The Carl Zeiss Award 2020

BBRC has had a close relationship with Zeiss since 1983, making it one of the most long-standing partnerships in the birding world. Not only does Zeiss provide the bulk of the Committee's annual sponsorship, enabling it to function effectively, but it has also supplied all BBRC members with a pair of their flagship Victory SF binoculars since 2015. Zeiss also provides another pair of the Victory SFs as a prize for this award.

Since 1992, the Carl Zeiss Award has been presented to acknowledge exceptional rarity 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. Every record submitted is eligible 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 2020 comprised ten entries. All of the submissions that made it to that final shortlist were excellent in one way or another, with five of the ten being placed first by at least one voter. It is heartening that the standard of the best rarity submissions remains high, and for budding rarity finders looking for ways to improve any future submissions, having a look through those presented here would be a good start.

The nine runners-up in the 2020 award appear 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 accounts are shown as submitted.

Pallid Swift

Skokholm, Pembrokeshire, November 2018 – Richard Brown and Giselle Eagle

When done well, the photo montage is an extremely effective way of delivering lots of information in a clear and efficient manner. When Richard and Giselle found this Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus* on Skokholm, getting a series of photographs proved invaluable. This remains one of the more difficult species for BBRC to assess, and the presentation of those photographs helped significantly with the assessment of this species' key features. One voter commented: 'Best Pallid Swift description I've seen; this kind of annotation is excellent and reminiscent of Michael McKee's

Richard Brown and Giselle Eagle

Fig. 1. Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus*, Skokholm, Pembrokeshire, November 2018.

winning Brown Shrike [*Lanius cristatus*] from 2017. Importantly, [their submission has] at least addressed the challenge of "Eastern Common Swift" *A. apus pekinensis*.'

Northern Giant/ Southern Giant Petrel

Whitburn, Co. Durham and Cullernose Point, Northumberland, July 2019 – Mark Newsome and Stewart Sexton

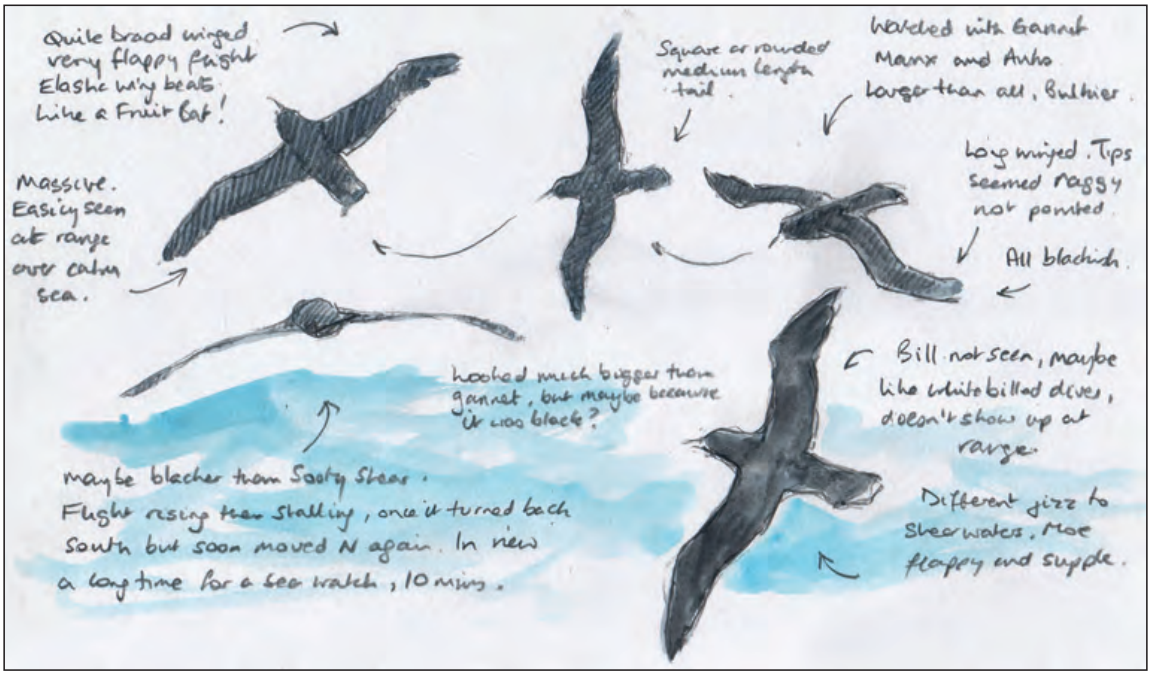
The birding community's collective jaw certainly hit the floor when news broke of a Giant Petrel *Macronectes halli/giganteus*, first seen by Mark Newsome at Whitburn, then farther up the coast at Cullernose Point. Giant Petrel has been claimed in Britain several times before, but none of the claims were as well documented as this one. One voter's comments were: 'Lucky for this bird that it chose to appear in front of one of the most experienced seawatchers in the country. Mark had previous experience of the species group, which assisted him in the identification. His calm assessment of the petrel in its four- to five-minute flypast enabled him to consider fully the relevant features, which are convincingly described in his submission.' This is potentially the first record for Britain of one of the Giant Petrels and was accepted as such by BBRC; at the time of writing it is still being assessed by BOURC.

An often-overlooked aspect of a seawatching record is the weather conditions, but here Mark gives an accurate picture of what viewing conditions were like: pretty much perfect! To a large extent you make your own luck in birding, and Mark has been gazing out to sea from Whitburn for years, building huge amounts of experience and an enviable list of finds. The question of whether a potential first for Britain would be acceptable with a single observer and no photographs was, thankfully, not one the committee had to face this time, because two hours later it was seen again 60 km farther north by Stewart Sexton and Mark Eaton.

Barolo/Boyd's/Audubon's Shearwater

Corsewall Point, Dumfries & Galloway, August 2019 – Brian Henderson

Getting a submission of a Barolo/Boyd's/Audubon's Shearwater *Puffinus baroli/boydi/lherminieri* accepted by BBRC is seen as something akin to answering the Sphinx's riddle, but that is not necessarily so. In his submission, Brian Henderson provided a full and convincing account of his encounter, with details on plumage and, most importantly, jizz. 'One of the trickiest species to describe convincingly but Brian manages it with an excellent account and his forty years'



Stewart Sexton

Fig. 2. Northern Giant/Southern Giant Petrel *Macronectes halli/giganteus*, Cullernose Point, Northumberland, July 2019.

seawatching experience stands him in good stead here. Happily, the bird was quite obliging and his submission includes a detailed description of the relevant features. To his credit, of course, he also managed a single photograph, which [is] a grippingly convincing image.'

Brian Henderson

Fig. 3. Barolo/Boyd's/Audubon's Shearwater *Puffinus baroli/boydi/lherminieri*, Corsewall Point, Dumfries & Galloway, August 2019.

Jizz etc –

Smaller, compacter and sturdier-looking (stockier-looking) than the nearby Manx Shearwaters [*Puffinus puffinus*].

In proportion to body size, the head looked out-of-place comparatively small.

Wings looked obviously shorter, broader and blunter (more rounded).

Less attenuated than the Manxies due to its shorter, more rounded and broader tail.

Flight was the obvious 'indefinable something' feature that initially stood out. It had a quicker, faster and flappier flight and its wingbeats were quicker than those of the Manxies, i.e. it was flapping around 10–12+ times between glides compared to the Manxies, which were flapping 3–6 wingbeats between glides.

The downward flaps of the wings of the Barolo were deeper than those of the Manxies.

The glides were very much shorter than the glides of the Manxies, i.e. only a second or two compared to 3–5+ for the Manxies.

Stayed close and low over the water and didn't 'bank' and 'shear' as the Manxies did.

On the whole, it was a combination of the smaller size, distinctive mode of flight/flight action and white facial features that initially drew my attention to it that made this bird stand out and really set it apart from the nearby Manxies. I also ruled out it being a Manx Shearwater with an aberrant facial plumage owing to its smaller size and critically distinctive mode of flight/flight action whilst at the same time observing and comparing it to all other Manx Shearwaters that passed by.

Two-barred Greenish Warbler

Orford Quay, Suffolk, October 2019 – Mark Cornish

Voting members were suitably impressed both by the find and by the quality of Mark's submission. A series of photographs by Mark and Sean Nixon of Suffolk's first Two-barred Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus plumbeitarsus* showed all the requisite plumage features of the species, and there was also a link to a sound recording and a series of sonograms to complete the picture. 'A superb submission that brilliantly captures the excitement and thrill of encountering a really rare bird. Mark's process of arriving at the correct identification in such a calm and considered fashion, drawing on his experience and observational skills, is to be commended.'

My best photo of the bird, taken just after 09:30. Shows the following features:

Long, broad and straight greater-covert bar of equal length along its width extending to scapulars, and can be seen to be wider than the tarsus.

Plain olive tertials with just slightly darker centres.

Clean, white flanks and underparts.

Long, broad yellowish-white supercilium. The loral line is strong and slightly darker in front of eye.

Pale pink legs and feet.

Mark Cornish

Fig. 4. Two-barred Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus plumbeitarsus*, Orford Quay, Suffolk, October 2019.

Eastern Olivaceous Warbler

Fair Isle, Shetland, June 2019 – David Parnaby

The *Iduna* warblers are the archetypical non-descript grey warbler. They come in various shades of grey, or milky tea if you prefer, and also in varying sizes. Their identification is a subtle art, requiring an exacting and level-headed assessment of a combination of features, and this Eastern Olivaceous Warbler *Iduna pallida* was no exception, especially given that the measurements of the bird in the hand showed overlap with other members of the tribe. A series of in-the-hand and field photographs added to a detailed description and well-presented comparison of the biometrics (table 1). And just to give that watertight 'Do Not Argue' seal, there was a DNA confirmation from Martin Collinson and Thom Shannon at the University of Aberdeen.

Sarah Harris

Fig. 5. Eastern Olivaceous Warbler *Iduna pallida*, Fair Isle, Shetland, June 2019. When your comparison species is a River Warbler *Locustella fluviatilis* (left), you know you are on Fair Isle!

Table 1. Comparison of principal biometric data for Upcher's Warbler *Hippolais languida*, Sykes's Warbler *Iduna rama*, Western Olivaceous Warbler (WOW) *I. opaca*, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler (EOW) *I. pallida* and the Fair Isle Eastern Olivaceous Warbler (AHH9775). Red type indicates where a measurement of the Fair Isle bird falls outside the range of a given taxon.

	Upcher's	Sykes's	WOW	EOW	AHH9775
wing length (mm)	**72–81.5**	**58–65**	67–74	62–71	70
Either EOW or WOW (rules out Upcher's and Sykes's)					
tail length (mm)			50–61	48–59	53
Not conclusive					
P2	**P5 or P5/6**	P6/8	**P7 or P7/8**	P6/7	P6/7 (closer P6)
EOW (or Sykes's)					
wing point	**3 (4)**			3 & 4	3 & 4
Probably not Upcher's					
emarginated primaries	3 4 (5)	**3 4 5 6**		3 4 5 (6)	3 4 (5)
Favours Upcher's, but within range of EOW (rules out Sykes's)					
bill length (to skull) (mm)	16.0–21.8	**12.6–15.9**	**16.6–18.5**	15.0–17.4	16.2/16.5
Upcher's (although at bottom of range) or EOW (rules out Sykes's and [just] WOW)					
bill width (mm) (Svensson 1992)			3.9–5.0	**3.1–3.9**	4.9
P1>PC (mm)	-2.0–4.0		4.0–9.0	2.5–7.0	4
Not conclusive, although at very top end of Upcher's or very bottom end of WOW					

Marmora's Warbler

Unst, Shetland, May 2018 – David Cooper

David Cooper won this award last year with his account of a fly-by Brünnich's Guillemot *Uria lomvia*, and it's no surprise to see him featured here again, this time with Shetland's first Marmora's Warbler *Sylvia sarda*. As well as providing an engaging narrative, Dave made absolutely sure of the identification by fully considering the possibility of Balearic Warbler *S. balearica*, and offered a very useful set of photographs of his bird compared with birds from the native range. Interestingly, his technique of turning his photographs into 'negatives', seen in last year's write-up of his Brünnich's Guillemot, also worked well here, highlighting the difference in throat colour between Marmora's and Balearic. 'An excellent and exciting account of a tremendous find, documented with good photographs and also a good analysis of a "new" identification challenge in Britain – the separation of Marmora's from Balearic Warbler.'

David Cooper

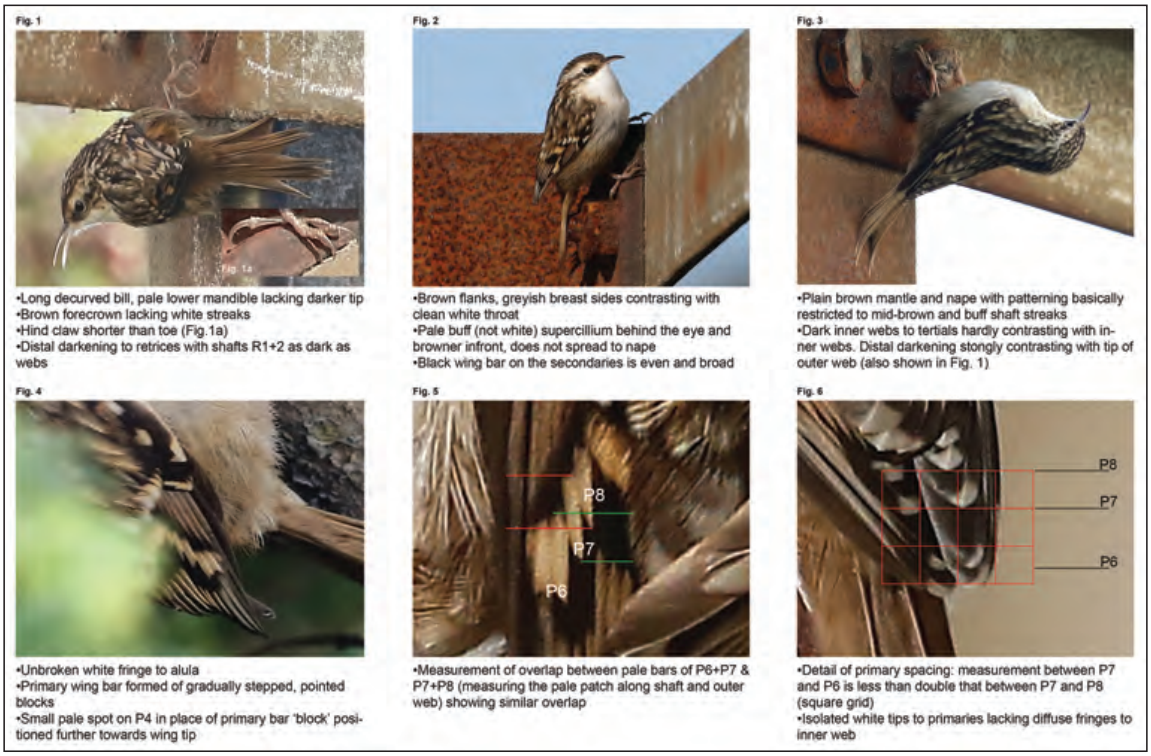
David Cooper

Fig. 6. Marmora's Warbler *Sylvia sarda*, Baltasound, Unst, Shetland, May 2018. **a.** Similar to our first view of the bird perched, tail typically held half-cocked, it reveals its dark crimson iris and narrow mixed red/white orbital ring, pinkish base to its dark-tipped bill and orange legs and feet. Its plumage comprised subtly differing shades of matt slate-grey save for its well-marked darker lores and mask extending to both above and below its eye, whitish malar spot, brown-tinged remiges and vaguely buff-tinged flanks. **b.** The brownish hues visible to its tertial fringes and slightly faded and worn buff-brown primaries age it as a first-summer. The well-marked dark lores and mask then sex it as a male.

Short-toed Treecreeper

Langdon Cliffs, Kent, September 2019 – Jamie Partridge

A vagrant treecreeper on the south coast in the autumn is ripe for being looked at forensically, and that is just what Jamie Partridge did when faced with (what turned out to be) a Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla* on the cliffs above the port of Dover. Managing to fire off a series of photographs that illustrate the key features was vital in this scenario, and Jamie has presented them well here. Importantly, the description also features a transcription of two different call types heard, giving him and the Committee confidence that the identification was correct.



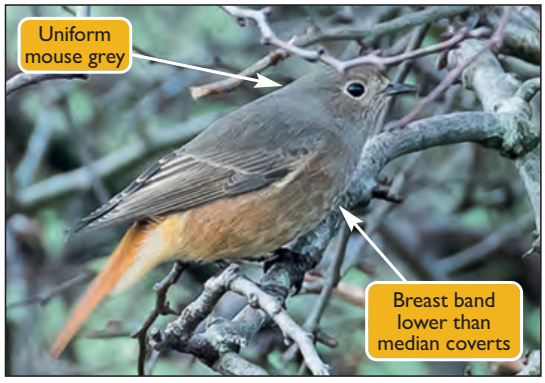
Jamie Partridge

Fig. 7. Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla*, Langdon Cliffs, Kent, September 2019.

'Eastern Black Redstart'

Maidens, Ayrshire, November 2018 – Angus Hogg

Not infrequently in this award we have highlighted birds that have ultimately been found 'Not Proven'. Yet, because we are seeking to highlight the nature of the submission rather than the outcome, this is not a major issue. Indeed, it is sometimes the not proven submissions that can lead to us expanding our knowledge, and these are often great learning experiences for voting members. This submission of a bird thought to be an 'Eastern Black Redstart' *Phoenicurus ochruros phoenicuroides/rufiventris* was a surprise when it landed in our in-tray, being the first claim of a bird in female-type plumage for Britain. This was a well-researched and well-thought-through claim; female Eastern Black Redstart is currently on the fringe of what we consider possible in the field. Currently, DNA analysis is needed to clinch the identification but it may well be that we are able to reconsider this record in future with new knowledge and experience; and that will only be possible given the detail presented by the observer. Ruling out a hybrid Common Redstart *P. phoenicurus* × Black Redstart is among the challenges for a bird such as this.



Dave Grant

Fig. 8. The Ayrshire redstart *Phoenicurus*, November 2018.

Why a Black Redstart?

1. It does have a Common Redstart feel about it and, superficially, one of the images (image 5) looked like images of 'Ehrenberg's Redstart' *P. p. samamisicus* in Shirihai & Svensson (2018), pp. 265–266). However, wing formula discounted this.
2. Wing-tip = P5 (see image 5).
3. Difference between P5–P6 less than half of distance between P6–P7 (see images 5 & 13).
4. This difference between P5–P6 appeared less than half of distance between P6–P7, therefore, according to van Duivendijk (2010), this is unlikely to be hybrid Common Redstart x Black Redstart (see images 5 & 13).

Why Eastern Black Redstart?

1. Underwing-coverts = orangey rufous (see image 17).
2. Dark border on breast below median coverts (see images 11 & 12).
3. Belly = orangey rufous (see images 6, 11 & 12).
4. P6 looks emarginated (see image 18).
5. Mantle = mousey grey (see image 9).
6. Head and hood = mousey grey (see image 6).
7. Scapulars = mousey grey (see image 5).
8. White wing panel was indistinct as reported in Shirihai & Svensson (2018) for *P. o. phoenicuroides* (see image 5).
9. The tone of the grey on the head, breast and back is even and paler than expected for *P. o. semirufus* and *P. o. ochruros*. Based upon this feature this bird may be *P. o. phoenicuroides*.
10. However, it is generally accepted that the above might be confirmed only through DNA analyses.

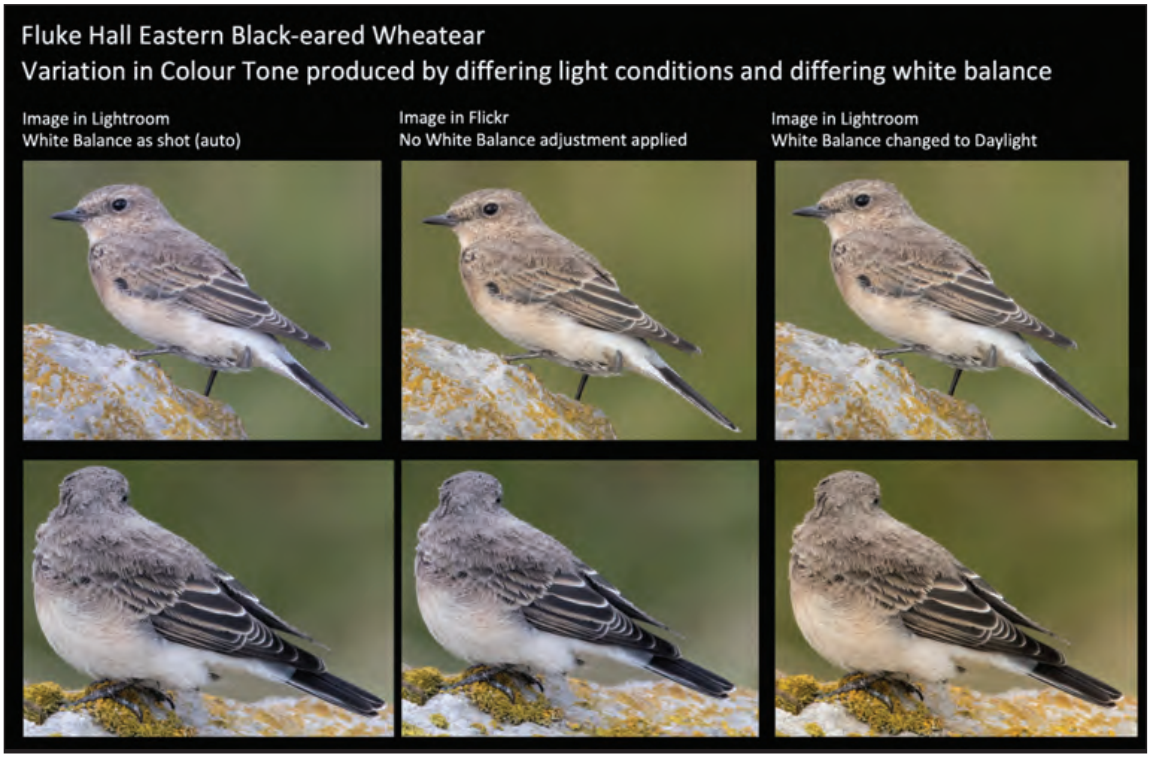
Female-type or first-winter male (non-'*paradoxus*')?

1. Primaries and secondaries = buff tinged.
2. Greater coverts = buff tipped (see image 5).
3. Vent = whitish; whilst this may suggest a hybrid, Garner (2011) commented that 'it seems normal for young male *phoenicuroides* to have pale/white patch in the nether regions!'

'Eastern Black-eared Wheatear'

Fluke Hall, Lancashire & North Merseyside, September 2019 – Paul Ellis

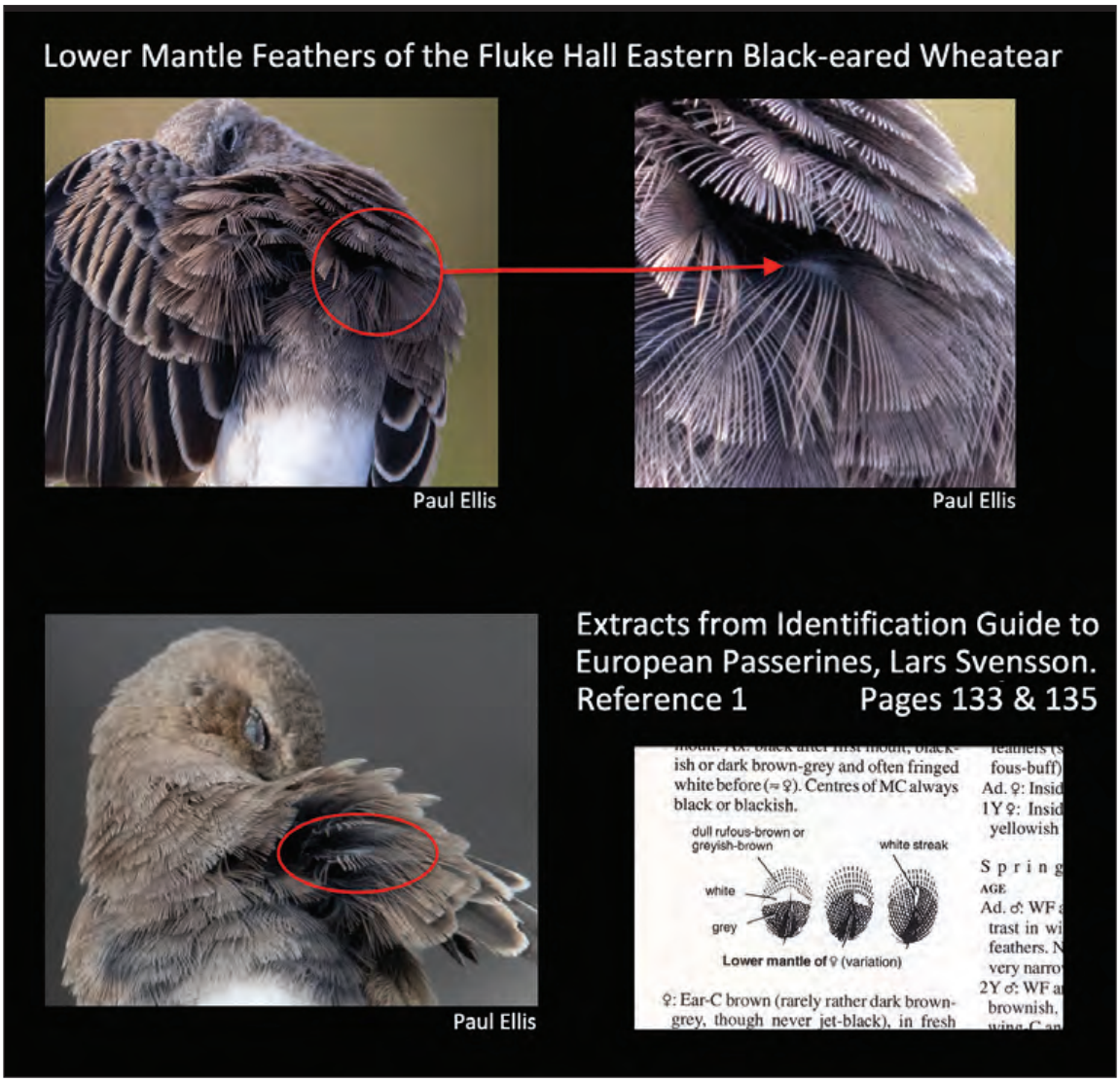
The discovery of a Pied *Oenanthe pleschanka* or Black-eared Wheatear *O. hispanica* in Lancashire in September 2019



Paul Ellis

Fig. 9a. This montage is a great illustration of how the coloration of this bird, such a vital component of the identification, varied in different images according to the image processing employed.

drew much excitement, as the bird's cold, greyish appearance steered the identification towards the eastern form of Black-eared Wheatear *O. h. melanoleuca*. The bird's timing was spot on, since the split of Eastern Black-eared *O. melanoleuca* and Western Black-eared *O. hispanica* will be adopted in 2021. Although this record is still in circulation, the detail presented here in Paul's exceptional submission gives an indication of what may be required for future acceptance.



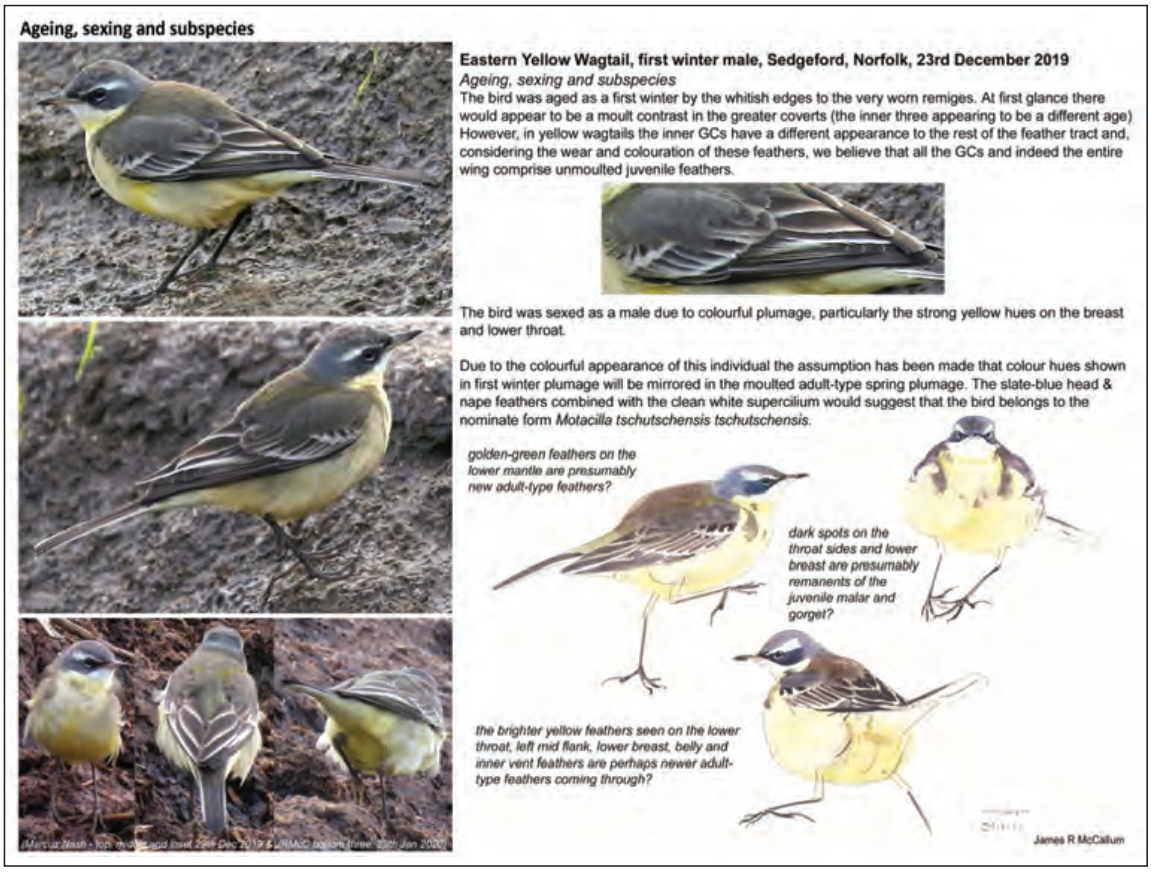
Paul Ellis

Fig. 9b. These images show the all-important white mark on the lower mantle feathers, which points towards 'Eastern Black-eared Wheatear' *O. h. melanoleuca* rather than Pied Wheatear *O. pleschanka*.

The Carl Zeiss Award 2020 winner: Eastern Yellow Wagtail

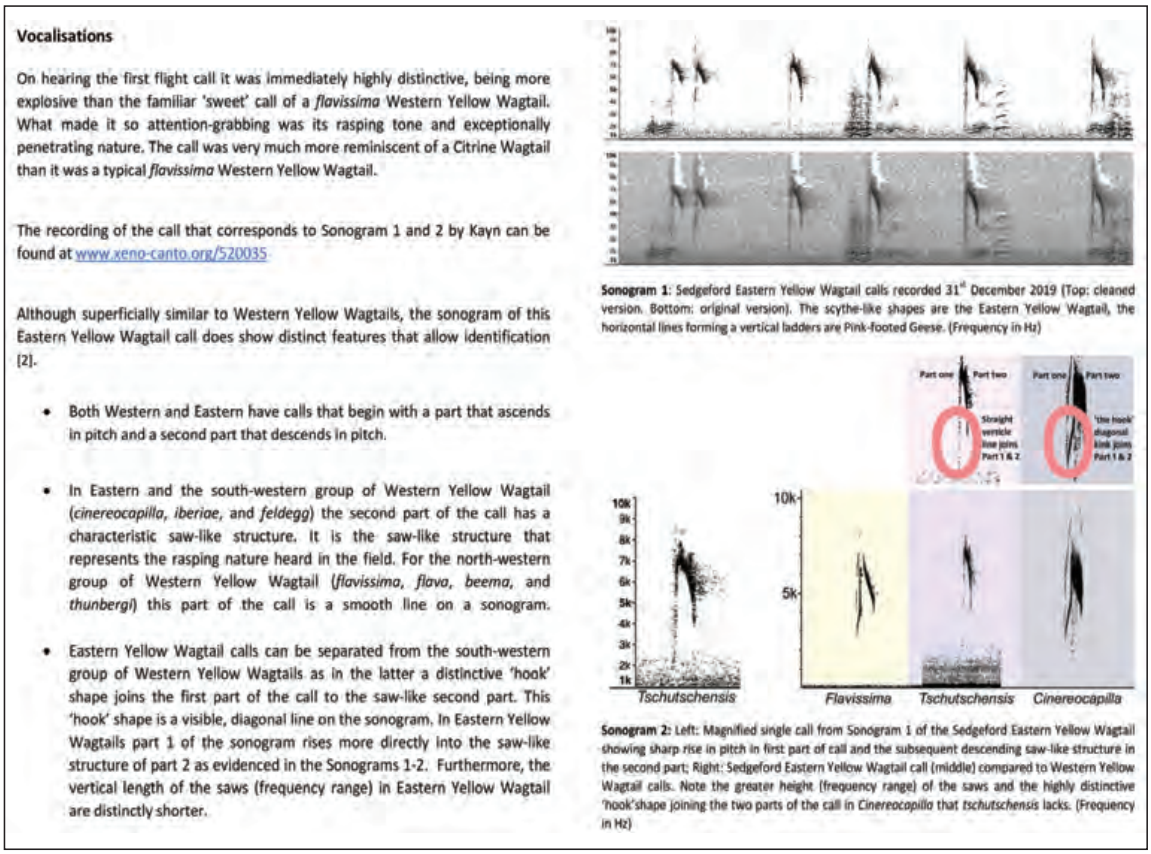
Sedgeford, Norfolk, December 2019 – James McCallum and Kayn Forbes

James McCallum has featured in every Carl Zeiss Award shortlist since 2016. His submissions are invariably excellent, typically featuring a series of beautiful field sketches worked up into finished paintings. As an artist who works solely in the field, his eye for detail simply has to be exceptional. The submission for this Eastern Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla tschutschensis* was no exception, and James and Kayn Forbes presented a very readable introduction followed by a series of photographs illustrating the bird in a variety of light conditions (each explained in the labelling). The detailed written description was accompanied by artwork, and their reasons for ageing, sexing and allocation to subspecies level were clearly laid out. This is potentially the first record of nominate



James McCallum and Kayn Forbes

Fig. 10a. Eastern Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla t. tschutschensis*, Sedgeford, Norfolk, December 2019. This part of the submission deals with the bird's age, sex and subspecies attribution.



James McCallum and Kayn Forbes

Fig. 10b. Vocalisations of Eastern Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla t. tschutschensis*, Sedgeford, Norfolk, December 2019.

tschutschensis for Britain and was accepted as such by BBRC; at the time of writing it is still being assessed by BOURC.

The final part of the submission dealt with the all-important call, and the recording was presented as a sonogram (together with a link to the actual recording) with direct comparisons with the calls of Yellow Wagtail *M. flava*, including the potential confusion taxa *M. f. iberiae* and *M. f. cinereocapilla*. This was the only one of this year's contenders to feature in the top five of all voters, and was the no. 1 for many. Overall, this was a standout winner, and voters' comments included: 'A brilliant comprehensive description; glad it was flagged for inclusion. Particularly liked the discussion of vocalisations with sonograms and the explanation of differences used to identify taxa. James's field sketches are stunning as usual.' And 'A form new to Britain, great submission with all bases covered. Especially strong section on voice. The usual exceptionally high-quality submission from JM.'

James and Kayn were presented with their prize, a pair of the Zeiss Victory SF 8×42 binoculars, by Richard Porter in Norfolk in summer 2020.

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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.

Readers should note that more extensive extracts from the original submissions can be found in *BB* online www.britishbirds.co.uk.

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BBRC British Birds Rarities Committee

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New members for BBRC

In the absence of further nominations, Phil Crockett and Michael McKee have been recruited as voting members to fill the vacancies left by Nic Hallam and Richard Schofield (see *Brit. Birds* 113: 363–366).