

Brown Flycatcher on Fair Isle: new to Britain

Paul Harvey

Abstract A Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica* was found and trapped on Fair Isle on 1st July 1992. It remained on the island the following day but was not seen thereafter. The identification was accepted by BBRC and BOURC. Owing to doubts that it had occurred in a wild state, BOURC originally placed the record into Category D, which forms an Appendix to the British List. Following further British records of the species in 2007 (in Yorkshire) and 2008 (on Fair Isle), BOURC reviewed the first Fair Isle bird, which was accepted as the first British record, and placed all three individuals into Category A of the British List.

Early morning trap-rounds on Fair Isle in midsummer are typically uneventful affairs so, despite the overnight switch to northeast winds, I left the Observatory at 07.00 hrs on 1st July very much on autopilot. I was accompanied by John Lumsden and Jack Keiser, both visitors to the Observatory. By the time we had reached the patch of sallows *Salix* and conifers known as the Plantation, I had trapped just two Rock Pipits *Anthus petrosus*. But as I entered the Plantation, what looked like a small greyish warbler flitted towards the southern catching box of the Heligoland trap; unfortunately it brushed the mesh and then escaped through a small hole. I was intrigued by the bird, unsure as to what it was, so we waited for a short while hoping it would reappear. After ten minutes or so, I decided to ring the Rock Pipits at the small ringing hut just to the south of the trapping area.

Upon my return to the Plantation, the mystery bird was flushed again and it alighted briefly on the heather bank opposite, some 30 m away. Its stance and large eye suggested that it was a flycatcher, but surely it was too small and clean for a Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*, while the lack of white in the tail ruled out Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva*. Things were getting exciting! The bird flew back into the Plantation and after an agonising ten minutes of searching I managed to relocate it in the canopy. It was clearly very small, unstreaked

and, furthermore, showed a striking pale whitish eye-ring and pale lores. When I saw the size and shape of the bill and extent of the pale orange on the lower mandible, my adrenalin levels were such that I could barely hold myself steady. It surely had to be a Brown Flycatcher! At this stage I saw the bird land on a post deep inside the catching area and immediately dashed in, flushing it into the catching box. A brief in-the-hand examination was enough to dispel any lingering doubts: I was holding Britain's first Brown Flycatcher *M. dauurica*!

It was now 08.30 hrs and I returned hastily to the Observatory and showed the bird to an astonished Nick Dymond, Roger Riddington, Roy Taylor and Steve Votier. A quick phone call was made to Nick Riddiford, who lives in the south of the island, and he appeared in no time at all, breaking one or two cycling records in the process. The bird was examined in the hand, ringed, photographed and a detailed description taken, before being released back at the Plantation just after 09.00 hrs.

Detailed description

The following is based upon a combination of field observations and the in-the-hand description.

Structure

A small, dumpy, shortish-tailed, large-headed flycatcher. The bill was incredibly broad at the base and appeared almost boat-shaped, while

the dark eye was strikingly large. The primary projection was approximately equal to the length of the exposed tertials (although it could appear slightly shorter or longer in the field depending on the stance) and similar to the distance between the wing point and the tail tip. The primaries extended about half to three-quarters of the way down the tail.

Head

The most obvious feature was the prominent pale eye-ring, merging with the equally prominent pale lores. The pale supercilia above the lores at times appeared to meet over the bill base. Occasionally there appeared to be a slightly paler area behind the upper rear of the eye. The orbital ring was dark, accentuating the apparent size of the eye. The crown and nape appeared grey in strong light but showed some olive tones in duller conditions. The fore-crown was slightly paler and occasionally appeared warmer. The ear-coverts were grey, often appearing greyer than the crown. On either side of the face, a creamy submoustachial area, flecked with grey, extended around the base of the ear-coverts and was bordered by a fairly prominent dark malar stripe running from just short of the bill to below the ear-coverts. In bright light conditions the malar stripes could disappear completely. The chin and throat were white.

Upperparts

The nape, mantle and back were greyish, always contrasting markedly with the

brownish wings and tail. In the shade or in poor light conditions, however, there appeared to be some olive tones to the upperparts. The rump was slightly browner and the uppertail-coverts were grey.

Underparts

The colour of the underparts varied according to the light conditions. In very strong light the whole of the underparts appeared white, whereas in dull or shaded conditions there was a marked greyish suffusion on the sides of the breast; this sometimes even appeared to extend right across the breast to form a greyish pectoral band. The flanks also occasionally showed a greyish suffusion. The chin, throat and undertail-coverts always appeared white, the chin and throat contrasting markedly with the grey suffusion on the breast in dull light.

Wings

The primaries and secondaries were brownish, often looking quite bleached. The tips of the longest primaries were heavily abraded, the inner ones less so, while the secondaries appeared a little fresher. The tertials were also heavily abraded, two with triangular notches in the tips, brownish in colour and with the remnants of a pale buff fringe. The primary coverts and the large feather of the alula were bleached brown, the central feather of the alula was a darker 'fresher' brown, presumably having been moulted at an earlier date. The lesser and median coverts were greyish-brown. The eight

outer greater coverts on the left wing (seven on the right wing) were bleached brown with heavily worn tips. However, the outer four feathers (on each wing) still showed an obvious buff tip on the outer web of the feather while the remaining juvenile feathers had worn away in the shape of the missing buff tip. The innermost greater covert on the



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left wing (the inner two on the right wing) was clearly fresher and greyer-centred, with a neat greyish-white fringe.

Tail

The tail appeared square-ended and the rectrices were brownish and heavily abraded. Two feathers were broken (at about halfway, the pattern of the break typical of that seen when birds have broken tail feathers) and a third (outer feather) had worn down to the shaft.

Bare parts

The upper mandible was dark horn, the lower mandible orange/straw on the basal two-thirds, with a dark-horn distal third. The gape was a stunning yellow, almost resembling that of a freshly fledged juvenile passerine! There were five pairs of prominent rectal bristles. The legs were purple-horn, with a yellowish rear, but in the field essentially appeared dark blackish. The iris was dark brown and the pupil black.

Biometric data

wing length	72 mm
tail length	47 mm
bill – length to skull	15.4 mm
bill – width at rear of nostrils	7.5 mm
bill – depth at rear of nostrils	3.4 mm
weight	12.4 g

The fat score was assessed as 2 on a score of 0–5, 5 being the maximum.

Behaviour

The bird fed in typical flycatcher fashion, generally within the canopy of the Plantation, when frequent, amazingly loud bill-snapping could be heard. Sometimes it would sit motionless, concealed within the canopy, for minutes at a time. It rarely left the Plantation, where it performed for about 50 visiting birders over its two-day stay. On the afternoon of 2nd July, it was seen feeding farther afield and was last seen near the Gully trap that evening.

Identification

Once I had calmed down, the identification was relatively straightforward. The combination of size, lack of any streaking in the plumage, lack of white in the tail, bill structure

and the extensive yellow on the lower mandible quickly removed Spotted and Red-breasted Flycatchers from the equation. Fortunately, I had spent some time birding in southeast Asia in the 1980s, and two identification articles on potential vagrant eastern flycatchers had been published in the popular British birding press the previous year (Alström & Hirschfeld 1991; Bradshaw *et al.* 1991), so I was reasonably well versed with the relevant identification criteria. Grey-streaked Flycatcher *M. griseisticta* has distinct streaking across the breast and down the flanks and shows less yellow/orange on the lower mandible, so was easily ruled out. Siberian Flycatcher *M. sibirica* can appear more like Brown, but typically shows a much stronger dark wash (occasionally even smudged streaks) down the sides of the breast, sometimes split by just a pale central band. In addition, Siberian shows much less distinct pale (brownier-washed) lores than Brown, and has a smaller, narrower bill with a less prominent pale base to the lower mandible.

Ageing and moult

The bird was aged as a first-summer based mainly on the pattern of the greater coverts: a number of these (eight on the left wing and seven on the right) were clearly retained juvenile feathers. The uppertail-coverts, perhaps the most worn tract of the contour feathers, also showed some pale tips (despite the degree of wear) and it seems likely that these were also retained juvenile feathers. The general state of abrasion of the remiges and rectrices was also more in line with a first-summer than an adult. Unlike Spotted Flycatcher, which has a complete winter moult, Brown Flycatcher has a complete summer moult. This individual would, therefore, have carried its flight feathers, some greater coverts and possibly its uppertail-coverts since it left the nest some 12 months earlier.

Weather conditions and associated arrivals

During the latter half of May and most of June 1992, northern Europe was dominated by anticyclonic conditions with an associated easterly airstream. During this period there were record numbers of some common and scarce migrants on Fair Isle, including Spotted

Flycatchers, Icterine *Hippolais icterina* and Wood Warblers *Phylloscopus sibilatrix* as well as nine Red-throated Pipits *Anthus cervinus*, five Black-headed Buntings *Emberiza melanocephala*, two Greenish Warblers *P. trochiloides* and a Paddyfield Warbler *Acrocephalus agricola*. Although westerly conditions were more prevalent on Fair Isle during the latter part of June, an anticyclone briefly re-established itself over Scandinavia at the end of the month bringing northeast winds on 1st July when the Brown Flycatcher was found. All attention focused on the flycatcher that day but a wider search of the island on 2nd July produced Fair Isle's first Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva* as well as a Marsh Warbler *A. palustris* and the third Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* in four days. Elsewhere in Britain, a Greenish Warbler was trapped at South Walney, Cumbria, on 30th June (*Brit. Birds* 86: 516).

Range and distribution

Brown Flycatcher is now generally treated as monotypic. It breeds in southern and eastern Siberia from the Yenisey River east to Amurland, Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands. It also breeds in northern Mongolia, the Korean Peninsula, Japan and south to northeastern China. It migrates to winter from the eastern Himalayas east to southern China and south to Sri Lanka, Indochina and the Malay Peninsula to the Philippines and Greater Sundas. The species is, therefore, a long-distance migrant which shares parts of its breeding

and wintering range with other species that originate in Siberia and occur as vagrants to Britain.

Origin and status

I was initially concerned about the heavily abraded tail feathers, and the prospect that that could be the result of damage sustained in captivity. It was thus a welcome relief when I opened Svensson (1992) to find that the species has a complete summer moult. I considered it quite plausible that this individual could show this degree of abrasion some 12 months after it had left the nest. Nevertheless, it was heartening that highly experienced ringers such as Nick Riddiford and Nick Dymond agreed with this view. Indeed they seemed less concerned by the degree of wear and damage than I was.

We were aware that the timing of the record was very unusual for a Siberian vagrant, most of which occur as young birds in autumn. We did, however, feel that an arrival date of 1st July is what might be expected if the bird had overshot its breeding grounds on its spring migration and just kept migrating. For example, Arctic Warblers *P. borealis*, many of which winter in the same areas as Brown Flycatchers, had occurred previously in Britain at similar times: at Titchwell, Norfolk, on 5th July 1975 (*Brit. Birds* 69: 350) and on Fair Isle on 3rd July 1982 (*Brit. Birds* 76: 515). These individuals had presumably overshot their breeding grounds after a long migration from their wintering areas.

Given that the Brown Flycatcher is a long-distance migrant that winters in the tropics, the state of the plumage was consistent with what might be expected of a first-summer in early July. Although the arrival date was unusual, it could be explained by a spring migrant overshooting the breeding range. The record was sub-



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mitted to BBRC in the belief that it represented a genuine vagrant.

Original submission to later review

The record was sent to BBRC in late 1992 and the identification accepted unanimously; it was passed on to BOURC in March 1993. Although the latter committee accepted the identification, categorisation was a much more complex affair. After some deliberation, they decided to place Brown Flycatcher in Category D, for reasons outlined by Parkin & Shaw (1994). BOURC considered that the arrival date did not conform to the expected autumn arrival pattern for an insectivorous Siberian vagrant reaching Britain, nor did it match the arrival dates of the two Brown Flycatchers that had reached western Europe prior to 1992. Although BOURC was not aware of any Brown Flycatchers having been advertised or imported into Britain since 1970, the availability of related species combined with the difficulty of identification made it possible that the species could have been imported inadvertently (and undetected).

Other European records

By 1992 there had already been two accepted records in Europe, so the discovery of one in Britain was not entirely unexpected. One was recorded in Denmark on 24th–25th September 1959 (Christensen 1960), and one was in Sweden on 27th–30th September 1986 (Hirschfeld 1987).

The discovery of two subsequent birds in Britain – an adult at Flamborough Head, Yorkshire, on 3rd–4th October 2007 (Baines 2007), and a first-winter on Fair Isle on 24th–25th September 2008 (Shaw 2010) – showed that vagrancy by Brown Flycatcher to Britain was a reality and reignited interest in the 1992 Fair Isle bird. After they had been accepted by BBRC, the two recent Brown Flycatcher records were reviewed by BOURC, which in turn prompted the circumstances of the 1992 Fair Isle record to be re-examined. Although no additional evidence to suggest the likely origin had emerged, no hard evidence that the species occurred in the captive bird trade in Britain or elsewhere in Europe had come to light. Once again the unusual date was alluded to, and also the

worn condition of the bird's plumage, although the latter was found to be consistent with that shown by museum specimens taken in June and July. Consequently, BOURC accepted the 1992 Fair Isle bird as being of wild origin, and Brown Flycatcher was added to Category A of the British List (BOU 2010). A further European record occurred during the intervening period, in Greece on 4th September 1993 (Slack 2009).

Further comments on the arrival date

Since 1992, spring occurrences of Siberian vagrants have occurred with greater regularity. The relatively early arrival dates of the majority of these individuals suggest that they have probably wintered successfully in western Europe, or slightly farther afield, and then been found as they undertook a northward spring migration. Britain's first Taiga Flycatcher *F. albicilla* (Lassey 2005) is surely a classic example of this, being located as early as 26th April in 2003. The increasing number of Yellow-browed Warblers *P. inornatus* now wintering in western Europe also support this suggestion. This pattern is perhaps to be expected as it would seem highly unlikely that many genuine spring overshoots would reach western Europe from their wintering grounds in southeast Asia or India.

The phenomenon of spring 'overshooting' seems to be widely accepted by ornithologists today. Whether this represents genuine overshooting during a relatively long-distance northward spring movement, individuals actively moving north to locate territories or mates, genetic malfunctions that fail to switch off the migratory urge, or some combination of these is still largely conjecture. Should a bird such as the Fair Isle 1992 Brown Flycatcher undertake such a movement, however, I would contend that an arrival date of 1st July is not unexpected. Consider the dates of late-spring records in western Europe of two similar-sized migratory insectivorous passerines whose winter distribution overlaps with that of Brown Flycatcher – Arctic and Lanceolated Warblers *Locustella lanceolata*. Arctic Warblers have bred in small numbers in eastern Fennoscandia for some time. These individuals have one of the longest migrations of any



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passerine species wintering in southeast Asia. Hagemeyer & Blair (1997) indicated that breeding birds arrive in Finland from mid June onwards and that warm springs result in higher numbers. In Britain there are now ten records of Arctic Warblers in June and July (Slack 2009). Nine have occurred in Shetland, six between 21st June and 10th July, with another on 19th and two on 30th July. The tenth individual was found at Titchwell on 5th July. This occurrence pattern is precisely what one might expect of individuals overshooting their breeding grounds. The second species, Lanceolated Warbler, which also shares some of its wintering range with the Brown Flycatcher, is experiencing something of a westward range expansion and now occurs regularly in Finland and occasionally breeds. Lindblom (2008) documented 95 records of Lanceolated Warbler in Finland, 91 of them in spring (it is perhaps not surprising, given their skulking nature, that so many records are of singing males). What is interesting, however, is their arrival dates. The earliest record was on 16th June, with 34 found in June, 56 in July and one in August. The majority were found between 22nd June and 12th July. The arrival in Finland is later than that in the main breeding range in Russia, where it is common before mid June. In both cases, the late arrival is possibly just a function of the distance

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travelled.

Although this is little more than conjecture, it seems plausible that an arrival date of 1st July in Shetland is just what one might expect for a Brown Flycatcher reaching Europe if it did indeed 'overshoot' its breeding grounds. With an ever-increasing number of observers in western Europe, it will be

interesting to see whether we get further major Siberian vagrants between mid June and mid July.

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Editorial comment Martin Collinson, Chairman of BOURC, provided the following summary of the hurdles which this record of Brown Flycatcher had to overcome before being admitted into Category A of the British List: ‘When Paul Harvey clamped his binoculars on Britain’s first Brown Flycatcher, he could have little suspected the time it would take to get it into Category A. Nor could he have anticipated the totem-like status this bird (and its partner in crime, the Mugimaki Flycatcher *Ficedula mugimaki* at Stone Creek, Yorkshire, on 16th–17th November 1991) would achieve in discussions of the perceived chasm between ordinary birders and the establishment (as represented by BOURC). The initial decision to place the species in Category D was not universally welcomed, given that none had been found in trade during assessment of the record, but in hindsight was clearly the right one. Twenty other species of eastern flycatcher had recently been imported to the UK, and species were found in trade that had been incorrectly identified or never been advertised. Add to that the widespread potential for illegal import and it was a realistic possibility that Brown Flycatchers were in captivity in Europe in 1992. Asian Brown Flycatchers are still listed on some cagebird-related websites such as www.softbillsforsale.com, and even though none appear to be currently advertised, the species certainly must have featured on the aviculture radar until relatively recently. When the Fair Isle individual turned up outside the main migration period, with a tatty plumage, which, while not inconsistent with a wild origin, did not inspire confidence, there was enough doubt in BOURC’s collective mind to preclude full acceptance in Category A.

‘So, what changed? It is fair to say that there was no single defining factor that tipped the balance, but a combination of events and new information. Obviously, there was the occurrence of two birds in Britain in the autumns of 2007 and 2008 at a period when, thanks to the EU-wide ban on imports from 1st July 2007 due to bird flu, there would not be any wild-caught birds in (legal) trade. Although one of these (the Flamborough bird) was almost certainly an adult, they unambiguously got this species over the “credibility barrier” for wild occurrence in Britain. Even in 1992, however, the previous autumn records from Denmark and Sweden might have suggested that there was actually not much of a credibility barrier to surmount.

‘It had already been established that the poor state of the bird’s tail was not in itself a problem, and this was reinforced by a continuing pattern of other species turning up as “midsummer” migrants in the Northern Isles, in plumage states very similar to this Brown Flycatcher.

‘Another continuing supporting factor, as explained by Paul Harvey in this paper, is the realisation that the 1st July date is not as anomalous as previously thought. The developing pattern of late June and July records of Arctic Warbler, which was not as obvious in 1992 as it is now, is a strong argument that spring overshooting of eastern vagrants can and does produce such occurrence dates during the protracted northern spring. Prior to 1992, you would have got very long odds on the possibility that Britain’s first Brown Flycatcher would turn up in July but, with the benefit of this new information, there seems to be no further reason to deny this individual its place in the record. BOURC concluded that the balance of probability is overwhelmingly that it was a wild, natural vagrant and placed it in Category A.

‘The initial assignment of the 1992 individual to Category D was seen as being overly conservative in some circles, with widespread sympathies that the observers had been harshly treated. It does, however, underline the value of Category D as indicating “Doubt”, not “Dumped”. The potential of this species to occur as a vagrant was always apparent, but so was its potential to escape from a cage, hence the doubt. Species are held in Category D for a limited time to determine whether further occurrences or new knowledge allow BOURC to confidently assign them to A or E. On this occasion, Category D did its job and a satisfactory judgement on the provenance of the bird became possible.’

Adam Rowlands, Chairman of BBRC, commented: ‘Brown Flycatcher had long been an anticipated vagrant to our shores (see e.g. *Brit. Birds* 73: 392). Although at least one previous record from Britain had proved unacceptable to BBRC (Holy Island, Northumberland, on 9th September 1956), the identification of the first Fair Isle bird was well established and left no doubt. Paul’s account summarises the record’s transition from Category D to A accurately and there is little else to add. Despite the repeat showing in 2007 and 2008, the species remains a potential gem for rarity hunters. If it is seen well, identification should not prove to be a significant hurdle, but the prize of finding Britain’s first Grey-streaked or Siberian Flycatcher remains.’