



# The Carl Zeiss Award 2019

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 ranking the submissions in order (without knowing the views of their colleagues). The scores are then summed to give an overall winner.

The final shortlist for 2019 was made up of a whopping 12 entries. The leader changed at various points during the voting, but in the end we were left with a clear winner, and indeed a top three that finished well above the rest. Space precludes discussion of all 12 on the shortlist, so the following summary focuses on the six runners-up and finally the winner.

As always, we are extremely grateful to Carl Zeiss, not only for providing an outstanding prize for the winning submission, a pair of ZEISS Victory SF binoculars, but also for sponsoring BBRC throughout the year.

The six runners-up in the 2019 award are presented first, in taxonomic order. Following a short introduction, selected extracts and illustrations from each account are reproduced; apart from minor formatting changes and grammatical

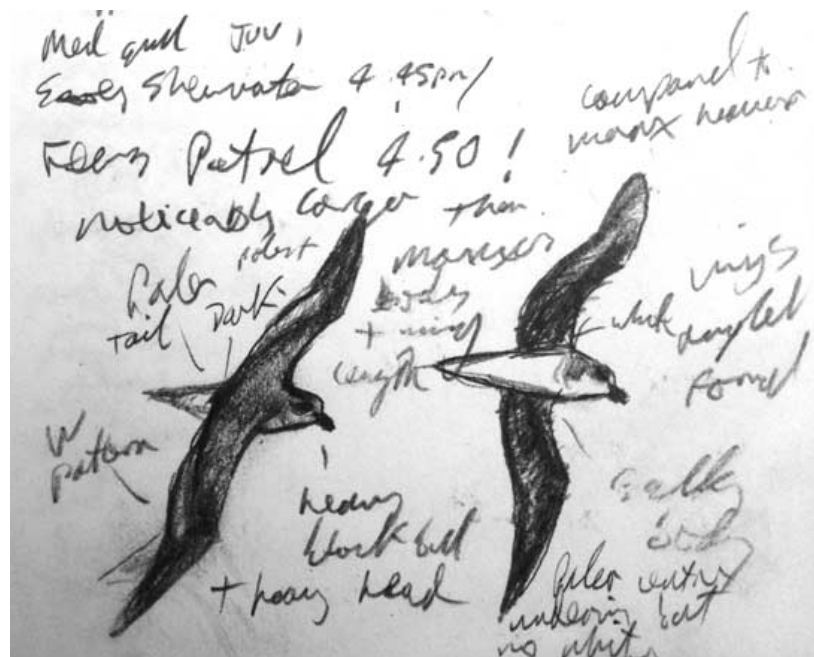
corrections, the extracts are shown as submitted.

## Fea's or Desertas Petrel

Berry Head, Devon, July 2017 –

Mike Langman

Mike Langman is an experienced seawatcher, and the fact that the Committee accepted this bird as a Fea's *Pterodroma feae*/Desertas Petrel *P. deserta*, having been able to eliminate Zino's Petrel *P. madeira* on the basis of the comparison with Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus* (see plates 251 & 252), is testament to both that experience and the detail contained in his submission. This was one of the best 'Fea's-type' records that we have assessed in recent years, and one voting member summed this up well: 'Although now practically annual in Britain, many submissions fail to convey the real excitement and identification process when seeing one of these fabulous seabirds. A wonderful account from a seasoned seawatcher. And most impressively a video was captured which serves as an excellent reference to a "Fea's" in a British context.'



Mike Langman

**Fig. 1.** Fea's *Pterodroma feae* or Desertas Petrel *P. deserta*, Berry Head, Devon, July 2017.

Mike Langman



Mike Langman



**251 & 252.** Videograbs of the Berry Head *Pterodroma* (on the right), reproduced in black and white to highlight the comparison in size and shape with the accompanying Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus*.

'At about 16.50 hrs I picked up a flock of 8–9 Manx Shearwaters coming out of the murk from the north, about 1–1.5 miles away. As I was counting the shearwaters with my binoculars, I very quickly picked out another bird with them – banking much higher initially and veering from side to side a lot more. Straightaway the bird looked bigger, I even considered a Cory's Shearwater [*Calonectris borealis*],

but was very quickly aware it was too small...

Quickly I changed to my scope and (as suspected) found myself watching a Fea's-type Petrel. The bird was clearly longer-winged and looked bigger overall than any of the Manx Shearwaters it was associating with, which I knew would rule out a Zino's Petrel. The bird continued its rather slow progress south with now more Manx Shearwaters passing it all the time. The Manx Shearwaters' flight was direct and mostly low to the sea with rather a lot of flapping and occasional medium-height banking. The *Pterodroma* was doing its usual weaving, meandering flight with high banks often side on to the southerly breeze; therefore it was

making slower progress south, giving me plenty of time to watch it as it got closer.'

### Wilson's Snipes

Porthellick, Scilly, October 2017 –

James Lidster and Debby Doodeman

This was a truly epic submission, describing in forensic detail the appearance of three Wilson's Snipes *Gallinago delicata* present on

Debby Doodeman



**253.** Wilson's *Gallinago delicata* (left-hand bird) and Common Snipes *G. gallinago*, Porthellick, Scilly, October 2017. First impression: cold, black-and-white plumage, plus spotted wing made the bird stand out.





Jim Almond

**254.** Wilson's Snipe *Gallinago delicata*, Porthellick, Scilly, October 2017.

St Mary's in 2017 (plates 253 & 254) and also serving as a very timely cross-reference against BBRC criteria. The accolades bestowed upon this mammoth piece of work by voters clearly illustrated that this could have been a worthy winner in many other years: it finished in second place overall, but was given first place by two voters. What was presented here was undeniably excellent, and certainly overturned the doubts among some observers in relation to one of the three birds present. In terms of the award, it may have suffered a little from the fact that it was 'another Wilson's Snipe', and as good as that is, we have been here before. However, as an outstanding example of how to put together a submission that will act as a reference for BBRC in forthcoming years, look no further than this. Voters commented: 'This submission contained everything for me, a dream of discovery, the actual realisation of finding, good detective work and input from other observers, great photos, detailed analysis of plumage, and cross-checking with criteria to meet acceptance by BBRC. All meticulously

compiled and superbly presented.' And also: 'A fabulously detailed account, which should be published somewhere. Very interesting for me was that it highlights the "red herring" in comparing *faeroeensis* Common Snipe and *delicata*. Basically tackles the subject in its entirety. Most notable line: "Don't worry I'm not crazy" – I beg to differ...!'

'Underwing (not seen well enough to study in field): The axillaries were heavily barred, with the black barring on the inner axillaries notably broader than the white. On the shorter, outer axillaries the ratio is slightly different, but it still looked like 50%+ black... The lesser and median coverts were heavily barred black and white. The greater coverts were predominantly dark grey, with those on the outer wing uniform grey with white tips. Towards the inner wing the greater underwing-coverts become progressively more barred distally but the overall impression was still of a very dark underwing.'



## Brown Shrike

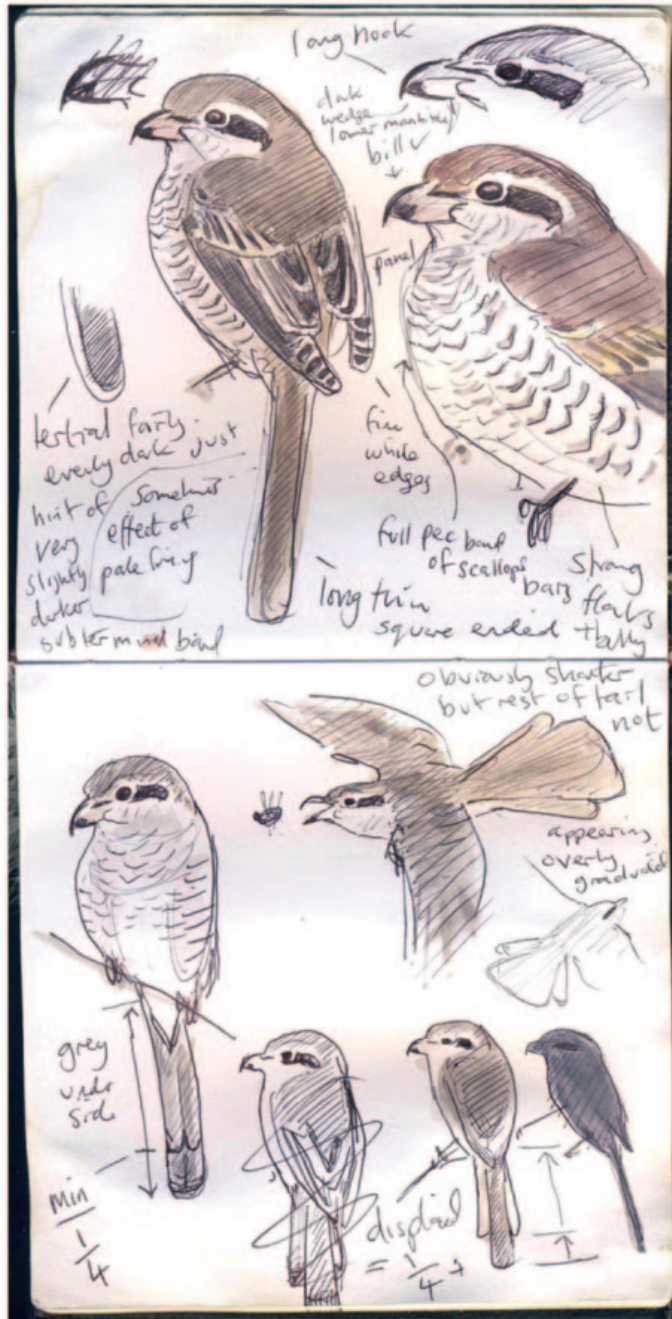
Weybourne, Norfolk, October 2018 –  
Mark Golley, James McCallum and  
Phil Borley

The annual appearance by James McCallum in this competition continues, with his field sketches illuminating this joint submission with Mark Golley (fig. 2). The photographs

### Brown Shrike, first winter, Weybourne Camp, 21st Oct 18

JRMCC

The bird was elusive and often distant and against the sun but some better views late afternoon in much better light. These are only basic field impressions of what was visible in the field.



General structure - large billed, larger head, shorter primary projection and longer tailed compared to Red-backed Shrike.

Bill - heavy with broad base. Culmen smoothly curving terminating in obvious sharp hook. Pinky grey base and greyer upper mandible. obvious grey shading along culmen and obvious 'spot' on tip of lower mandible.

Legs and feet - dark grey

Dark 'mask' particularly behind the eye but also dark line along lores bordering nostrils.

Supercillium - off white and broad behind eye.

Upperparts - earthy brown sometimes looking quite cold. Seemingly unmarked i.e. without scallops. Tail often appeared fractionally warmer.

Median & greater coverts thin buffy tips with darker centers.

Tertial Third/longest tertial almost cloaked by middle tertial. Pale fringe, almost solid dark centers but sometimes a hint of fractionally darker subterminal band.

Secondaries whitish edges forming wing panel. Primaries dark brown with thin whitish tips.

Underparts dirty white and finely scalloped all over except center of lower breast. Strongest on flanks. (Scalloping not clearly visible until bird seen closer and in good light)

Tail - appearing long and thin and distinctly square ended when closed. (Even impression of having a narrow pale edge when perched against the light.) Underside of tail medium grey, outer pair of tail feathers falling well short of tail tip - in the field calculated to be minimum of 25% shorter than length of exposed tail (sometimes appearing closer to 30% shorter). This could also be seen in flight and interestingly, rather than appearing graduated the rest of the tail looked of a similar length.

Fig. 2. First-winter Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus*, Weybourne Camp, Norfolk, 21st October 2018.

and field notes supplied left no room for error, providing excellent documentation of Norfolk's first Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus*. Voters commented: 'A nice account, James McCallum's field sketches are ace as usual. James must have the record for most submissions in the CZA final shortlist, perhaps he deserves an award for that!'

'Ahead of us were around 15–20 birders, spread in tiny groups across 100 yards or more of the beach, but none of them were watching the bird at that point. After a few minutes, a couple of people to the right of James and myself picked up the shrike flying up into a bramble bush on the southern edge of the pool. The light was awful, bright and burning out detail but the first views pole-axed the pair of us.

'In front of us was a shrike. A shrike in poor light. A shrike which, despite the grim backlit burn-out was a shrike with a striking (and exceptionally rare-looking) combination of a strongly demarcated dark mask, a curiously large bill, apparently concolorous upperparts, short-looking wings and a long, thin tail. Having been fortunate enough to have found several young Red-backed Shrikes [*L. collurio*] over the years, including a few on two recent late August trips to Fair Isle, I knew precisely what was going on. Immediately my stomach knotted with the excited tension that only ever comes my way when confronted with something really good. James was clearly feeling the same symptoms as an eerie hush descended for a few seconds as we both took in the details on the bird sat a hundred yards or more to the south of us. My mouth went dry but not so dry that I couldn't utter the words: "It's a Brown Shrike, James, it's a Brown Shrike..."

#### **'North American Horned Lark'**

Queen Mary and Staines Reservoirs,  
Surrey, from November 2017 –  
Ross Ahmed

The quantity of bird photographs being posted online seems likely to ensure that rarity

'upgrades' are set to continue. Notable examples of major rarities 'found' online in recent years include the Co. Durham Eastern Crowned Warbler *Phylloscopus coronatus* and the Devon Long-billed Murrelet *Brachyramphus perdix*. The identification of this 'North American Horned Lark' *Eremophila a. alpestris/hoyti* was a classic example of internet sleuthing and Ross deserves huge credit for his initial suspicion of this bird's true identity, and for the painstaking effort he put into producing a compelling and detailed submission. The occurrence and associated documentation of this bird helped BBRC in its assessment of a previous claim, from the Outer Hebrides in October 2014, which is currently being assessed by BOURC.

This was another favourite among voters, not only for the photo montage that sets out in detail the differences between this individual and typical European birds (plate 255), but also for the presentation of the DNA results and latest thoughts on subspecific identification. This finished in third place overall, but was given first place by two voters. Voters commented: 'Brilliant contender for CZA and could easily be the winner, an in-depth account attempting to address the subspecies, DNA tree and expert comment from the USA. Best thing for me is the fabulous montage at the end showing differences in plumage between Horned Lark and Shore Lark. A description like this for a [potential] first, which essentially does the work for BBRC must be very highly rated.'

'I was scanning Twitter on the evening of 24th November 2017 when I came across a photo by John Rowland of a bird labelled as "Shorelark" Straightaway the bird seemed very richly coloured and quite unlike the cold tones of *E. a. flava*. I wondered if the bird could be an American-race bird and a quick check of an article written by Brian Small on the apparent Horned Lark on Scilly in October 2001 [*Birding World* 15(3): 111–120] appeared to confirm that the bird was at least a candidate for an American subspecies. This prompted me to suggest on Twitter that the bird might be an American subspecies.'





**255.** 'North American Horned Lark' *Eremophila a. alpestris/hoyti*, showing a montage of images of the Surrey bird (from various photographers) and a comparable series of Shore Lark *E. a. flava*.

### Iberian Chiffchaffs

Spurn, Yorkshire, April 2017 – Tim Jones

The fact that Tim Jones found two Iberian Chiffchaffs *Phylloscopus ibericus* at Spurn in the space of a week is an amazing feat in itself, especially as it seems that most Iberian Chiffchaffs turn up away from the classic migration spots. Well photographed (plate 256) and, more importantly, sound recorded and with analysis of sonograms included, the bird featured here was also trapped, and DNA support gave belt and braces. Voters commented: 'I've put this quite high on the

list. It would have appeared higher if they hadn't lost the detailed in-hand notes! In all seriousness, it's great that Iberian is being kept on the radar, that they're aware of the latest papers, and that generally they're doing everything right.'

'Standing at Numpties, hoping for some vis-mig but not a lot was happening; a pale Curlew [*Numenius arquata*] that dropped into Clubley's caught my eye and I decided to walk up and try and photograph it, more to warm up than anything else! The Curlews flew to Walker Butts so



I followed, up the Canal. I sheltered behind a large hawthorn to get some pics of the Curlew when a familiar call began coming from the hawthorn I was standing next to. It sounded just like an Iberian Chiffchaff but it surely couldn't be – I'd found one only seven days previously 650 m further up the Canal!



Tim Jones

**256.** Iberian Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus ibericus*, Spurn, Yorkshire, 16th April 2017.

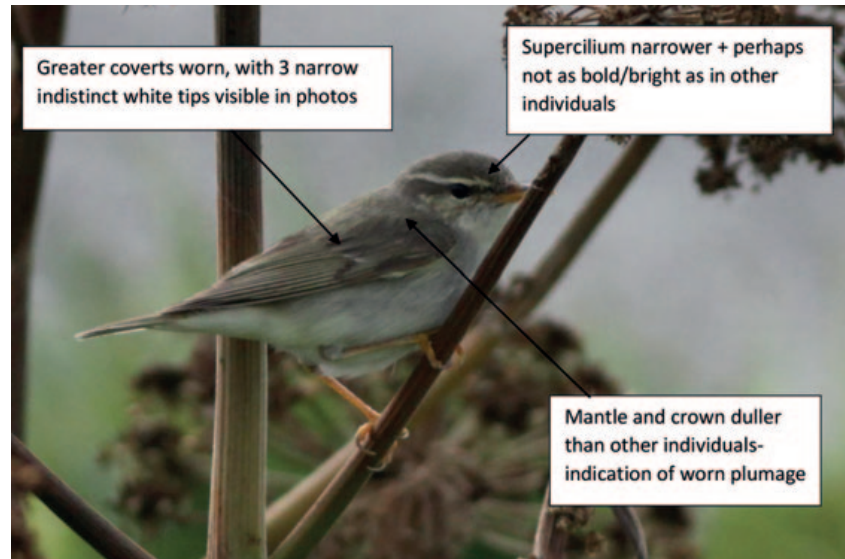
'Half expecting a Reed Bunting [*Emberiza schoeniclus*] to pop out, I was amazed when a phyllosc did indeed show itself, an amazingly bright bird resembling a Willow Warbler [*P. trochilus*]. I almost didn't believe it, but as though to prove me wrong the bird showed amazingly well, allowing me to get some quality pics where I was able to see that it was emarginated to the sixth primary and P2=7/8!'

photographs are nicely laid out and key plumage features are highlighted that differentiate the individuals; all summed up nicely by one voter: 'I really like this one, as it results in the observers really having to look closely at each individual bird beyond just identification. It's a good bit of detective work, and helps in some

### Arctic Warblers

Fair Isle, September  
2018 – Tom Gale

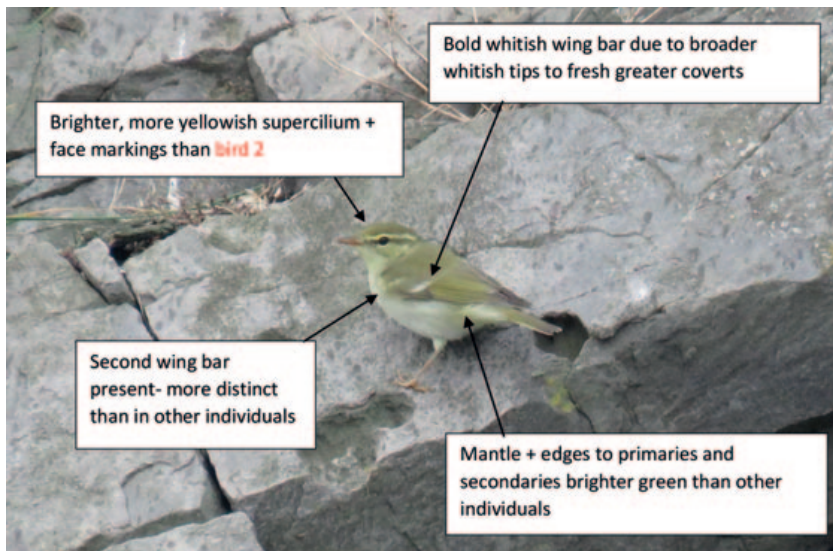
The observers on Fair Isle are used to dealing with multiple arrivals of rarities, but here they made a special effort to prove conclusively there were at least five Arctic Warblers *Phylloscopus borealis* present on the isle in August and September 2018 (plates 257 & 258). Also pleasing to see was the lack of trying to push for seven birds, which could easily have been the true number. The annotated



David Parnaby

**257.** 'Arctic Warbler *Phylloscopus borealis* bird 2: Stackhoull, 5th September 2018, Richard Cope et al. With 20 days since the last Arctic Warbler sighting, as well as the favourable conditions for birds to cross the North Sea on 5th September (southeast winds had also brought a Lanceolated Warbler *Locustella lanceolata* and an Icterine Warbler *Hippolais icterina*, both present in the Gully), the Arctic Warbler found at Stackhoull was established as a new individual. A very worn individual, this bird was aged as an adult. Wear on the greater coverts meant that the pale wing-bar was very indistinct, with three narrow white tips on the right wing and two visible in photos on the left wing. There was no hint of a second wing-bar on the median coverts. The bird's plumage also appeared washed out/faded, with the mantle and crown being greyer than in other individuals.'

David Parnaby



**258.** 'Arctic Warbler *Phylloscopus borealis* bird 3: Muckle Jarm's Geo, 6th–7th September 2018, David Roche et al. Bird 3... showed plumage differences from bird 2 (the adult at Stackhoull on 5th September). The brightest individual, it was aged as a first-calendar-year bird, due to freshness of plumage. Wing-coverts had very little wear, with a second wing-bar present on the median coverts (not as distinct as on greater coverts, but still noticeable in the field and on all photos). Greater coverts had 4–5 broader whitish tips, creating a bold wing-bar.'

respects to look at variation within the species as well as differences in the field between the age classes. It's also a nice final hoorah as Arctic Warbler comes off the BBRC list.'

tify and photograph a fly-by Brännich's Guillemot *Uria lomvia* off Lamba Ness in January! Indeed, if we awarded prizes for the most impressive find, this would surely be a

David Cooper



**259.** Brännich's Guillemot *Uria lomvia* upper right bird (and inset below) with Common Guillemots *U. aalge*, Lamba Ness, Unst, January 2018. 'My attention was drawn to the bird by virtue of its apparently "classic" winter-plumaged Brännich's head pattern, consisting of wholly dark ear-coverts lacking any white behind the eye, simply showing a restricted and poorly demarcated "dusky" whitish throat, contrasting with a broad dark collar and its short thick bill – the bill of the two accompanying Common Guillemots appeared long and narrow by comparison, particularly the winter-plumaged individual. To my mind, the image also conveys the trailing bird showing slightly blacker upperparts than the two Guillemots. Enlarged (inset) it has an "unfamiliar feel" for someone used to seeing passing Guillemots and Razorbills [*Alca torda*] in showing a noticeable bump on its forehead, a short strong bill, curving upper mandible with its bill being held subtly pointing downwards and a thickset, pot-bellied appearance.'

## The Carl Zeiss Award 2019 winner Brännich's Guillemot

Lamba Ness, Unst,  
January 2018 –  
David Cooper

With a clear lead in the points score, this was the first choice of five voters and a stand-out winner in that respect too. Unusually perhaps, this is not a feather by feather account, and the photographs are grainy and small. However, what a find! In what was a brief encounter, Dave managed to locate, evaluate, iden-

tify and photograph a fly-by Brännich's Guillemot *Uria lomvia* off Lamba Ness in January! Indeed, if we awarded prizes for the most impressive find, this would surely be a top contender for the year. As well as providing photographic evidence (plates 259–261), Dave used a simple trick of turning the images into negatives, highlighting and illustrating the extent of the clean white flanks. Going above and beyond simply submitting the photographs, he turned a brief encounter into a highly readable and gripping account of what must have been one of the most stressful encounters in seawatching. His submission, and his extensive analysis of the photographs, combined with the involvement of external



advice, shows a level of honesty that is sometimes missing from other submissions. Voters commented: 'A fabulous account of the experience of finding a rare seabird, with most of the relevant aspects of the identification well seen and described in the submission. The ability to photograph the bird in such difficult conditions is commendable.' And: 'My winner. Sensational account of the first accepted fly-by Brünnich's. We have so many problems with fly-by seabirds and this record demonstrates the need for a photograph, it wouldn't have been submitted otherwise as Dave couldn't be sure afterwards. Love the way he discusses the identification, the way Brünnich's Guillemot size is described in various field guides, and the shape by using montage and negatives of the captured image.'

Dave wins a pair of the excellent Zeiss Victory SF 10×42 binoculars and hopefully he'll be reminded of his Brünnich's every time he uses them!

Paul French and Chas Holt, BBRC Chairman and Secretary, c/o 1 Greenfield Bungalows, Easington, East Yorkshire HU12 0TZ; e-mail [chair@bbrc.org.uk](mailto:chair@bbrc.org.uk)



**BBRC**

British Birds Rarities Committee



**BBRC is sponsored by Carl Zeiss Ltd and the RSPB**

Chairman Paul French, 1 Greenfield Bungalows, Easington, East Yorkshire HU12 0TZ; e-mail [chair@bbrc.org.uk](mailto:chair@bbrc.org.uk)

Secretary Chas Holt, 307 St John's Way, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 3PA; e-mail [secretary@bbrc.org.uk](mailto:secretary@bbrc.org.uk)



David Cooper

**260.** 'Now placed alongside an image copied from the Birding Frontiers website. In addition to the structural similarities of head shape and bill shape and plumage similarities of its head pattern, the Razorbill-like white rump-sides inflecting upwards where they "meet" the trailing edge of the wing seems a close match to the Brünnich's Guillemot rather than to the rather messy rear-flank pattern shown by the Common Guillemot in the left image.'



David Cooper

**261.** 'It's a bit sci-fi (or at least to me!) but looking at "negatives" can often prove helpful in assessing the shape and structure of an object as this not only inverts "colours" but can also better "highlight" how light is falling on a subject. Personally, I think the bill shape; convex forehead rather than the concave forehead of a Common Guillemot; throat pattern; bulging upper breast; and pot-bellied and yet more tapering rear-end look just as compelling when viewed as a negative. The Common Guillemot looks markedly rear-heavy in comparison. Perhaps even more importantly is what it reveals by the crispness or well-defined blackness of the rear flanks of the Brünnich's Guillemot compared with the far less well-defined blackness of the rear flanks of the Common Guillemot.'

#### 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](http://www.birdguides.com) and Rare Bird Alert [www.rarebirdalert.co.uk](http://www.rarebirdalert.co.uk)). We are extremely grateful to Carl Zeiss for their continued support of the Committee and this award.

