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River Warbler on Fair Isle: a bird new to Britain

By *Peter Davis*

(Plate 23a)

A FIRST-WINTER River Warbler (*Locustella fluviatilis*) was trapped at Fair Isle on 24th September 1961, and seen again on the following day. This is the first record of this east European species in the British Isles, although it breeds as near to us as the Oder River in north-east Germany, and has occurred in southern Norway, Heligoland and Holland.

The bird was found shortly after noon on the 24th, in the incomparable "warbler-ditch" at Lower Leogh, by G. J. Barnes, R. M. Nedderman, P. J. Slater and the writer. It was skulking in tussocky grass in a shallow and open section of the drain; as we watched, it flew up to the lowest wire of the adjacent fence, and gave us a brief but unimpeded view from behind. It was obviously a *Locustella*, but one we had not previously seen; it was larger than a Grasshopper Warbler (*L. naevia*) and had dark olive-brown, unstreaked upper-parts. We were not able to see the underside, but noted an indistinct pale supercilium. Its fan-shaped tail appeared noticeably long and broad. Its legs and feet were seen to be pink, and seemed large and strong for its size.

A short single-panel mist-net was erected in the ditch, and within ten minutes of its discovery the bird was in the hand. It was taken to the laboratory, and was now seen by some fifteen other observers. The following description was made:

Entire *upper-parts*, wings and tail dark olive-brown, with a rather rufous tinge, especially on the scapulars, wing-coverts and upper tail-coverts; feathers of crown and forehead indistinctly tipped darker brown, otherwise no streaking or barring above. Lores, cheeks and ear-coverts greyer brown; very indistinct

buffish supercilium. *Under-parts* whitish, washed yellowish-buff, with blurred and indistinct grey-brown streaking on chin, throat and upper breast; flanks and sides of breast washed grey-brown with yellowish overlay; centre of lower breast and belly whiter than rest of under-parts, unstreaked; under tail-coverts grey-brown with broad whitish tips; axillaries and under wing-coverts washed pale grey-brown, with pale yellow tinge on outermost coverts, near carpal joint. Outer web of 2nd primary dirty-white; shafts of tail feathers dark above, whitish below; flight-feathers in good condition, tail slightly chipped; twelve rectrices. *Soft parts*: upper mandible horn-coloured with slight flesh tinge, especially near cutting-edge, and lower mandible pale flesh tinged dark towards tip; gape pale yellow; legs and feet clear flesh-pink, paler behind and on the soles; eye dark grey-brown. *Measurements*: wing 73 mm., bill 16.5 mm., tarsus 23 mm., tail 52 mm.; weight 17.1 gm. at 1255 GMT. *Wing-formula*: 1st primary 5 mm. less than primary coverts; 2nd longest, 3rd — 2.5 mm., 4th — 5.5 mm., 5th — 8 mm., 6th — 11 mm., 7th — 13 mm., 8th — 16.5 mm.; no emargination; no notch on inner web of 2nd.

No method of ageing River Warblers is given in K. Williamson's *Identification for Ringers: 1* (1960), but according to H. E. Dresser's *A Manual of Palaearctic Birds* (1902), p. 136, "the young bird has the upper parts more rusty in tinge, the under parts tinged with ochreous, and the throat is also indistinctly striped". Our warbler showed these characters. In several other species of this genus the first-winter birds are said to be more rufous above, and in all they are more yellow below.

The warbler was photographed in colour by several of the visitors, and in black-and-white by my wife. The monochrome reproduction on plate 23a shows the general appearance, the blurred streaking of the under-parts, the stout bill and the indistinct supercilium. Towards the end of the photography it escaped from my hand and flew away; but about ten minutes later it entered one of the observatory buildings and was recaptured. It was then transported to more congenial surroundings at the Gilsetter Marsh. Here we had excellent views as it crept among the sedges; the streaked breast seemed a good field-character on the occasions when a front or side view was possible.

None of the visitors nor I saw the River Warbler on the 25th, but it spent the day creeping about the stone dykes at Lower Stonybreck, and the occupants of that croft pointed it out to our cook, Pat Adams, during the afternoon. She watched it at close range through a window and saw that it was the ringed bird. It had disappeared by the following day.

We had to distinguish the Fair Isle bird from Gray's Grasshopper Warbler (*L. fasciolata*) and from Savi's Warbler (*L. luscinoides*), particularly the less rufous form *L. l. fusca*. Neither of these species has streaked under-parts, however, so that field-identification would probably have been possible even if we had been unable to catch it. The differences of size, wing-formula and coloration were readily available to us in Williamson's invaluable guide already mentioned.



PLATE 23A. River Warbler (*Locustella fluviatilis*), Fair Isle, September 1961. This shows the general shape, the blurred streaks on the under-parts, the stout bill and the indistinct supercilium (see opposite) (photo: Angela Davis)