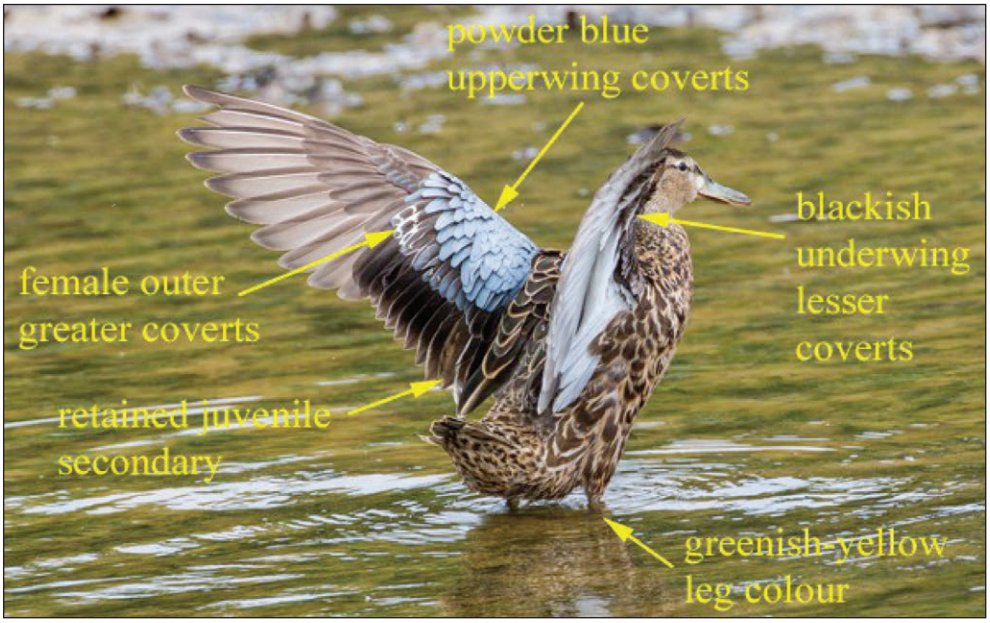
The Carl Zeiss Award 2021

The British Birds Rarities Committee has had a close relationship with ZEISS since 1983, making it one of the longest-standing partnerships in British ornithology. Not only does ZEISS provide the bulk of the Committee's annual sponsorship, enabling BBRC to function effectively, but, since 2015, it has also supplied all BBRC members with a pair of their flagship Victory SF binoculars. Additionally, ZEISS provides a pair of Victory SFs for the winner of the Carl Zeiss Award.

Since its inception in 1992, the Carl Zeiss Award has been presented to acknowledge exceptional rarity submissions to BBRC. From 2015, the award has been given to the best overall submission for which assessment has been completed during the previous 12 months. Every record submitted is eligible for the award, and, when assessing a record, BBRC voting members are able to nominate submissions of particular merit for the Carl Zeiss Award shortlist. The voting process is carried out 'blind', with each voting member reviewing the final shortlist and ranking the submissions in order without knowing the views of their colleagues. Members individuals scores for each shortlisted submission are then summed to give an overall winner.

The final shortlist for 2021 comprised 12 entries. All of the submissions that made it to that final shortlist were of top quality, with four of the 12 being placed first by at least one voter. It is heartening that the standard of the best rarity submissions remains high and, for rarity-finders who are looking for ways to improve their future submissions, a read of the shortlisted submissions presented here – and available to view in full on the *British Birds* website (www.britishbirds.co.uk) – would be a good start.

The 11 submissions that were runners-up of the 2021 award appear in taxonomic order, followed by the winner. Accompanying each one is a short overview of why BBRC members were drawn to each of the submissions, along with selected extracts.



Alan Curry

Fig. 1. First-summer (2CY) female Blue-winged Teal *Spatula discors*, Castle Island, Ashington, Northumberland, May 2020.

Blue-winged Teal

Castle Island, Ashington, Northumberland, May–June 2020 – Alan Curry

Blue-winged Teal *Spatula discors* is a species that can fall foul of 'the hybrid issue', and questions were initially raised about the purity of this individual. However, Alan's detailed analysis, aided by the annotated-photograph method, ensured that the Committee could see all avenues had been explored and this was, after all, an acceptable Blue-winged Teal. Beyond this, Alan was also able to confidently age and sex the bird, something that is all too often overlooked or left to assumption in many descriptions. As one member commented: 'A lovely description with annotated notes, addressing the hybrid issue comprehensively and backed up with expert opinion.'

Ferruginous Duck

West Park, Wolverhampton, West Midlands, February–April 2020 – Craig Reed

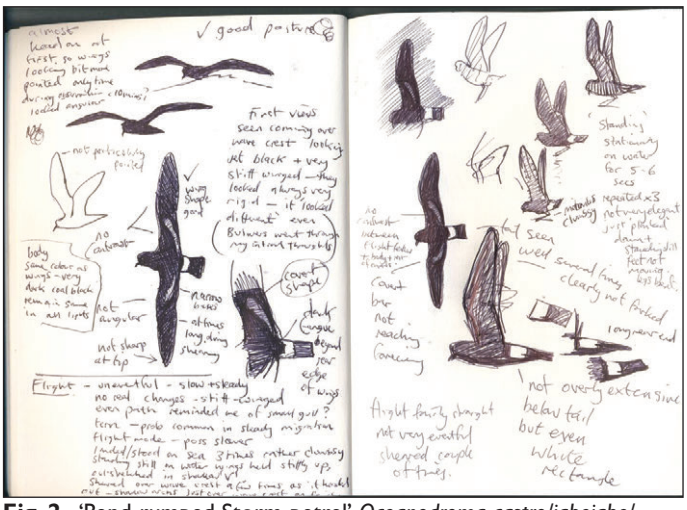
Proof that rare birds can turn up in even the most landlocked and urban of locations, this Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* was the subject of a complete description from Craig, including details of its behaviour (coming close to onlookers, but always with the Tufted Duck *A. fuligula* flock). Another set of annotated photographs left no room for doubt. 'A really nice modern annotated description from Craig. I find this style very easy to assess and digest.'

> The bird was initially wary, swimming away from observers and keeping to the centre of the pool. Generally, it kept as far as it could be from the paths which circumnavigate the edges of the pool. During the bird's stay, it became increasingly confiding and would give great views to observers if they allowed it to approach. It was always wary of people approaching it, however, and would swim away from the edge if a photographer approached too quickly or walkers passed by. The topography of the underwater surface of this man-made lake and the behaviour of the Tufted Ducks in the park, which routinely feed close to the edge, presumably impacted on its behaviour in this urban setting. Shoveler [*Spatula clypeata*] and [Common] Pochard [*A. ferina*] both routinely mimic this behaviour in the park, sometimes approaching within feet.

'Band-rumped Storm-petrel'

Pendeen, Cornwall, September 2009 – Martin Elliot, John Fosterm, Mark Golley, James McCallum, *et al.*

This particular record of 'Band-rumped Storm-petrel' *Oceanodroma castro/jabejabe/monteiroi* has proven to be the cause of much debate on the Committee during its three circulations. It was first assessed in 2016, but a narrow Not Proven result meant that a second circulation was needed. This also resulted in a narrow vote for Not Proven, and this is how the record stayed for several years. It is testament to the quality of the



James McCallum

Fig. 2. 'Band-rumped Storm-petrel' *Oceanodroma castro/jabejabe/monteiroi*, Pendeen, Cornwall, September 2009.

submission that we could revisit it in 2020–21 and finally come to a positive decision on this, the second for Britain. James McCallum's name has appeared in the Carl Zeiss Award in almost every year since 2016, but this submission also contains extensive notes and/or artwork from Martin Elliot, Mark Golley and John Foster, as well as a comment on the identification from Bob Flood. It really is a tour de force of a rarity submission, as well as a very useful exercise in charting the Committee's evolving approach to what was seen as the major stumbling block first time around: the exact extent of white wrapping onto the sides of the undertail-coverts. As one member put it: 'A record that needed to bring together the different observers and assure those [who were] originally uncertain. I think the fact that it is now accepted demonstrates the durability of the evidence presented, which includes excellent field notes.'

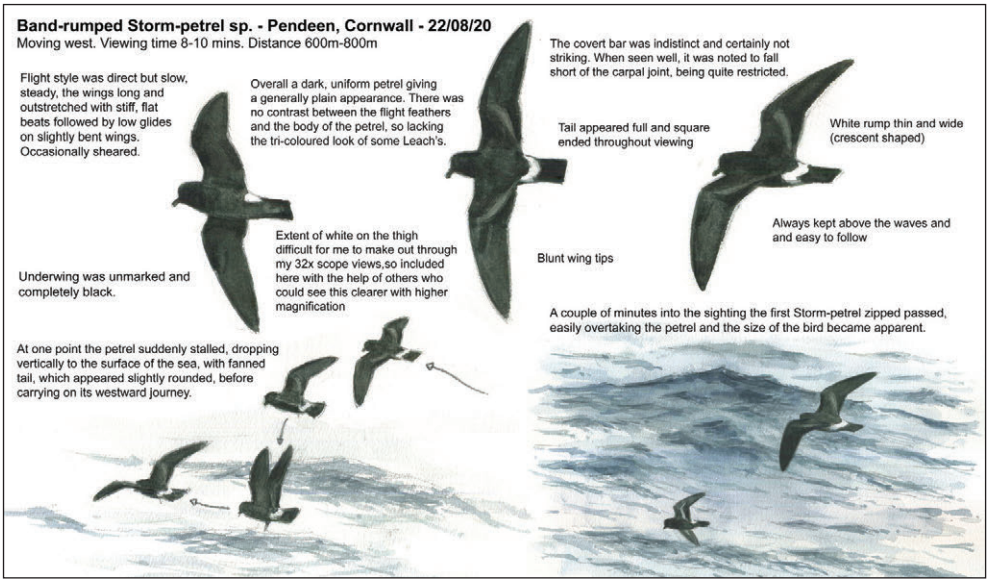
For those of a certain vintage, or for those with a grasp on remembering fabled tales of great birding days, 3rd September will always have a special place in the memory. Some 26 years to the day since the north coast of west Cornwall had borne witness to what was, [in 1983], the ultimate British seawatch, the same date in 2009 was to prove equally as special.

From my point of view, 3rd September 2009 was a classic day of genuinely exciting seawatching, which culminated in a fabulous near ten-minute encounter with a monstrously rare storm-petrel.

'Band-rumped Storm-petrel'

Pendeen, Cornwall, September 2020 – John Badley, Anthony Bentley, Richard Bradbury, Richard Johnson and Joe Tobias

Another 'Band-rumped Storm-petrel' from Pendeen, and another seabird record where photos do not form part of the submission. This record also featured a collation of submissions from several observers, with detailed field notes and sketches from each. The circumstances were well presented, and the notes were convincing and comprehensively ruled out other possible species. One voter commented: 'I thought this submission was outstanding. The account of the day's seawatching was gripping, including the highs and lows of piecing together the identification between the two sets of observers. Joe Tobias's description of the bird's flight action and plumage was highly informative and was nicely complemented by Richard Johnson's sketches and paintings.'



Richard Johnson

Fig. 3. 'Band-rumped Storm-petrel', Pendeen, Cornwall, August 2020.

Scopoli's Shearwater

Multiple sites, Fife and Lothian, August 2020 – John Nadin

Following on from the above, this record illustrates that, occasionally, photographs are instrumental in the identification and acceptance of rare seabirds. This *Calonectris* shearwater had been found the previous day but, as a Cory's Shearwater *C. borealis* had also been present recently in the area, Scopoli's *C. diomedea* was understandably not considered until Dennis Morrison managed to get some photos the revealed the diagnostic pattern on the underside of the primaries. The subsequent internet identification is described and gives comments from seabird experts, all forming a great submission. The bird possessed a distinctive patch of damaged feathers on the right wing, leading to it being dubbed 'Flash' and subsequently allowing it to be identified from other locations.

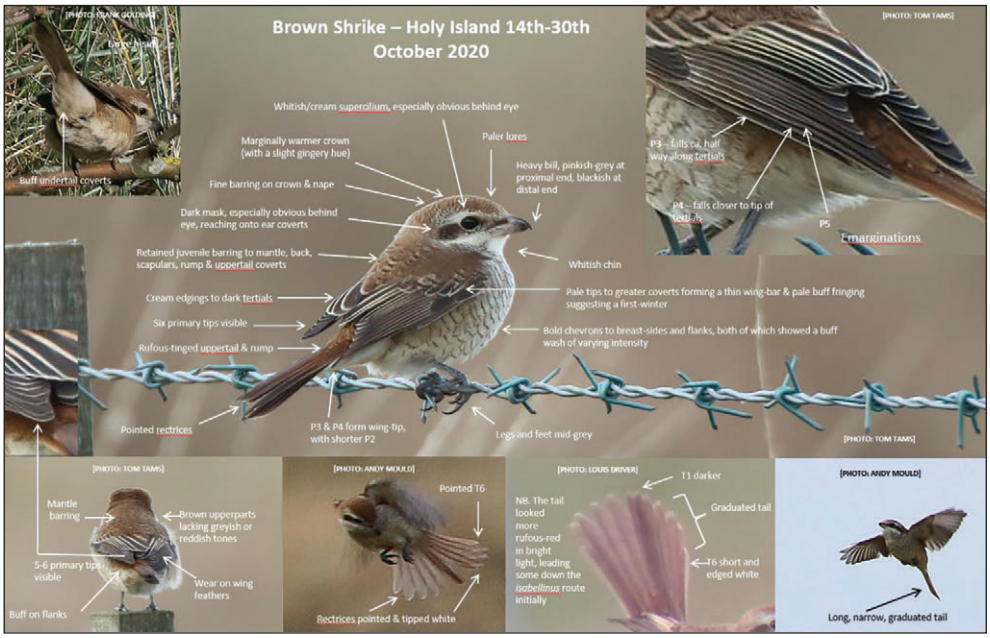
Dennis Morrison

Fig. 4. Scopoli's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea*, Queensferry, Lothian, August 2020.

Brown Shrike

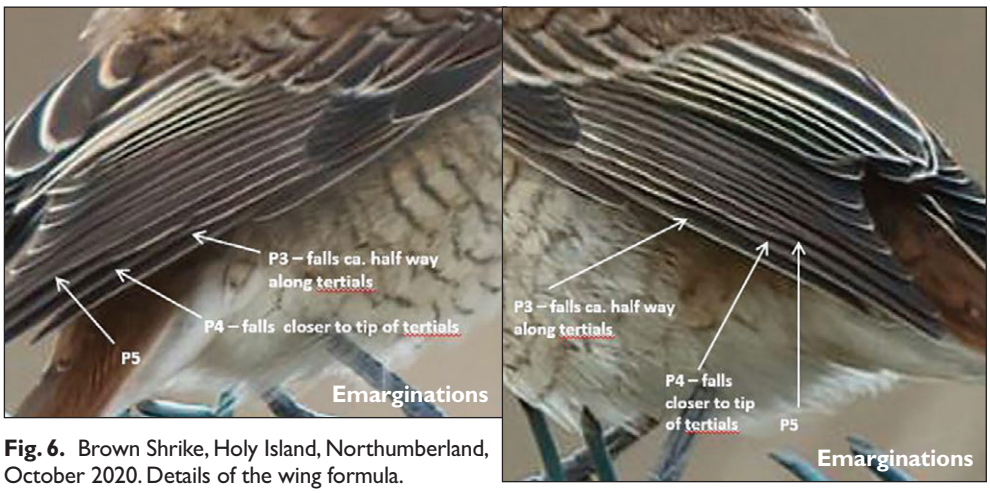
Holy Island, Northumberland, October 2020 – Andrew Mould

More and more observers are using the annotated-photo-montage approach to submissions now, and it has to be said that the Committee does like them! This is a particularly good example of the genre, with the first montage showing the majority of identification features of this Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus*, and the second showing the wing formula in detail. In addition to this, Andrew has also presented a detailed discussion on the separation of this bird from Turkestan *L. phoenicuroides* and Red-backed Shrikes *L. collurio*, as well as ageing criteria. 'A superb submission, centred on an excellent use of captioned photo-analysis. This combined with a bullet-point approach to potential confusion species reduces a potentially tricky identification to something resembling at-a-glance.'



Andy Mould

Fig. 5. Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus*, Holy Island, Northumberland, October 2020.



Andy Mould

Fig. 6. Brown Shrike, Holy Island, Northumberland, October 2020. Details of the wing formula.

Two-barred Greenish Warbler

Budle Point, Northumberland, September–October 2020 – Ross Ahmed and Chris Knox

Ross Ahmed is no stranger to this award, and this joint submission from him and Chris Knox was widely commended. A detailed account of the circumstances and a set of annotated pictures proving the identification and showing ageing features, together with a series of sonograms that are compared with those of other Two-barred Greenish Warblers *Phylloscopus plumbeitarsus* and various confusion species, all serve to make this a water-tight identification. 'This was a beautifully presented submission which not only illustrated the key identification criteria, but also went through ruling out the possible confusion species in a British context. I also liked the annotations to the sonograms highlighting the differences between them' and 'an excellent account of persistence with a hard-to-see but ultimately very well-documented bird.'

Ross Ahmed

Fig. 7. Two-barred Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus plumbeitarsus*, Budle Point, September–October 2020.

Asian Desert Warbler

Holy Island, Northumberland, June 2020 – Mike Carr

Despite this being a relatively straightforward identification, Mike Carr has presented a very nice set of images that illustrate his full description of this Asian Desert Warbler *Curruca nana*, one of the birds of the year for many people. Sound recordings complete the evidence, and there is also discussion on its separation from African Desert Warbler *C. deserti*.

Mike Carr

469. Male Asian Desert Warbler *Curruca nana*, Holy Island, Northumberland, June 2020.

Short-toed Treecreeper

Dungeness, Kent, various dates, 2020 – David Walker *et al.*

David Walker comprehensive submission included all four Short-toed Treecreepers *Certhia brachydactyla* that were found at Dungeness in 2020, which provides detailed explanations backed up by photos as to why there were three different birds within a relatively short space of time. This was instrumental in the Committee accepting each as a different individual.

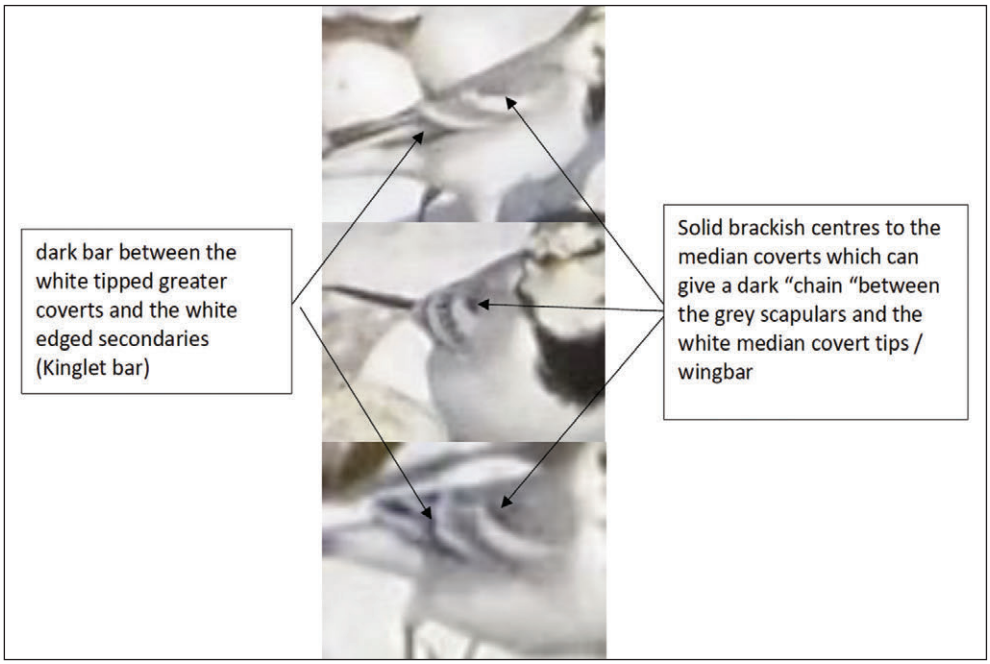
David Walker

470. Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla*, Dungeness, Kent, April 2020. The second of four birds at this site in 2020.

'East Siberian Wagtail'

Unst, Shetland, October 2020 – Mark Sutton

The identification of vagrant forms of White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* is fraught with difficulty due to the variability in nominate-race birds, and the occasional odd bird does turn up. 'East Siberian Wagtail' *M. a. ocularis* is an unfamiliar taxon to many, but this submission made the best of the photographs taken and combined that with research into the separation of *ocularis* from 'Black-backed Wagtail' *M. a. lugens*.



Mark Sutton

Fig. 8. 'East Siberian Wagtail' *Motacilla alba ocularis*, Unst, Shetland, October 2020.

Paddyfield Pipit

Sennen, Cornwall, October–November 2019 – Paul St Pierre

This submission actually had more individual votes for first place than the eventual winner, but it scored slightly lower overall once each of the member's scores were combined. Much of the submission is, understandably, taken up with the story of the call analysis that initially clinched the identification of the bird as Paddyfield Pipit *Anthus rufulus*, but there is also discussion of its plumage and age. Given the length of its stay and how well watched it was, the only constructive criticism was that some would have liked a larger selection of photos and perhaps some artwork too. Comments from BBRC members make clear their appreciation of this submission:

'For me, this conveyed best the reality of making sense of a puzzling bird and of the frequent uncertainty in rarity-finding. It brought together succinctly multiple sources of evidence. Really clearly presented and the circumstances are well written.'

'A jigsaw put together by a whole team of people for a largely unexpected species. Some impressive perseverance involved. Excellent submission covers everything using all the tools of modern-day birding: first-class photos, sound recordings, DNA and an understanding of moult. Useful for future reference.'

'A submission with a little bit of everything! Some great sleuthing on calls, plumage and jizz to get to species level, backed up by DNA. Research into vagrancy patterns. We now wait for a verdict on category [on the British List].'

Fortunately, Toby Phelps was able to get a sound recording and made the call available by Twitter and on his website. Dawn Balmer investigated a location the bird had been using for a potential DNA sample, and her daughter, Bethany Wilson, quickly spotted some fresh poo. John Martin collected the sample and sent it to Martin Collinson at Aberdeen University.

James Lidster heard Toby's recording, thought it more likely to be Blyth's [Pipit *A. godlewskii*] based upon call, and sent the recording to bird sound experts Magnus Robb and Thijs Fijen. Magnus quickly eliminated Richard's [*A. richardi*] and Blyth's Pipits and strongly suspected Paddyfield Pipit.

Steve Rogers

471. Paddyfield Pipit *Anthus rufulus*, Sennen, Cornwall, November 2019.

The Carl Zeiss Award 2021 winner: Zino's Petrel

At sea off Scilly, July 2020 – Bob Flood

Despite the challenging circumstances of the bird's discovery, this submission wrings every drop of evidence from the relatively brief encounter. The fortunate series of photographs obtained by the other lucky observers on board are analysed in great detail, with reference to the finder's own published work on the underwing pattern of Zino's Petrel *Pterodroma maderia*. This is backed up with insightful discussion of flight action and structure and leaves no doubt as to what those present witnessed. Bob Flood gives an excellent commentary on the events of that trip, with quotes from the other birders involved to give a sense of just how everyone was interpreting the bird in the relatively brief time it was alongside the boat. The images clinch the record, with the bird's white underwing-bar giving the nation's birders a collective 'ooooh' moment back when they were first published. It was, as one voter wrote: 'A first-class and – given the brief nature of the sighting – admirably comprehensive account of an incredibly exciting (and globally

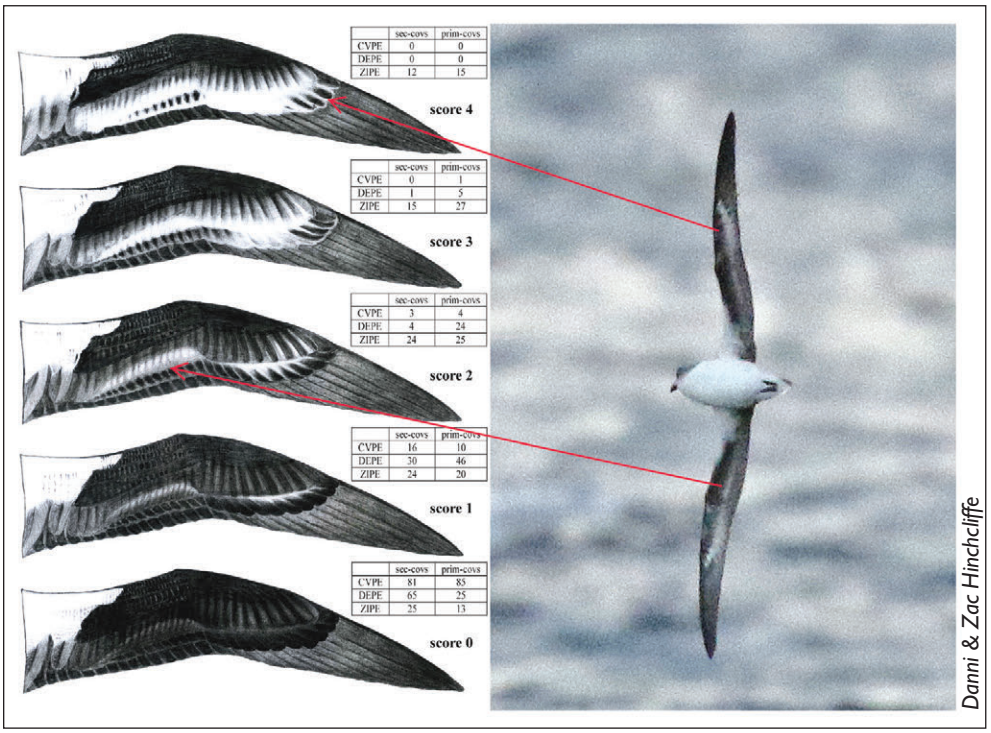


Fig. 9. Zino's Petrel *Pterodroma madeira*, off Scilly, August 2020. The following caption is taken from Bob Flood's submission: 'Scorecard for scoring whitish in the underwing-coverts of the *feae*-complex (Flood & Fisher 2013). Whitish occurs in the underwing greater and median primary and secondary coverts (prim-covs and sec-covs, respectively). An all-dark underwing scores 0, the greatest extent of whitish scores 4. A bird can have different scores for primary and secondary coverts. Figures in the tables give the approximate percentages of birds showing these scores (based on Shirihai *et al.* 2010). The primary-covert score 4 of the Scilly bird is diagnostic of Zino's Petrel, as neither of the Fea's taxa shows such an extent of whitish; the secondary-covert score 2 of the Scilly bird is near diagnostic of Zino's, with only 3% of Cape Verde Petrels [Fea's Petrels *P. feae*] and 4% of Desertas Petrels [*P. desertas*] having this score, compared to 24% of Zino's. The area of whitish in the underwing-coverts appears more extensive when the underwings are observed face on (here, the underwings in the photo are at an acute angle, but less so on the first in the sequence of four photos overpage). However, it is evident from the photos that the greater primary coverts are predominantly whitish except for the outermost three/four coverts that are predominantly dark; the median primary coverts are extensively whitish distally. The median secondary coverts are predominantly whitish.'

Endangered) first for Britain.' Another voter stated: 'this is a brilliant description from a leading expert in the field of seabirds and with a huge amount of experience of the complex. I really like the quotes from other observers on board, size comparison with Manx Shearwater [*Puffinus puffinus*], jizz and the underwing scoring. The summary is fantastic and concise and the photographs the icing. Nice section on geolocators backs up the potential for Zino's to occur in the area.' A third member commented: 'as a first for Britain, this had to be watertight. The photos (which were likely difficult to get) illustrate the crucial underwing-covert pattern score and detailed descriptions of the bird's structure and flight behaviour provide a solid case for this bird's identification.'

Bob is awarded a pair of Zeiss Victory SF 00×00 binoculars.

When first seen, the Scilly Zino's was following a Manx Shearwater, low over the surface, apparently checking it out. Then, without warning, it demonstrated rapid acceleration and super-manoeuvrability, towered up in a steep incline from the ocean surface, at great speed, with no effort. It was a particularly small and lightweight representative of the *feae*-complex [*P. madeira/feae/deserta*] and had a striking amount of whitish in the otherwise blackish underwing-coverts. Subsequent flight was fast and erratic, zooming upward and diving downward, making sharp twists and tight turns. In this respect, it reminded me of the small 'Cookilaria' petrels of the Southern Oceans (small *Pterodroma* petrels). The larger Fea's [*P. feae*] (longer-winged, longer-bodied; see biometrics below) is too large and too heavy to perform the sharp twists and tight turns of a typical lightweight Zino's. The Scilly Zino's performed 'freak-out flight' several times when it flipped from side to side with rapid and shallow flicks of the wings, like the 'freak-out flight' of Soft-plumaged Petrel [*P. mollis*]. I have not seen either of the two Fea's-type petrels perform 'freak-out flight'.

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 ZEISS for their continued support of the Committee and this award.

References

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Shirihai, H., Bretagnolle, V., & Zino, F. 2010. Identification of Fea's, Desertas and Zino's Petrels at sea. *Birding World* 23: 239–275.

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