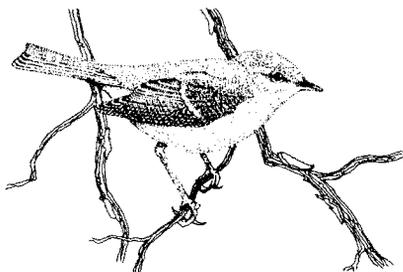


# Tennessee Warblers: new to Britain and Ireland

*Roger A. Broad*



**O**n the morning of 6th September 1975, C. D. R. Heard and G. Walbridge were walking along the side of a dry-stone wall at Finni-

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quoy, Fair Isle, Shetland, when GW flushed a bird from near the mouth of the Double Dyke trap. It flew overhead between them giving a frequent 'zit, zit' call which was very much like that of a Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* or a Firecrest *Regulus ignicapillus*; when it alighted on the cliff-top, however, it was obviously a very bright warbler. The whole breast was bright yellow while the upperparts were a bright lime green. They watched it for about two minutes as it dashed about the hillside. Once, when it perched briefly on a roadside fence, its undertail-coverts were seen to be pure white, and a broad but indistinct wing-bar was noticed. It also showed a neat yellow supercilium joining a distinct yellow eye-ring; darker flight feathers contrasting with the remarkable green of the mantle and coverts; and dark grey legs. Unfortunately, it was rarely still and did not stay for long, soon flying off towards the south of the island. Extensive searches until dark failed to rediscover it and their brief views were insufficient to identify it with certainty.

Early the following morning, CDRH and GW relocated it in a small potato patch, where it proved to be far less elusive. Both observers immediately realised that it was an American warbler and a little research showed that the combination of yellow underparts, pure white undertail-coverts and presence of a wing-bar was diagnostic of Tennessee Warbler *Vermivora peregrina*. Later, it was well seen by many observers including R. A. Broad and P. J. Roberts, who were able to corroborate the original field observations and, after consultation with several reference works, all agreed with the initial identification: a Tennessee Warbler, a species previously unrecorded in Britain and Ireland.

The bird frequented the crofting area of the island, where it was seen daily until 18th September, feeding mainly in the standing crops. During this period, it provided many observers with the opportunity for extended observations, but little extra was added to the comprehensive field notes compiled by CDRH and GW:

**SIZE AND SHAPE** Shorter but much stockier than Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*: a dumpy little warbler. **PLUMAGE** Generally rather yellow-faced, with neat yellow supercilium extending short distance beyond eye and joined to equally distinct yellow eye-ring. Green lores and ear-coverts, forming obscure eyestripe. Upperparts uniform, bright lime green, appearing even brighter on rump, particularly noticeable in flight. Wing-coverts same colour as upperparts, but tips of greater coverts broadly tipped paler, forming broad wing-bar, rather poorly demarcated on inner feathers, but striking on outer feathers, where it contrasted with darker dusky-olive flight feathers; median coverts edged paler yellowish-green and

forming indistinct upper wing-bar, visible in dull flat light, but not apparent in strong sunlight; thin green fringes on outer webs of primaries, which had distinct whitish tips forming obvious row of spots on folded wing; tertials with broad, poorly defined, green fringes. Tail with green fringes, similar to flight feathers and contrasting with bright rump. Underparts: breast bright yellow, becoming paler on belly and contrasting with pure white undertail-coverts. **BARE PARTS** Bill broader based and slightly longer than Willow Warbler's, but fine-tipped, dark greyish with paler pinkish tinge near base of lower mandible. Legs dark grey. **CALL** Consistent, repeated 'zit, zit' most like a Firecrest's, but more penetrating.

CDRH and GW also noticed that the bird had the peculiar habit of wagging the whole of its body from side to side while the head was held angled downwards.

On 18th September, the bird was mist-netted at Field Croft and a

thorough examination confirmed the original identification. It was seen in the hand by many observers at the observatory, where it was ringed, measured and the following detailed plumage description recorded:

**UPPERPARTS** Forehead to rump including scapulars bright olive-green, brightest on lower mantle and rump, in some lights feathers showed yellowish caste and silky appearance. **TAIL** All feathers sharply pointed, dark grey-brown with olive-green sheen, inner webs with white fringe, most noticeable on outer and penultimate feathers. **WINGS** Primaries blackish-grey with distinct white crescents at tips particularly on inner primaries; secondaries similar to primaries but broad olive-green fringes on outer webs forming panel on closed wing; tertials as secondaries but fringes broader and feathers with general greenish caste; alula and primary coverts as primaries but with narrow olive-green fringes and alula covert with narrow, pale olive tip; greater coverts similar to primary coverts but fringes much broader, almost yellow-green and extending over most of outer web, six outermost feathers with distinct pale yellow dot at tip of outer web; median coverts as greater coverts but bright green fringes on inner webs and tips without yellow dot; lesser coverts as scapulars; underside of flight feathers pale, soft grey; underwing coverts off-white, paler lemon-yellow at tips. **FACE** Supercilium more yellow than upperparts, greenish-yellow extending from top of upper mandible to just posterior to eye, greyish line

from bill to eye; eye-ring pale creamy-yellow touching supercilium above eye; ear-coverts similar to mantle but more dingy, greyer above and yellower below. **UNDERPARTS** Chin, feathers with white bases and bright yellow tips; neck, upper breast and anterior flanks very bright yellow; posterior flanks greyish, with greenish tone at base of wings and yellowish-buff wash extending around base of legs and towards vent; belly silky, off-white with some yellowish streaks; under-tail-coverts long, similar to belly but separated by yellowish-buff wash just posterior to vent. **BARE PARTS** Bill dagger-like, graduated to a fine point, dark grey, a little paler at tip and cutting edge, lower mandible generally a little paler than upper and with yellowish tinge. Eyes very dark brown. Legs and feet medium grey, paler laterally; soles almost flesh-coloured; claws rather stubby, a little paler than legs. **MEASUREMENTS** Wing 66mm; bill 12.5mm; tarsus 18mm; tail 43.5mm; weight 11.5g. **WING FORMULA** 1st primary 6mm shorter than primary coverts; 3rd and 4th longest; 2nd -2mm; 5th -1.5mm; 6th -7mm; 7th -10.5mm; 8th -12.5mm; 9th -13.5mm; 10th -16mm; 3rd, 4th and 5th primaries emarginated, and shallow notch on 2nd, 3rd and 4th primaries.

After it had been photographed (plates 29 & 30), it was released and it was not subsequently seen until the afternoon of 20th September, when it was observed at Field Croft for the last time.

At 12.15 GMT on 24th September 1975, I was in the Fair Isle Observatory garden, where I saw what I at first took to be a *Phylloscopus* warbler, flitting low down among the cabbages. The light was poor and it was raining lightly, but, nevertheless, as it flew across a gap, I was immediately struck by the brightness of the plumage, although I was unable to discern any detail. It then flitted up and over the observatory, giving a familiar, repeated 'zit, zit' call and I was convinced that it was a Tennessee Warbler. The bird had flown directly into the mouth of the Observatory Trap, where I succeeded in catching it and where, to my complete surprise, I found the bird to be a new individual. It was seen in the hand by many observers, some of whom had also seen the previous individual. After release, it was last observed, later the same day, on Buness.

In the hand, comparison with the notes of the first individual showed that the wing formula was almost identical and the measurements within 1mm. The weight (8.6g) reflected its recent arrival, being 2.9g lighter than the first bird which was trapped almost two weeks after it was first seen. The

detailed plumage descriptions were broadly similar, but the following differences, which might have been in total sufficient to distinguish the two birds in the field were recorded:

Generally duller, colours less intense, particularly the yellows on underparts. Fore-head a little yellower than crown. Eye-ring pale lemon yellow above and below eye, but incomplete, interrupted by greyish eye-stripe extending from base of bill to a little way posterior to eye. Underparts: yellow of upper breast less intense, lemon yellow; flanks more grey, belly white with yellow streaking

virtually absent. Tail: feathers a little less pointed. Wings: white crescent-shaped tips to inner primaries and outer secondaries, although showing up as distinct spots, less extensive; tips to greater coverts forming wing-bar, but colour of spots less intense, more diffuse, extending on outer webs as fringes.



**29 & 30.** Tennessee Warbler *Vermivora peregrina*, Shetland, 18th September 1975 (R. A. Broad)



This migratory North American wood-warbler has a wide breeding distribution in Canada south into the northern United States (Godfrey 1966). Bruun & Singer (1975) mentioned that the species has been recorded as an accidental in Iceland, and notes on the species have already appeared in *British Birds* (Browne 1960). In his article, Browne drew attention to the possibility of the Tennessee Warbler crossing the Atlantic where, in autumn plumage and appearing superficially like a *Phylloscopus* warbler, it might easily be overlooked. He listed the call, which he rendered as 'zi' or 'zi-zi' and more resembling the call of a tit *Parus* than of any other European warbler; the grey legs; and one or two wing-bars as the best distinguishing features. Peterson (1947) described the Tennessee Warbler as a dull fall warbler in its usual range, but, for a vagrant in a European situation, this comment would be misleading. Clearly, if the Fair Isle individuals are typical of the species in autumn plumage, the general brightness, both the green upperparts and the yellow of the upper breast, may in many European situations be sufficient to pick it out as something different. The brightness coupled with the frequent distinctive call make this species less likely to be overlooked than might initially have been supposed.

### **Acknowledgments**

I am grateful to C. D. R. Heard for his comments on the first draft of this paper.

### **Summary**

A Tennessee Warbler *Femivora peregrina* was seen on Fair Isle, Shetland, between 6th and 20th September 1975, and a second individual was present on 24th September 1975; both were trapped. These constitute the first and second records for Britain and Ireland of this Nearctic species.

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