admittedly many were in the overlap zone).

**DNA analysis (by Martin Collinson):**

'...has come back as *nitidus* – 1021/1022 bp identical to database *nitidus* and 32 bp different from *viridanus*, and 51 bp from *plumbeitarsus*, so nailed on ID. Good news for all! Have a good weekend. Best wishes, Martin'

**Acknowledgments**

BBRC is extremely grateful to Carl Zeiss for their continued sponsorship of the Committee, and their support for this award by providing an outstanding prize for the winning submission, a pair of Victory SF binoculars. We also thank all those observers who submit their records of rarities for consideration, either directly to the Committee or via our arrangement with BirdGuides [www.birdguides.com](http://www.birdguides.com) and Rare Bird Alert [www.rarebirdalert.co.uk](http://www.rarebirdalert.co.uk).

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**BBRC**

British Birds Rarities Committee



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## Notes

### Kleptoparasitism by Red Kites on Common Kestrel

At about 13.15 hrs on 5th February 2018, in an area of rough grassland and scrub on the northern flank of Ivinghoe Beacon, Buckinghamshire, I observed two Red Kites *Milvus milvus* pursuing a Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* at an altitude of c. 15–30 m. One Red Kite was close to the Kestrel, following its every twist and turn, while the other maintained a position slightly behind and about 5 m below. After weaving back and forth for a minute or so, the Kestrel dropped a small dark object, most likely a vole, which was caught in mid-air by the lower Red Kite. Both kites continued their pursuit of the Kestrel, the one with the prey in an increasingly desultory manner, soon breaking off

altogether. The main pursuer was completely relentless, however, and the Kestrel appeared incapable of shaking it off, despite weaving in all directions at high speed. Eventually, the Kestrel spiralled upwards, still weaving, the Red Kite pursuing it from behind and below, and occasionally seeming to try to strike it. The Kestrel eventually disappeared into a patch of cloud; at this point the kite broke off its pursuit but continued to circle just below the cloud.

Red Kites are well-known kleptoparasites, predominantly on other raptors, but also on species such as herons, gulls and corvids (e.g. Cramp & Simmons 1980, Lovegrove 1990, Gómez-Tejedor 1998, Wildman *et al.* 1998,