

# Notes



**Breeding productivity of Little Grebe** Surprisingly few published data are available on the productivity of the Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* in Britain. Those given by Vinicombe (1982) relate to one locality, Chew Valley Lake, Avon, where the species is well established. In Sussex, where single pairs are typically found on small undisturbed waters, the Little Grebe has always been a scarce breeder (fewer than 50 pairs in 1985); concern that it may have declined prompted a retrospective assessment of breeding success, the results of which may be of more than local interest.

Reported broods of this species normally consist of medium-sized or large young. Consequently, it can be assumed that the majority of chick mortality will have already occurred and that brood size at fledging will be only marginally less than that observed. The percentage distribution of reported brood sizes in Sussex was very similar to that in Avon (table 1). The mean brood size in Sussex has varied annually from 1.6 to 2.5, with a mean of 1.77 (176 broods over 21 years), compared with a mean of 1.76 in Avon (116 broods over nine years). Some of the largest broods in Sussex (four to six) were reported from new breeding sites, usually in the first year of occupancy, and these opportunistic pairs often succeeded in raising two broods in the same year. Known second broods accounted for less than 10% of the total broods reported.

**Table 1. Distribution (%) of brood sizes of Little Grebes *Tachybaptus ruficollis* in Sussex (1966-86), compared with Chew Valley Lake, Avon (1971-79)**  
Data for Chew Valley Lake from Vinicombe (1982)

	No. broods	BROOD SIZE					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
Sussex	176	50	29.5	12.5	5.7	1.7	0.57
Avon	116	47.4	32.8	17.2	1.7	0.9	

**Table 2. Breeding success (including second broods) of Little Grebes *Tachybaptus ruficollis* at Rye Harbour and Chichester Gravel-pits, Sussex**

	No. of years	No. of pairs	YOUNG PER PAIR PER YEAR	
			Mean	Range
Rye Harbour	13	129	1.55	0.125-2.43
Chichester	8	53	1.53	0.4-3.75

Because of the difficulties caused by this species' habit of brood division, records from the two breeding strongholds in Sussex — the gravel-pits at Rye Harbour and at Chichester — have been excluded from the calculations of brood size. The breeding success at both sites has, however, been calculated: giving mean figures of 1.55 and 1.53 young per pair per year for Rye and

Chichester, respectively (table 2). During a survey in 1985, breeding success over Sussex as a whole was 1.2 young per pair. S. W. M. HUGHES

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#### REFERENCE

VINCOMBE, K. E. 1982. Breeding and population fluctuations of the Little Grebe. *Brit. Birds* 75: 204-218.

**Wilson's Petrel with legs ensnared in fishing mesh** In August 1989, while watching petrels at 37°45'N, 10°22'W off Portugal, my attention was drawn to two Wilson's Petrels *Oceanites oceanicus* in the wake of the vessel. They eventually approached to within a few metres, when it became obvious that one had its legs entangled in fine fishing mesh or nylon line. The tangle of material loosely bound the petrel's legs together from the toes to the true ankle, but did not seem to upset its balance: the petrel continued to feed normally, with its characteristic skipping action apparently unhindered. After ten minutes, the petrel flew away from the wake, legs dangling slightly, still clearly ensnared. C. C. MOORE

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This record of Wilson's Petrels in Portuguese waters has been accepted by the Iberian Rarities Committee. Ets

**Leach's Storm-petrels visiting ships at sea** During the last 30 years, 97 (32%) of 303 forms recording details of 59 species of seabird examined in the hand when they came on board ships at sea filled in for the Royal Naval Bird-watching Society have related to Leach's Storm-petrels\* *Oceanodroma leucorhoa* encountered throughout the year in all parts of their range, while another 47 (16%) of the records relate to other storm-petrels (Hydrobatidae) (summaries listed *Sea Swallow* 39: 37, map *Sea Swallow* 22: facing p. 32). While many of these birds were reported to have come to lights on dark nights with a poor visibility, when indeed it may be difficult to persuade them to go away, seabirds of this family and also some larger species certainly also appear to have developed social displays around not only headlands and rocks, which in the case of Leach's Storm-petrels have even been reported at islets off South Africa (R. M. and B. M. Randall, *Ostrich* 57: 157-161) and the Chatham Islands off New Zealand (M. J. Imber and T. G. Lovegrove, *Notornis* 29: 101-108), but also objects at sea. It would indeed be interesting to discover what a yachtsman might catch if he were to sail around the world playing a tape recording and replacing one of his sails with a mist net.

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\*The use of this English name is at the request of Dr Bourne.

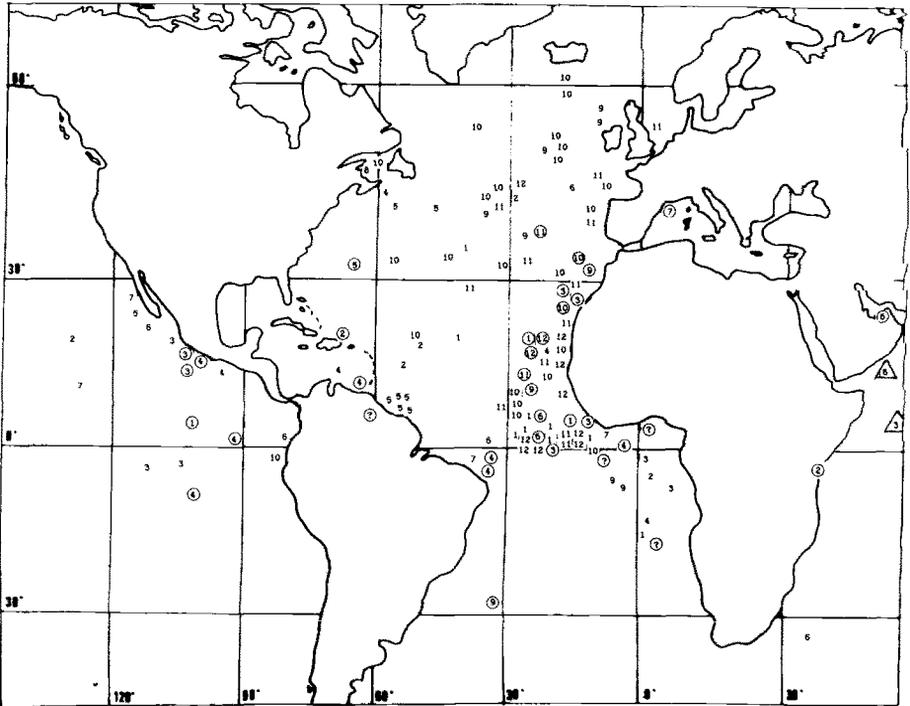


Fig. 1. Leach's Storm-petrels *Oceanodroma leucorhoa* examined in the hand. Figures show position and month of occurrence, with circle around museum specimens of Leach's Storm-petrel and triangle around Swinhoe's Storm-petrels *O. (L.) monorhis* of northwest Pacific collected by Roger Bailey in Arabian Sea (*Ibis* 110: 27-34). In Atlantic, most are in east in autumn, along Equatorial Counter-current when most strongly developed in early winter, in South Atlantic in late winter, and in west in spring. In Pacific, most recorded in east, with two records from northwest in March and August. Swinhoe's Storm-petrel appears to move from northwest Pacific to Indian Ocean with northeast monsoon, some possibly overshooting into Atlantic and returning north there, and returns with southwest monsoon, when Leach's Storm-petrel may also move north in Indian Ocean. Birds in south in northern summer may be immature

### Behaviour of Leach's Petrels at dusk and night around yacht in mid Atlantic

Dr W. R. P. Bourne (*Brit. Birds* 81: 400-401) mentioned the boarding of ships by seabirds and the fact that small species not uncommonly come to ships' lights at night, while E. Jones (*Brit. Birds* 81: 399) recorded two Storm Petrels *Hydrobates pelagicus* and a Leach's Petrel *Oceanodroma leucorhoa* landing on a ship in thick fog off southeast Ireland. During a yacht crossing of the Atlantic, I made observations on the behaviour of Leach's Petrels which suggest that, for this species at least, neither attraction to light nor inclement weather are prerequisites for the boarding of ships.

During 4th-12th July 1988, from 33°10'N, 51°30'W to 44°40'N, 32°10'W (roughly from 660 nautical miles/1,220 km east of Bermuda to 300 nautical miles/550 km WNW of Flores, Azores), Leach's Petrels were by far the most frequently seen species (estimated minimum: 80 individuals). During this period the seas were calm, the skies generally clear, and the winds very light;

full moon had been on 29th June. By day, the petrels flew no more than 2-3 m above the water and came no closer to the yacht (travelling usually at 5-6 knots/9-11 kph) than 15-20 m. By sunset, however, before navigation lights had to be turned on and when up to six individuals were following the yacht's general northeasterly course, their behaviour began to change: they flew increasingly higher and closer behind and alongside the yacht, eventually reaching at least the level of the masthead (25 m above the water) and coming to within 1 m of crew members on deck; in complete darkness, a petrel could often be seen near the masthead light. Their continued presence was evinced in two other ways: their calling, and on two, probably three, occasions the unexpected arrival of petrels on the yacht itself. The first was caught by the resident cat at 22.00 hours on 4th July; after confirming its identity and ensuring that it had come to no apparent harm, I released the bird, which promptly flew away. Six nights later, at 02.00 hours on 10th July, another petrel (probably a Leach's, but I did not see it) landed in the cockpit; and, in the night of the new moon, at 01.30 hours on 12th July, a second confirmed Leach's Petrel entered an unlit cabin via a deck-top hatch. There was no reason to doubt that these landings were other than deliberate and were not, for example, the result of colliding with the rigging. I heard calls only in complete darkness. They were mainly abbreviated versions of the longest call, which I remembered as a quick, shrill, nasal 'chu-chu chu chi-chu' with a rising and falling inflection. Both these calls and the increasing 'confidence' of the petrels with the onset of darkness reminded me of what I had experienced in June 1987 at the Leach's Petrel colony on Dun, St Kilda, Western Isles. Neither Wilson's Petrels *Oceanites oceanicus* nor Storm Petrels, which were each the dominant (indeed, virtually sole) petrel species in successive, more northeastern stages of the voyage, showed any similar interest at all in the yacht. The behaviour of Leach's Petrels recorded here may indicate the possibility of tape-luring this species to small ships at sea.

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**Extra-pair copulation by breeding male Mute Swan** During March 1989, on the River Thames, Oxfordshire, a pair of Mute Swans *Cygnus olor* nested for the fifth consecutive year in their well-established territory at Holton Mill. While the pen (*Darvic* ring number 'H37') was incubating the eight eggs on the nest 100 m upstream of the mill, the cob (ring 'DFB') spent most of his time some 200 m downstream below the mill. On the adjacent territory at Cuddesdon Mill, about 3 km downstream of Holton Mill, an 18-year-old female Mute Swan (ring 'X98') who had lost her 15-year-old mate in March 1989 was ousted by a new pair of swans. On 19th April, she swam upstream to Holton Mill, where she met male 'DFB'. Given the latter's previous record of vigorous territory defence, it was surprising to find that he accepted this intruder, and within a few days female 'X98' and male 'DFB' were seen in active courtship display; during late April, they were seen to copulate on at least four separate occasions, each time out of view of female 'H37', who continued incubating. So far as is known, 'X98' and 'DFB' made no attempt to nest following their copulations; 'X98' was not seen from early May onwards.

On 9th May, 'H37' hatched six cygnets, which 'DFB' and she both raised to fledging.

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Birkhead & Perrins (1986, *The Mute Swan*) stated (page 93) that, during incubation (by the female), 'the male has plenty of time, if he gets the opportunity, to seek extra copulations . . . In one case, an unattached female copulated with an already mated male, building a nest only 10 m away from the first nest and successfully hatching a brood of cygnets.' Such behaviour appears, however, to be uncommon. EDS

**Montagu's Harriers taking prey disturbed by farm machinery** The note on Steppe Eagles *Aquila (rapax) nipalensis* taking prey disturbed by farm machinery (*Brit. Birds* 82: 330) recalled the following. On 13th August 1984, in East Anglia, I watched a female Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* hunting behind a tractor that was cultivating a barley field. The crop had already been harvested, and the stubble and straw burnt on 12th August, and the tractor was breaking up the ground using a heavy drag. The harrier pair had nested in an adjacent cereal field, and the three young had fledged, but were still dependent on the parents for food. Within minutes of the tractor starting work, both adult harriers were hunting near it, at times approaching to within about 40-50 m, and catching prey, which they took back and passed to the juveniles perched on a grassy bank some 200 m away. The machine spent three days working in this field, and during this time the female Montagu's Harrier continued to hunt it for up to 30 minutes at a time. Apart from his initial interest, the male spent very little time in the area, preferring to hunt farther afield. On several occasions, the female would hunt directly behind the working tractor for some minutes, closely quartering the area which had just been cultivated, and maintaining a distance of approximately 40-60 m, intermittently pouncing on prey and taking it back to the juveniles. The harrier continued to hunt the field after the tractor had departed, but catching success soon diminished and she lost interest. During the period that the tractor was working in the field, the male was seen to catch two prey items and the female 12, almost certainly all small mammals.

In 1985, a pair of Montagu's Harriers nested in a field of winter wheat next to a pea field. On 29th July, contractors started vining the peas, resulting in considerable human and vehicular activity 24 hours per day. Despite this, the female hunted harvested areas of the field several times during the day, catching at least two prey items. Harvesting of the peas was completed on 31st July, and the next day she was seen to catch four prey items in the field; these were taken back to the four well-grown young in the nest. It was not possible to identify individual prey items, but, since several pairs of Skylarks *Alauda arvensis* were nesting in the crop, it is possible that she was taking not only small mammals, but also chicks from nests devoid of cover.

In 1989, a pair again nested in a field of winter wheat next to a field of peas. On 5th July, the peas were being harvested with a vining machine, and the female spent periods hunting and catching prey along a grassy bank close to where the machines were working. At no other time during the breeding season was she seen to hunt this bank, so I concluded that she was catching small mammals that had been disturbed by the machinery.

BOB IMAGE

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**Nest cup of Moorhen composed of polythene** At South Walney Nature Reserve, Cumbria, Moorhens *Gallinula chloropus* often create their nests in clumps of soft rush *Juncus effusus*, making use of dead material of the same vegetation for its construction. The cup of one particular nest, located in late May 1988, was composed entirely of scraps of polythene, on which eight eggs had been laid (plate 243). The nest was preyed on in the following week. When disassembled, it yielded 19 pieces of polythene, the largest of which was approximately 30 cm x 15 cm; the total area of polythene utilised was calculated to be 0.26 m<sup>2</sup>. Close by was an unused platform containing a further eight pieces of polythene totalling 0.12 m<sup>2</sup>.

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Human rubbish, when available, and if vaguely like natural materials, is not uncommon in the nests of many species. EDS



243. Nest of Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* containing polythene, Cumbria, May 1988 (Tim Dean)

**Knob-nibbling by Crested Coot** On 22nd December 1987, at Lac de Sidi Bourhaba, near Mehdija Plage, Morocco, I photographed a pair of Crested Coots *Fulica cristata* (plates 244 & 245) and observed their behaviour. Both appeared to be in breeding condition and had conspicuous frontal knobs, dark red on one and red-and-yellow on the other. They had no nest, although several other coots elsewhere at the lake carried nesting material. The two birds were foraging in the submerged vegetation and, several times, they swam quietly towards each other. When close together, one bowed its head, holding its bill underwater and presenting its knobs forwards; the other gently nibbled the first's knobs, but sometimes it also bowed its head in a submissive manner. This heterosexual behaviour, to which I can find no reference for this species, was seen several times in the course of a few hours. It appeared very similar to the bowing-and-nibbling ceremony of Coots *F. atra*.

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244 & 245. Pair of knob-nibbling Crested Coots *Fulica cristata*, Morocco, December 1987  
(Arnoud B. van den Berg)



### **Savannah Sparrow in Shetland: second record for the Western**

**Paleartic** On Fair Isle, Shetland, 30th September 1987 was a day of moderate SSW winds, mainly dull, but with brighter periods. PME was walking quietly beside a turnip rig at Shirva when he saw a small bird hop out of the crop about 10 m ahead of him. He was able to get an extremely brief rear view with binoculars before it hopped around the corner of the rig and out of sight. His first impression was of a bunting, perhaps a Little Bunting *Emberiza pusilla*. From the top of the rig, he obtained a brief side view, mainly of the bird's head, before it hopped around the next corner and back into the crop. It was a bunting-like bird, with heavily streaked upperparts and underparts. It had a complex head-pattern, with a thin whitish central crown-stripe, a pale eye-ring, a white submoustachial stripe and a supercilium which was strikingly lemon-yellow in front of and above the eye. The bill was long and pointed, with a fairly straight culmen, somehow quite unlike that of any Eurasian bunting he had seen. It was the bill shape that suggested that it was an American sparrow, and the yellow supercilium immediately suggested Savannah Sparrow *Ammodramus sandwichensis*. The bird also, however, showed an obvious clumping of the breast streaks, forming a large central spot. This was reminiscent of Song Sparrow *Zonotrichia melodia*. It was nearly ten years since PME had seen either of these species and he could not remember much more about them, particularly their structural differences. Although he suspected that it was a Savannah Sparrow, PME decided to err on the side of caution, particularly after such brief views.

PME left the bird and called the observatory from the nearby phone box. He told Elizabeth Riddiford that he had found an American sparrow, proba-



246. Savannah Sparrow *Ammodramus sandwichensis*, Shetland, September 1987 (*K. Osborn*)

bly Savannah or Song, and asked her to bring an American field guide. He then returned to the crop and tried to gain further views of the sparrow, but succeeded in seeing it only briefly in flight, noticing that the bird showed a very short tail with pale grey outer tail feathers. The breast spot also appeared to be much smaller than earlier, and seemed to consist of just a couple of clumped, wet feathers. This made him suspect that it could not be a Song Sparrow.

When NJR and the other birders arrived, the sparrow was skulking amongst the turnips. The field guide they had brought (Robbins *et al.* 1966) did not prove to be very helpful as it showed no structural details. Despite lots of conflicting suggestions from the assembled throng as to the identity of the bird, PME was now fairly sure that it had to be a Savannah Sparrow, but was still reluctant to commit himself. R. J. Johns, however, provided the clinching piece of information. He explained that, whilst Song Sparrows have proportionately long tails, Savannah Sparrows are very short-tailed. As soon as he said this, PME was convinced that the bird was a Savannah Sparrow. Eventu-

ally, the bird gave excellent views to all those present, and later that afternoon it was trapped and ringed by NJR, was aged as a first-winter on the shape and amount of wear of the rectrices (Pyle *et al.* 1987) and was photographed (plate 246). It was still present on 1st October, but was not seen subsequently.

The following description was taken in the hand:

**SIZE AND SHAPE** Similar in size and build to Reed Bunting *E. schoeniclus*, except for proportionately very short tail. Tail projection beyond wing tips less than length of exposed tertials. Wings very short, tips of primaries extending only just beyond tertials. Bill proportionately long for Emberizid, very pointed and with straight culmen.

**HEAD AND NECK** Crown-stripe creamy-white (individual feathers black with creamy fringes), very clearly defined, broadest at rear and much narrower than lateral crown-strips. Lateral crown-strips very dark brown, each feather black with dark chestnut fringe. Supercilium white above base of bill, washed bright lemon-yellow, becoming richer lemon-yellow immediately in front of and above eye, with yellow colour curving up to form drawn-out backward-facing point just behind eye. Supercilium behind eye pale grey-brown, flaring towards rear and ending at rear crown. Eye-ring very prominent, lemon-yellow on upper lid and yellowish-white on lower lid. Lores dull brown. Eye-stripe thin just behind eye, black with chestnut admixed, but broadening into oval-shaped patch over the upper rear ear-coverts. Ear-coverts brown with slight chestnut tone, faintly mottled paler buff. Moustachial stripe very dark brown, thin and slightly broken near base of bill, but broader at rear, with very distinctive upward kink just below eye and downward kink at rear of ear-coverts where it almost joined malar stripe and eye-stripe. Submoustachial stripe very prominent, white, vaguely tinged buff, with sparse tiny greyish-brown spots, the stripe broader at rear and with upper margin kinked in similar manner to moustachial stripe. Malar stripe grey-black, beginning 3 mm from base of lower mandible, very thin initially, but widening towards rear, where it almost joined moustachial stripe and heavy breast streaking. Chin and throat white, with sparse, diffuse, tiny grey chevrons. Nape feathers black with rich chestnut fringes except in centre, where there was buffer tone to fringes. Lower nape feathers grey with greyish-brown edges, this area showing very little streaking.

**UPPERPARTS** Mantle and scapulars grey-brown with thick dark brown streaks, each feather black with rich chestnut fringe, but some with

greyer or buffy fringes forming two pairs of prominent pale braces on each side of darker mantle centre. Rump and uppertail-coverts had dark grey centres with broad greyish-brown fringes with a slight chestnut tone, so appearing finely streaked. Uppertail dark grey, with pale chestnut-buff fringes to outer web of each feather, and pale brown tips with very faint chestnut tone to second and slightly to third outermost feathers. Outermost tail feathers pale buff-grey, with paler buff-brown fringes on outer webs and paler buff-brown tips.

**WINGS** Tertials: longest tertial grey-black with very broad chestnut fringe and chestnut tip to inner web; middle tertial grey-black with very broad chestnut fringe becoming paler, white with faint chestnut tone, at tip; shortest tertial dark grey with chestnut band between dark centre and broad white fringe. Greater coverts grey-black with fairly rich chestnut outer webs, and white with slight chestnut tone on tips forming thin wing-bar. Median coverts grey-black with broad chestnut fringes to outer webs, and inner webs and tips white with slight chestnut tone forming wing-bar. Lesser coverts darkish grey, fringed pale grey with slight chestnut tone. Alula dark grey, with faint chestnut-brown fringe to middle feather and very thin whitish fringe to largest feather. Primary coverts dark grey with thin pale chestnut fringes, and medium pale grey tips to inner ones. Secondaries dark grey with quite broad, rich chestnut fringes. Primaries dark grey with thin pale chestnut fringes. Underwing-coverts greyish-white with slight yellow tone on lesser secondary coverts. Underside of remiges pale grey.

**UNDERPARTS** Upper breast yellowish-buff with heavy grey-black streaking, richer and more chestnut at sides. Each feather had grey-black centre surrounded by dark chestnut and fringed buffish-white. Central breast-spot seen initially in field later disappeared and had been caused by wet feathers clumping together. Lower breast and upper belly paler buffish-white, less densely and heavily streaked grey-black. Flanks pale buffish-white with two lines of broad grey-black streaks, each feather patterned similarly to upper breast. Centre of

belly white. Undertail-coverts and vent white with slight yellowish-buff tone. Longest undertail-coverts had dagger-shaped broad, brown central streaks similar to those on 'Mealy' Redpoll *Carduelis flammea flammea*. Undertail pale grey.

**BARE PARTS** Upper mandible mainly dark grey-horn, darkest on culmen, but with broad paler cutting edge. Lower mandible pinkish-horn, darkening from middle towards dark grey tip. Legs pale pink, palest on rear of tarsi. Feet

slightly darker with pale pink soles. Nails pinkish-horn, darkening towards tips. Eye very dark nut-brown.

**MEASUREMENTS** Wing 75 mm, tail 50 mm, bill from skull 12.5 mm, tarsus 22.5 mm, weight 21.1 g.

**BEHAVIOUR** Quite skulking, although sometimes fed for considerable period out in open close to edge of crop. When feeding or shuffling about on ground, short tail held horizontally, but when hopping tail angled upwards.

The Savannah Sparrow is common in farmland and grassland throughout North America. Northerly populations are migratory and the species regularly occurs on passage on the eastern seaboard during spring and autumn. The first record for the Western Palearctic concerned one at Portland, Dorset, during 11th-16th April 1982 (Broyd 1985). The Portland individual was of the race *A. s. princeps*, colloquially known as 'Ipswich Sparrow', which is characteristically larger and greyer than other subspecies. The race of the Fair Isle individual was not *princeps*. There have been no subsequent Western Palearctic records of this species.

We should like to thank K. Osborn for the photograph, and P. V. Harvey and Dr A. G. Knox for commenting on the manuscript.

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Peter Lansdown (Chairman, British Birds Rarities Committee) has commented as follows: 'Given good views of a Savannah Sparrow and thorough attention to detail by the observers, as is the case here, the identification is straightforward. As Pete Ellis quickly realised, the lemon-yellow in the supercilia suggested Savannah Sparrow, and the well-streaked breast and flanks, short tail and pink legs confirmed the identification.'

Dr Alan Knox (Chairman, British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee) has commented: 'The only previous British record of Savannah Sparrow, in Dorset in 1982, belonged to the subspecies *princeps*, which breeds only on Sable Island, off Nova Scotia (*Ibis* 133: 440). The Fair Isle bird was much darker and clearly did not belong to this distinctive race, and the record was passed to the BOURC as "race undetermined". Geographic variation in the Savannah Sparrow is clinal over much of its range, making it difficult, if not inappropriate, to assign the Fair Isle bird to subspecies. After consulting Dr Jim Rising in Canada and examining skins at the British Museum (Natural History) at Tring, it was decided that the Fair Isle bird appeared closest to *oblitus* or *labradorius* (BOURC, *Ibis* in press). These races breed from Manitoba to Newfoundland, wintering in southern USA, northern Mexico and Cuba.'

'The BOURC was able to consider this record at all only because it had been photographed in the hand and measured. The races of many species are not determinable in the field or even when trapped. Where at all possible, claims of rare races should be supported by the maximum of detail, including several photographs of the bird in the hand, with a colour standard in each photograph to assist judgement of the photographer's colour balance.' EDS