

# Yellow-browed Bunting: new to Britain and Ireland

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**F**or the small band of observers remaining on Fair Isle, Shetland—the observatory warden, two assistants and two visitors—12th October 1980 was already a hectic day, fresh arrivals including a Short-toed Lark *Calandrella cinerea*, three eastern Stonechats *Saxicola torquata maura/stejnegeri*, two Red-breasted Flycatchers *Ficedula parva*, a Rustic Bunting *Emberiza rustica* and a suspected Little Bunting *E. pusilla*. It was, however, to become a sensational day, dare we say a ‘red Setter day’.

## Discovery and identification

At about 15.30 GMT, ARK was walking along the edge of the turnip crop at Setter, vaguely in search of a Little Bunting which had been reported heading in that direction some two hours earlier. A small bird hopping around under the turnip leaves caught his eye. Fragmentary views suggested a bunting *Emberiza* and he suspected that it might be a Little, but when its head came into full view he was startled to see a blaze of yellow over and in front of its eye and a white central crown-stripe between black lateral crown-stripes. As he gently walked the bird along the rows of turnips, three possible identities presented themselves: Yellow-browed Bunting *E. chrysophrys*, Little Bunting and White-throated Sparrow *Zonotrichia albicollis*. The last was quickly eliminated, for, although this bird had a yellow head mark, it clearly could not be an adult White-throated Sparrow, since its underparts were streaked, and immatures lack the yellow; besides, it ‘felt’ like a bunting. From research prior to his Mongolian trips, ARK knew that Yellow-browed Bunting has a pale crown-stripe and a yellow supercilium, which fitted this bird very well; but could it not perhaps be an unusually well-marked Little Bunting? In spring, at least, Little can show quite vivid orange on the fore-supercilium, have blackish lateral crown stripes and be flecked underneath similar to this bird: During the advance, it was briefly flushed and heard to call: a high metallic ‘tic’ just like Little. Of course, most features were at variance with normal Little: no eye-ring, brown ear-coverts heavily bordered black, white crown-stripe, and most of all the yellow fore-supercilium; also, the bill: surely it was too large and was pink at the base?

ARK watched it for about 15 minutes, then ran to the phone in the Setter cottage, only to find no answer from the observatory. He watched the bird for some further minutes, leaning more and more towards Yellow-browed, then took leave for a few minutes to look up a probable Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola* which had flown over as he was watching the bunting. It



82. Male Yellow-browed Bunting *Emberiza chrysophrys*, Shetland, October 1980  
(I. S. Robertson)

was now that he met P. J. Ewins and K. M. Morton, both elated over the putative Citrine, but due to become even more so over the bunting.

It was easily found again in the turnips. The possibility of an aberrant Little Bunting was not upheld by PJE, and the probability was that this bunting with black-and-white crown and dash of lemon on the face was a Yellow-browed, a first for Britain and Ireland. PJE went to the phone to try to reach ISR at the observatory, only to learn that he was out. The message which did eventually reach him referred to a 'Yellow-browed WARBLER' *Phylloscopus inornatus*, so that he was still to remain blissfully unaware of the excitement at Setter. Since the light was beginning to fade and the bird was approachable, PJE decided that they (now joined by A. del-Nevo) should

catch the bird, which they did easily in a 20-foot single-shelf net. Back at the observatory, it was examined in the hand by ISR, and the measurements and plumage were found to be in good agreement with those for Yellow-browed Bunting in Dementiev & Gladkov (1969). We thus became certain of its identity. It was dark by the time the examination was over, so the bird was roosted overnight and released back at Setter the next morning, where it was to remain throughout most of its stay, moving to a similar crop at Field for the last few days, when disturbed by crop-lifting at Setter. It was last seen on 23rd October, by which time it had been seen by about 20 observers.

*Field description*

The Yellow-browed Bunting was quite confiding, allowing approach as close as 2 m at times. On 12th and 13th October, it was seen in good light and (remarkably for the Northern Isles) gentle breeze, through 9× and 10× binoculars, when the following description was taken.

**SIZE AND SHAPE** Small- to medium-sized bunting, nearer in size to Rustic than Little. No crest. Bill rather large, accentuated by pale pink base.

**PLUMAGE** Head pattern most striking: crown black, with narrow white crown-stripe widening on hind crown; supercilium broad, bright lemon yellow in front of and over eye, becoming whiter farther back; ear-coverts brown (quite warm in bright light, but not chestnut or rufous as on Little Bunting), with broad blackish outline extending backwards from eye, around rear edge and forward along lower edge in point towards gape with-

out quite reaching it, considerably more extensive than border of ear-coverts on Little Bunting; whitish spot in upper rear corner of ear-coverts, more conspicuous than on any other west Palearctic bunting; lore pale brownish, partly invaded by yellow of supercilium; no eye-ring; submoustachial stripe off-white, diffusing around ear-coverts patch; malar stripe fine and inconspicuous, of blackish flecks. Underparts sullied white with brownish invasion across sides of breast and flanks, overlaid with fine blackish flecks from chin to belly, smallest on chin and throat, boldest on flanks. Upperparts rich

83. Male Yellow-browed Bunting *Emberiza chrysocephala*, Shetland, October 1980  
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brown, having chestnut tinge in centre of mantle, with black streaks probably extending onto rump, and a pair of inconspicuous buff 'braces'. Wings: lesser coverts brown; median and greater coverts with dark centres, buff edges and whitish tips, latter forming two narrow wing-bars; tertials edged buff; primaries and secondaries edged brown. Tail with white on outer feathers.

**BARE PARTS** Bill with flesh-pink base and grey tip. Legs flesh-pink.

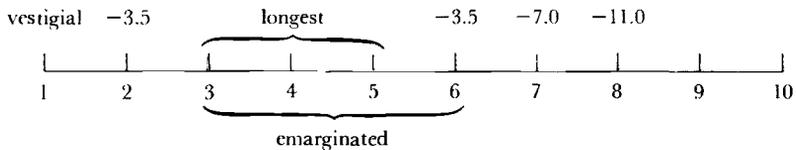
**CALL** 'Tic' or 'tic tic', probably indistinguishable from Little Rustic and Yellow-breasted *E. aureola* Buntings. Three observers (KMM, Ad-N, ISR) thought a 'tink' note was given at times, possibly different from the 'tic'.

### Hand description

**HEAD** Buff crown-stripe from base of upper mandible becoming white on top of crown, broadening out onto nape; lateral crown stripes very dark brown (almost black) with lighter tips; supercilium lemon yellow in front of eye, paler yellow behind, reaching to rear of ear-coverts, some feathers with black spots at tips especially above eye; eye-ring pale yellow, incomplete (above and below eye only); lore greyish-brown; ear-coverts dull brown with white spot in upper rear corner; eye-stripe sepia from behind eye only, forming dark border to ear-coverts.

**UPPERPARTS** Warm brown with blackish central streaks to feathers very similar to those of

### WING FORMULA



### Sex and age

The bright head pattern of this individual, in particular the yellow supercilium, prompted us to speculate that it was a male. After comparison with skins at the British Museum (Natural History), Tring, Derek Goodwin confirmed this.

It has, however, not been possible to age this bird. Derek Goodwin said: 'Our rather small series here (Yellow-browed Buntings at Tring), which consists mostly of late autumn, winter and spring birds, does not suggest to me that there is any difference between the colours of adult and first-year birds once the moult is over, though it is possible that a more comprehensive series would show that some slight differences that appear to be merely individual were linked with age.'

Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*; longest uppertail-coverts without dark streaks.

**UNDERPARTS** Chin and throat off-white with fine dark streaks; submoustachial stripe off-white bordered by blackish malar stripe; breast washed buff, strongest at sides, overlaid with fine black streaks; flanks buffish with long, extensive black streaks; belly and undertail-coverts unstreaked off-white.

**WINGS** Lesser coverts dull olive-buff; median coverts sepia with buff tips forming wing-bar; greater coverts sepia with buff tips and buff edge to outer web forming wing-bar; alula and greater primary coverts dull olive-brown; primaries and secondaries dull olive-brown with fine pale buff edges; tertials sepia with broad warm buff outer webs and tips.

**TAIL** Central feathers dull olive-brown, rest blackish with outer feathers showing white wedge from tip to 40 mm along shaft; penultimate feathers similar with wedge extending 25 mm; third outermost feathers with tiny white spot at tips.

**BARE PARTS** Upper mandible with straight culmen dark horn, pinkish at base and along cutting edge; lower mandible pale pink with slight dark horn at tip; legs and feet pale flesh-pink; eyes very dark brown.

**MEASUREMENTS** Wing 78 mm; bill 12.5 mm (depth at nares 6.2 mm); tarsus 20.5 mm; tail 63 mm; wing-point to longest secondaries 11 mm; wing-point to tip of tail 38 mm; total length 150 mm; weight 19.9 g.



84. Male Yellow-browed Bunting *Emberiza chrysophrys*, Shetland, October 1980  
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### Behaviour

The Yellow-browed Bunting spent most of its stay on the ground among turnip crops, where it fed continuously on seeds, particularly of chickweed *Stellaria media*. It was usually quite approachable, even to 2 m at times, although then it would become agitated, looking around nervously and raising its crown feathers. At other times, it could easily be overlooked, camouflaged against a dark brown soil or hidden among the turnip drills. It was reluctant to fly: when it did, it rarely went more than 50 m before dropping back into the crop. Occasionally, it perched on fences for brief periods. At Field, it fed in a more open situation, when photographs were taken at close range (plates 83-86).

### Origin

There is very little known about Yellow-browed Buntings. Dementiev & Gladkov (1969) gave its numerical status as 'Rare, sporadically distributed.' The range map (fig. 1) is very tentative, only one nest has been described, and almost nothing is known of the ecology of the species. It inhabits shrub-thickets and taiga forest, and, if the range map has any reliability, it is the most easterly distributed passerine to have occurred in Britain. The westernmost boundary of its range is at about 105°E (Vaurie 1959), considerably farther east than the westernmost Pallas's Warblers *Phylloscopus proregulus*, Dusky Warblers *P. fuscatus* or Pallas's Reed Buntings *Emberiza pallasii*, which all occur west to about 85°E.

The wintering area of Yellow-browed Buntings is in eastern China,



Fig. 1. Distributions of Yellow-browed Bunting *Emberiza chrysophrys* in breeding season (northerly black area) and in winter (southerly black area) (after Dementiev & Gladkov 1954 and Cheng 1976)

where they appear (at Chihli on the lower Yangtse) from September with the main arrivals in October and continuing to 20th November. The autumn migration within the USSR is not known, but is thought to commence in the first half of September.

The weather conditions leading up to the arrival on 12th October 1980 were classic for the arrival of eastern vagrants on Fair Isle. A northeast airstream predominated on 11th October as a low off the Norwegian coast filled, while two lows to the south were giving an easterly or southeasterly flow of air over the Baltic and southern North Sea. To the east, a large high extended from the Kola Peninsula (fig. 2). A tentative route for Siberian vagrants following a 'reverse migration' pattern would be along the easterly flow of the Siberian high to be funnelled across northern Norway and

85. Male Yellow-browed Bunting *Emberiza chrysophrys*, Shetland, October 1980  
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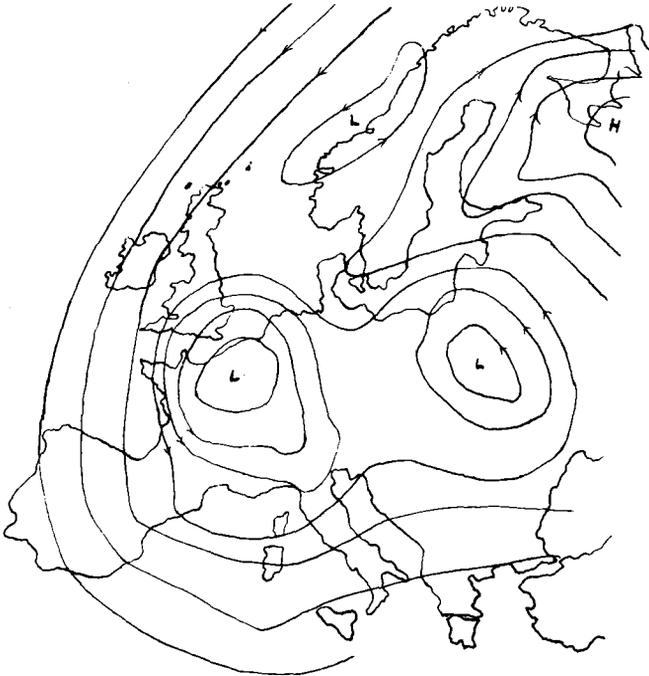


Fig. 2. Weather chart for 06.00 GMT on 11th October 1980 (courtesy the Meteorological Office)

thence down the Norwegian coast on northeast winds, right to Fair Isle! When this weather situation is looked at in terms of a globe, rather than a flat map, it at once becomes apparent that a reverse route (great circle)

86. Male Yellow-browed Bunting *Emberiza chrysophrys*, Shetland, October 1980  
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from eastern Siberia would coincide with the prevailing weather very neatly.

The first hint of eastern promise occurred on 10th October when a Yellow-browed Warbler (unusually scarce that autumn) appeared. On 11th October, two Yellow-browed Warblers were found, along with Rustic Bunting, Scarlet Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus* and a Short-toed Lark of a greyish eastern type.

The morning of 12th October was bright and sunny with good visibility and a light northeasterly airstream. By lunchtime, the handful of observers had found four eastern species (see introductory paragraphs). A further two eastern Stonechats were found after lunch, a suspected Little Bunting was heard, and a wagtail was seen which was rather problematical, showing some characters of Citrine Wagtail, but also some of one of the far-eastern forms of Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava simillima/taivana*. In addition to these vagrants, there were numbers of common migrants as well, most notably Chiffchaffs *P. collybita*, which reached a record number for Fair Isle, 80; nearly all of them were of the greyish northern type, possibly some *P. c. abietinus* from the eastern part of its range, but also more likely some *P. c. tristis*, the 'Siberian' Chiffchaff.

Migrants were clearly arriving throughout the day, coming ashore on the northeast coast, particularly in the vicinity of the Gully, thence being funnelled up to the Plantation. There were first seen two of the Stonechats, the wagtails coming from this direction and a bunting in early afternoon, believed on call to be Little, but on hindsight quite likely to have been the Yellow-browed Bunting newly arrived. This wave of eastern birds continued on 14th October, with a Pine Bunting *Emberiza leucocephalos*, a Richard's Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae* and a fresh Rustic Bunting.

This was the first acceptable record of Yellow-browed Bunting in Britain and Ireland. The species has been imported in very small numbers, along with other buntings, from Hong Kong (T. P. Inskipp, verbally), but with such a distinguished list of 'fellow travellers' arriving on a classic weather system there can be little doubt that the Fair Isle bird was a genuine vagrant. A record of one at Holkham, Norfolk, on 19th October 1975 was rejected by the BOU Records Committee (*Ibis* 122: 568) with this comment: 'The Committee felt unable to accept the identification because of discrepancies between the three independent descriptions submitted; they note, however, that the bird was seen during a remarkable influx of Siberian passerines.' There are two old Continental records: one from Lille in northern France in about 1830, which is accepted (Mayaud 1953), and another from the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg in spring 1863, which is regarded as doubtful (Hennicke 1900, Molineux 1930); the latter is presumably the one noted as 'Belgium' by Vaurie (1959) and other authors.

### Acknowledgments

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### Summary

A male Yellow-browed Bunting *Emberiza chrysophrys* was watched on Fair Isle, Shetland, on

12th October 1980; it was netted, ringed, roosted overnight and then released on the morning of 13th; it was last seen on 23rd October. This is the first fully accepted record for Britain and Ireland, and the second or third for Europe.

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