Cretzschmar's Bunting on Fair Isle: new to Britain and Ireland

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Plate 26

Late on the evening of 10th June 1967, on Fair Isle, Shetland, W. N. Landells, M. Kristersson and I flushed a roosting bunting from a field of rye-grass and, as it flew to land on a stone dyke, I gained the impression that the 'jizz' was wrong for an Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana*. It was very like that species, but the wings seemed rather uniform and the head bluish, and there was no trace of yellow or green in the plumage. We failed to get close to it before it disappeared into a field of oats and my companions were unable to confirm my tentative suspicions that it might be a Cretzschmar's Bunting *E. caesia*.

Despite a thorough search, this bird was not seen again until the afternoon of 14th June, when I flushed it from a ditch about 20 yards from where we had found it on the 10th. It landed further along the ditch and from there flew back to a stone dyke about 100 yards away. In flight, it appeared slightly smaller than an Ortolan and the call-note, which I wrote down as *styip*, was different. I was able to approach it fairly closely because it was less shy than most Ortolans and from a distance of 20 yards I wrote a field description and firmly identified it as a Cretzschmar's Bunting. I watched it for about 15 minutes and then left, but returned in the evening with G. J. Barnes and W. N. L. to catch it. We found it in the same field, where we noted that it preferred to settle on patches of bare earth or the stone walls rather than on fences or telephone wires, and about 20 minutes later trapped it in a mist-net. We took it to the observatory, made a detailed description and weighed, measured and ringed it. Darkness had fallen by this time and so we roosted the bird overnight. Early next morning, after photographs had been taken (plate 26a), we released it and it flew to the cliffs near-by.

We did not see the Cretzschmar's Bunting for the next three days, but early on 18th June I flushed it from beside the observatory; it flew to land on a patch of bare earth about 30 yards away, calling *styip* . . . . *styip*. We saw it several times that day and on the 19th and 20th, by which time it had been on the island for eleven days and had been watched by many people. It appeared to be feeding on seed heads.

FIELD AND LABORATORY DESCRIPTIONS

In the field, the Cretzschmar's Bunting was rather like an Ortolan, but slightly smaller and more dumpy. Its habits were similar, except that it was tamer and certainly easier to catch; Meinertzhagen (1954) and

Etchécopar and Hüe (1967) both referred to the tameness of this species. The most obvious differences from an Ortolan in spring plumage were the blue-grey head and breast, orange throat, more uniform brown wings and faint eye-ring. The upper-parts were generally browner, the mantle was streaked with darker brown, and the rump and upper tail-coverts were more rufous. The blue-grey breast was finely streaked with black and there was a finely streaked moustache; the lower breast and belly were rufous-orange, the flanks and under tail-coverts more buff and the tail brown with noticeable white outer feathers. The eye was dark, the bill pink and the legs flesh-pink.

The following detailed description was taken in hand:

Upper-parts: forehead, crown and nape blue-grey sparsely marked with fine black mesial streaks; mantle, back, rump and upper tail-coverts brown with long dark brown mesial streaks (greyish wash on mantle, paler and more rufous on rump and upper tail-coverts); ear-coverts greyer than crown; above eye orange-buff; thin orbital ring light buff, not very noticeable. *Under-parts:* lores, chin and throat orange with thin moustache of fine blue and black streaks; upper breast blue-grey sparsely marked with fine black streaks; rest of under-parts rufous-orange, deepest in colour on lower breast and marked with some brown shaft-streaks on under tail-coverts and finer streaks on flanks; axillaries and under wing-coverts dirty-white flecked with grey. *Tail:* rectrices mainly dark brown; central pair paler and pointed; outermost pair with central half of outer web and most of distal half of inner web white, and tip of outer web pale brown; penultimate pair with large white patch on distal end of inner web. *Wings:* flight-feathers mainly dark brown; primaries paler than secondaries with slight buff fringes to outer and inner webs; secondaries with wider buff fringes on outer webs; tertials with wide buff fringes on distal half of outer webs and pale buff fringes on inner webs; greater coverts brown thinly fringed and tipped buff; median coverts dark brown with broader whitish-buff tips; lesser coverts brown with greyish tips; bastard-wing brown. *Soft parts:* bill similar to Ortolan's, but smaller, more pointed and pinkish-brown with culmen brownish-horn; iris brown; legs and feet flesh-pink. *Measurements:* wing (flattened) 81.5 mm, wing (straightened) 83, tail 64, bill (from skull) 12.5, bill (from feathers) 10, bill depth 6, tarsus 18, hind claw 5.5; weight (at 19.15 GMT) 23.0 grams. *Wing formula:* 1st, minute and hidden, 9.5 mm shorter than primary coverts; 2nd and 3rd longest, 4th −1 mm, 5th −5, 6th −10.5, 7th −14, 8th −16.5, 9th −18.5, 10th −21; 3rd to 5th emarginated on outer webs (less so on 5th); longest tertial 10.5 mm shorter than longest primary; distance from tip of wing to tip of (square-ended) tail 38 mm.

DISTRIBUTION

Vaurie (1959-65) gave the breeding range of this species as 'Dalmatia south to Macedonia and Greece, Asia Minor, Cyprus, and Near East south to northern Palestine. Migrates through the Near East, Egypt, and Arabia (a few wintering in Egypt and western Arabia in the region of Mecca) to winter in the Sudan south to Sennar; straggles to Spain(?), southern France, Italy, the Crimea, southern Caucasus, and south-western Iran, has occurred in Heligoland.' There are no subspecies. The one on Fair Isle was the first recorded in north-western Europe since a surprising spate on Heligoland in the 19th century when a dozen, mainly fine males, were obtained in May-June between 1848 and 1867; and then only one more in the next 20 years (Gätke 1895).

WEATHER AND ASSOCIATED MIGRANTS

The wind was south-west with clear skies on 9th June, but changed to east, force 2-3, with overcast by the following morning; then the wind decreased and the skies cleared during the day, and the Cretzschmar's Bunting was first observed that evening. A Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator* also arrived on the 9th and a Rustic Bunting *E. rustica* and seven Collared Doves *Streptopelia decaocto* were new on the 11th.

Although the Cretzschmar's Bunting did not coincide with a large fall of Continental migrants, it did form part of an unusually strong and varied influx of southern and south-eastern vagrants in the Northern Isles throughout May and June. At Fair Isle these included unprecedented numbers of Icterine Warblers *Hippolais icterina* (maximum of eight on 27th May), two Subalpine Warblers *Sylvia cantillans*, the first Scottish record of a Sardinian Warbler *S. melanocephala* (*Brit. Birds*, 60: 483-485), and a Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*.

ESCAPED CAGE-BIRD OR NOT?

The publication of this record has been delayed while investigations were carried out by M. D. England, on behalf of the Rarities Committee, into the possibility that the Cretzschmar's Bunting might have been an escaped cage-bird. These enquiries revealed that a few of this species are imported into Britain. The occurrences of Red-headed Buntings *E. bruniceps* and other escapes at Fair Isle and elsewhere invalidate the argument that cage-birds are most likely to be seen near urban areas and not on islands (see *Brit. Birds*, 61: 41-43). In view of my previous experience with escaped cage-birds, however, I examined the Cretzschmar's Bunting carefully in the hand for evidence of captivity and I had no hesitation in regarding it as a wild vagrant. The escaped Red-headed Buntings, Black-headed Bunting *E. melanocephala*, rosefinch *Carpodacus sp.* and Rose-coloured Starling *Sturnus roseus* on Fair Isle have all had broken remiges and rectrices, soiled feathers on the side of the neck, bruised bills and unhealthy-looking feet, or at least some of these symptoms, which must indicate a period of captivity. None of the feathers of the Cretzschmar's Bunting was broken although the plumage was old and worn, the primaries showed a natural sun-bleached pattern where they overlapped at the tips, and the sides of the neck, the bill and the feet were clean and not soiled.

NOTES ON IDENTIFICATION

Cretzschmar's Bunting is rather similar to an Ortolan and, especially in autumn, extra-limital vagrants are likely to be identified only in the hand or when carefully examined in the field. The sole description readily available to British ornithologists is that in Peterson *et al.* (1954, 1966) and I have been unable to find any published details of measurements and wing formula up to the standard of those for other species

in Witherby *et al.* (1938-41). I am therefore very grateful to I. H. J. Lyster for lending me three specimens of Cretzschmar's Bunting from the Royal Scottish Museum (adult male and female from Smyrna and immature male from Skynos) and to Mrs George Waterston for searching the library of the Scottish Ornithologists' Club for references. (Adult male and immature Ortolans are in the skin collection on Fair Isle and we have details of eight ringed on the island; I also know that species well on spring and autumn migration.)

After examining this material, I noted several characters which appear to be of value in the identification of a vagrant Cretzschmar's Bunting. The adult male and female are rather similar and should present no difficulty in the hand or if seen well in the field, but the immature in summer or autumn is difficult to separate from an Ortolan in similar plumage. Even so, the whole plumage of the immature I examined was more buffish-chestnut than an Ortolan, which has a decidedly olive cast to the mantle and head, contrasting whitish tips to the greater and median coverts and an obvious yellow eye-ring; the chin and throat of this Cretzschmar's Bunting was orange-buff and striated, whereas the Ortolan has a yellow chin. The colour of the axillaries and under wing-coverts also appears to be a useful distinguishing feature at all ages: in the Fair Isle Cretzschmar's Bunting and the three skins these areas were dirty white, with traces of chestnut in the adult male, whereas the axillaries and under wing-coverts of the Ortolan are pale yellow. This was also noted by Svensson (1964).

Turning to structure, the data in table 1 seem to show that Cretzschmar's Bunting is the smaller of the two species, that its longest tertial is nearer in length to its longest primary and that its wing to tail measurement is greater. The last two differences were noted in a very small series of specimens, but, if correct, would be useful in the identification of immatures in the hand. The differences in wing length and wing to tail indicate that Cretzschmar's Bunting is relatively shorter-winged and

Table 1. Measurements (in millimetres) of Cretzschmar's Bunting *Emberiza caesia* **and Ortolan Bunting** *E. hortulana*

The 'Tertial to primary' shows the amount by which the longest tertial was shorter than the longest primary, while the 'Wing to tail' is the distance between the tip of the folded wing and the tip of the tail

	Cretzschmar's	Ortolan
Wing length (live)	81.5	81.5-88.5 (eight, average 84.5)
Wing length (skins)	79, 81, 84 (three)	86.5, 88 (two)
Bill from skull	12.5 (four)	13-14 (ten)
Tail length	62-65 (four)	62-70 (ten)
Tertial to primary	9-10.5 (four)	14, 19 (two)
Wing to tail	37-39 (four)	31, 32 (two)

more dumpy, and this was noticed in the field on Fair Isle before the bird was caught. The wing formulae of the two species are rather similar, although Cretzschmar's Bunting appears to show less emargination on the 5th primary and relatively longer 6th to 10th primaries. The combined wing formulae of the four Cretzschmar's Buntings which I examined (Fair Isle and three specimens) were: 1st minute and hidden, 8-10 mm shorter than primary coverts; 2nd and 3rd equal and longest (with 4th also equal in one case), 4th up to 1 mm shorter, 5th 3-5 shorter, 6th 9-10.5 shorter, 7th 13-14.5 shorter, 8th 16-16.5 shorter, 9th 18.5-20 shorter, 10th 20.5-23 shorter.

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PLATE 26. Above, Cretzschmar's Bunting *Emberiza caesia*, Shetland, June 1967 (*pages:* 144-148) (*photo: R. H. Dennis*); below, immature and male, Jordan, May 1963 (*photos Eric Hosking*). This species is separated from the Ortolan *E. hortulana* by its blue-grey (not olive) head and breast-band and its rusty-orange (not yellow) throat