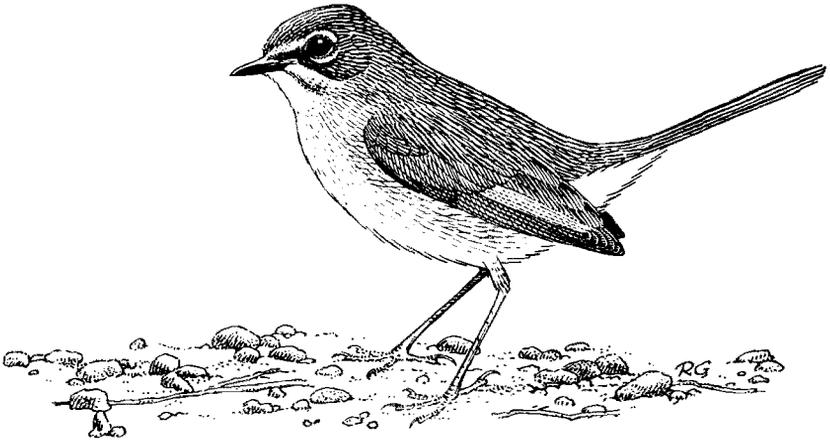


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Siberian Rubythroat: new to Britain and Ireland

A. R. Lowe



On the morning of 9th October 1975, P. J. Roberts, S. G. D. Cook and I were returning to the bird observatory from the south end of Fair Isle, Shetland, when we came across a bird at the North Grind that was unfamiliar to us. It had the upright stance, long legs and chat-like shape of a Robin *Erithacus rubecula* or a Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*, but appeared to be nearer to the size of a Nightingale *L. megarhynchos*. It fed on the ground and, as it ran about, its wings were held drooped and its longish tail was sometimes flicked up and held cocked. After several moments, we realised that the only species it could be was a Siberian Rubythroat *L. calliope*.

The upperparts were mid-brown, similar in colour to those of a Robin or a Nightingale. There was a noticeably more rufous panel on the remiges of the closed wings. The rump was also slightly rufous, contrasting with the brown of the back and tail. The breast and flanks were a warm creamy-buff, but the belly and vent were paler and whiter. There was a



32. Siberian Rubythroat *Luscinia calliope*, Shetland, October 1975
(S. G. D. Cook)

33. Siberian Rubythroat *Luscinia calliope*, Shetland, October 1975
(R. A. Broad)



very noticeable whitish throat which contrasted with the buff upper breast. The head pattern was striking: a distinct pale supercilium stopping just behind the eye, and a distinct eye-ring. The cap and the ear-coverts were the same colour as the back, but the lores appeared darker, and there were dark moustachial and malar stripes. The legs appeared pinkish and the bill dark.

After we had been watching the bird for some time, R. A. Broad arrived; he observed it closely for some minutes and could also think of nothing else it could be except a Siberian Rubythroat. After one unsuccessful attempt, we trapped the bird in the nearby Plantation Trap. In the hand, the identification was verified beyond doubt when we saw that

the white throat patch had faint, smudgy traces of red which had not been visible in the field.

At the observatory, the bird was examined, described, photographed (see plates 32 & 33) and then released in the observatory garden, where Dr B. Marshall, D. Coutts, I. Sandison and others who flew across to Fair Isle from Mainland were able to see it in the late afternoon. It remained in the garden all the next day, and was last seen at Setter on 11th October.

The following details were noted in the hand:

UPPERPARTS Forehead and crown mid-brown, feathers with paler tips. Crown cut off by supercilium giving capped appearance. Mantle and scapulars warm mid-brown; uppertail-coverts rufous and rump slightly paler. Uppertail-coverts more rufous at tips and most feathers with some darker barring similar to fault barring. Tail rounded, grey-brown with rufous tinge, especially at bases of outer webs, similar in colour to Thrush Nightingale *L. luscinia*, but less intense; all feathers rather abraded, but showing paler central tip. Primaries, secondaries and tertials as tail, but slightly greyer, with broad rufous fringes; fringes almost absent on tertials. Primary and greater coverts: outer webs markedly rufous-chestnut, similar to fringes of primaries and secondaries. Small, pale, wedge-shaped tips to all greater coverts and pale tips to longest two primary coverts. Primary coverts with narrower and less rufous fringes than greater coverts. Alula as primary coverts, but with paler fringes to outer web. Median and lesser coverts showing more rufous tips.

HEAD Supercilium yellow-buff, becoming white above eye; quite broad and distinct from base of bill to above eye, indistinct, short, greyish-white continuation behind eye. Eye-ring almost complete. Malar region and lores rather speckled, grey-brown, flecked paler, especially towards base of bill. Ear-coverts as crown, contrasting with broadish, indistinct continuation of supercilium. Distinct dark khaki moustachial stripe, contrasting with throat and cutting off pale line in malar region.

The autumn of 1975 produced a record number of vagrants from Siberia in Britain and Ireland. Excluding the two commonest species—Richard's Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae* and Yellow-browed Warbler *Phylloscopus inornatus*—there was a total of 57 individuals of probable or certain Siberian origin reported in autumn and winter 1975 (Dymond *et al.* 1976; O'Sullivan *et al.* 1977). There were 29 Pallas's Warblers *P. proregulus*, four Lanceolated Warblers *Locustella lanceolata*, three Radde's

UNDERPARTS Clear white semicircular area from chin to upper breast, with a few brown feathers and tips to a number of feathers at sides of throat showing pink similar to colour of breast of Redpoll *Carduelis flammea* of nominate race. Broad area of deep yellow-buff across lower breast. Belly almost silky-white, bases of some feathers showing greyish. Flanks dark olive-buff, contrasting with belly, and extending well down onto base of legs. Undertail-coverts off-white, with yellow-buff wash to all feathers, especially around vent. Underwing: greyish underside to flight feathers; coverts greyish, with yellowish wash.

BARE PARTS Bill typical *Luscinia*, with strong rictal bristles. Upper mandible blackish-grey; lower mandible similar, but pinkish-grey at base. Gape pale pinkish inside lower mandible, whitish inside upper mandible, although greyer at tip. Eye large; iris very dark brown-black. Legs tinged pinky-purple on sides, paler at rear; soles flesh-coloured; claws greyish.

MEASUREMENTS Wing 74 mm; wingpoint to tip of tail 53.5 mm; wingpoint to longest secondary 14.5 mm; bill 15.5 mm; tarsus 30 mm; tail 57 mm; weight 20.0 g.

WING FORMULA 1st primary 10 mm longer than primary coverts. 3rd and 4th longest; 2nd -7.5 mm; 5th -2 mm; 6th -5 mm; 7th -7.5 mm; 8th -10.5 mm; 9th -11.5 mm; 10th -13.5 mm; 3rd, 4th and 5th emarginated. Notch on 2nd 17.5 mm; on 3rd 17 mm; on 4th 13 mm.

Warblers *P. schwarzi*, three Stonechats *Saxicola torquata* of one of the Siberian races *maura* or *stejnegeri* and one or two records of each of 13 other species (including the Siberian Rubythroat). Baker (1977) carried out an analysis of some of these occurrences. A putative Yellow-browed Bunting *Emberiza chrysophrys* (still under review) in Norfolk and a Siberian Blue Robin *Luscinia cyane* in the Channel Islands (Rountree 1977)—neither of which is included in the foregoing totals—were, with the Siberian Rubythroat on Fair Isle, the highlights of this exceptionally large influx.

Summary

A Siberian Rubythroat *Luscinia calliope* was identified and then trapped on Fair Isle, Shetland, on 9th October 1975; it was last seen on 11th October.

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A. R. Lowe, 37 Warham Road, Binham, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 0DQ

Some notes on the Siberian Rubythroat

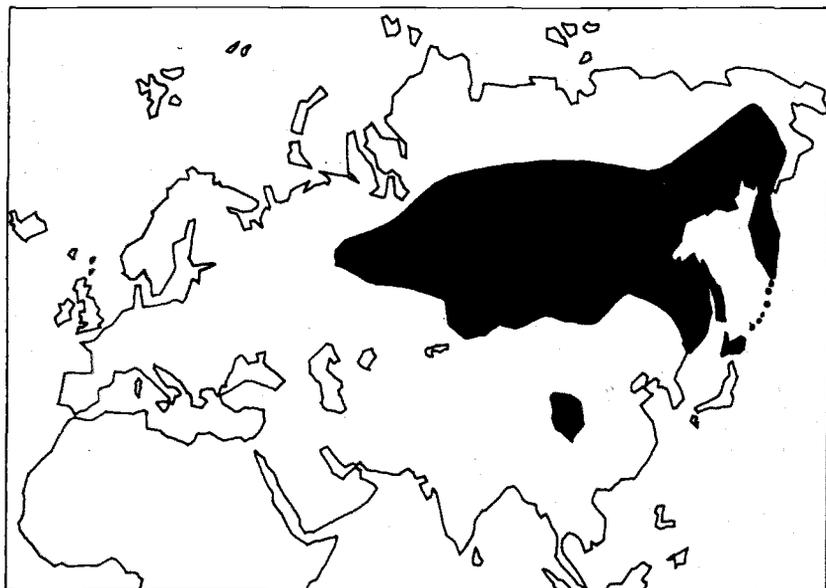
The very first issue of *British Birds* reported—but dismissed—the observation of two Siberian Rubythroats near Westgate-on-Sea, Kent, in early October 1900 (*Brit. Birds* 1: 8). Claimed occurrence in Poland (*Notaki Orn.* 10: 54) was not accepted by L. Tomiałojć (1972), but there are records from France (two, August 1829 and undated: Mayaud 1936), Italy (five, December 1886, October 1889, December 1898, March 1903 and December 1906: Arrigoni degli Oddi 1929), and Iceland (November 1943: Gudmundsson 1944), while Vaurie (1959) also noted that stragglers reached the Caucasus. Voous (1960) described the Siberian Rubythroat as 'a characteristic bird of the taiga' and its breeding distribution (fig. 1) as 'discontinuously east palearctic, in boreal climatic zones and mountain regions'. It is strongly migratory, wintering in southern Asia (from India to China), Taiwan and the Philippines. Thus, a fully documented vagrant record in Britain and Ireland comes as no great surprise.

With their large dark eyes and perky stance, the robins, nightingales, rubythroats and bluethroats in the closely related genera *Erithacus* and *Luscinia* are all very attractive and charming. In comparison with some of its relatives, the Siberian Rubythroat is almost soberly coloured, although the adult male (plate 34) has a beautiful crimson chin and throat (less orange, pinker and more restricted than the red on a Robin *E. rubecula*), contrasting with striking white supercilia and moustachial stripes. A captive male which the late Richard Richardson brought to a Bird Observatories Conference in Oxford in the early 1960s was greatly



34. Male Siberian Rubythroat *Luscinia calliope* with food for young, Amurland, USSR
July 1961 (Irene Neufeldt)

Fig. 1. Breeding distribution of Siberian Rubythroat *Luscinia calliope* (from Voous 1960)



admired and for a time made Siberian Rubythroat the number one target for wardens wanting to add a species to the British and Irish list.

Siberian Rubythroats are not uncommon in captivity in Britain (Tim Inskipp verbally). The Fair Isle individual, however, with the general appearance of a female, but traces of red on the throat, and pale tips to all the greater coverts, was probably a first-winter male (rather than an adult female) and, therefore, unlikely to have been an escape from captivity. Most autumn vagrants are immatures; late September and October is the usual time for far-eastern birds to occur in Britain and Ireland; and an Asiatic species could have chosen no better autumn than 1975 to support its claims for admissibility as a genuinely wild individual in western Europe. JTRS

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