

# Rufous-tailed Robin on Fair Isle: new to Britain

*Deryk Shaw*

**ABSTRACT** A first-winter Rufous-tailed Robin *Luscinia sibilans* was discovered on Fair Isle, Shetland, on 23rd October 2004. This represents the first record of this species for Britain and the Western Palearctic. Its occurrence coincided with an exceptional influx into Shetland of birds originating from Siberia and Central Asia, suggesting that all were affected by the prevailing weather conditions at that time. The timing of migration and weather patterns over northern Scotland are reviewed.

With a light breeze blowing from the northeast, conditions seemed promising for vagrant birds on Fair Isle, Shetland, on 23rd October 2004, and it was with my usual optimism that I headed out on the morning census to cover the northern part of the island. Other than a few thrushes and some cracking 'Northern Bullfinches' *Pyrrhula p. pyrrhula*, however, I had not seen a lot to shout about by the time I reached the top of Ward Hill at about 11.00 hrs. Meanwhile, Mike Wood (one of the Directors of Fair Isle Bird Observatory) was ambling south along the road from the Observatory with his wife, Angela, and two young daughters (Emily and Kate), when he spotted a bird resembling a juvenile Robin *Erithacus rubecula* hopping along the roadside by Bull's Park. The only person in sight was Mark Newell, and Mike went over to ask him if this was possible in late autumn. Mark replied 'No!' and they returned to look for the bird.

As I descended from the top of the hill towards Lower Station, my mobile phone rang and an out-of-breath (but still running) Alan Bull (my Assistant Warden) was shouting down the phone: 'Mark has just described to me what sounds like a Veery [*Catharus fuscescens*] at Bull's Park – well a *Catharus* thrush anyway! I'm on my way to check it out but there's no point you coming down yet. I'll keep you informed!' 'Okay! Thanks!' I replied and immediately

started down the hill. I did not care whether it was a Veery or not; any *Catharus* thrush would be a lifer and definitely worth running for. By the time I arrived, it had been identified as a Veery, and was showing well behind an old gate leaning against the dry-stone dyke. As I looked, I could see a small bird with a heavily mottled breast, a rufous tail contrasting with cold, olive-brown upperparts and pink legs. At this stage, I did not think it seemed quite right for Veery and thought it looked more like a Hermit Thrush *C. guttatus*, except that the breast pattern was more like that expected of a Veery. As I had not (and still haven't!) seen any of the *Catharus* thrushes, I thought it best to just take in the features of this bird. It was feeding close to the base of the dry-stone dyke and would periodically disappear into it for several minutes at a time. Discussion about its identity continued among the dozen or so people present, and although only one person had previously seen both species, his opinion strongly favoured Hermit Thrush. No other species were even considered at this time!

Regrettably, with my mind firmly fixed on a *Catharus*, I did not consider that it could be anything else and I tentatively put the news out that we had found a possible Hermit Thrush. The debate continued until lunchtime, when we returned to the Observatory for lunch and to check more references. It was over lunch that



Rebecca Nason

III. First-winter Rufous-tailed Robin *Luscinia sibilans*, Fair Isle, Shetland, October 2004.

Nick Dymond casually mentioned that it 'looked a bit like a Rufous-tailed Robin [*Luscinia sibilans*]', but added that 'it couldn't be that 'cos they are small, the jizz wasn't right and besides they are from southeast Asia'. Pandemonium ensued as references for Rufous-tailed Robin were sought, and shortly afterwards I was staring with incredulity at a picture I had found on the internet. Alan Bull came in with a similar picture in a copy of *Birding World*. We looked at each other in disbelief. That was it! Incredibly, it looked like we had another first for the Western Palearctic!

We were confident that this was our bird, but thought we had better see it in the flesh again to be absolutely certain. Mark, who had stayed behind to keep tabs on the bird, had not seen it since we left for lunch but, fortunately, a walk along the wall soon relocated it and doubly confirmed our suspicions. The next few moments will live with all of us forever – a feeling of relief that the bird was still here, then stunned shock as the realisation sank in that it really, truly was a Rufous-tailed Robin, followed by cheers and other such signs of elation! Now that the identification had been confirmed, I phoned out the updated news. This included a distorted telephone call to Paul Harvey, who was aboard the *Cyfish* with the Shetland crowd heading our way – not knowing if they were coming to see a Veery or a Hermit Thrush!

Once all had soaked in the moment, I decided that it could be easily trapped and that it should be examined in the hand to be absolutely sure of the identification and to check for signs of captivity. A net was erected next to the wall and the bird was gently coaxed into it. A glance at the underwing to check that we were not making some horrendous faux pas showed it to be plain buffish-white. In the hand I was amazed at how small it felt – even smaller than a Robin! Back in the ringing room, measurements and a brief description were taken. It was in good condition with no feather, claw or bill damage and was aged as a first-winter based on the retained juvenile greater coverts, which were brown with obvious small deep-buff tips (although the innermost two had been moulted, and were more olive and lacked buff tips), and distinctly pointed tail-feathers.

After ringing, it was photographed and then released back at the same site, where it remained until dusk. As it had been feeding voraciously throughout the day and was in good condition when examined, it was no surprise that it had departed by the morning, following a clear night.

#### *Detailed description*

A small chat with plump, round body, large beady eye, long pale-pink legs, and a relatively short tail. Reminiscent of Veery or Hermit

Hugh Harrop



112. First-winter Rufous-tailed Robin *Luscinia sibilans*, Fair Isle, Shetland, October 2004.

Thrush and (to those that had seen them) Siberian Blue Robin *Luscinia cyane*. Cold olive-brown upperparts with contrasting rufous rump and tail, and dirty buff-white underparts with extensive olive-brown scaling. With nothing alongside to compare it with, the small size (similar to Robin) was not immediately apparent to me, although if I had had previous experience of *Catharus* thrushes, I may have noticed that it was smaller. On examination in the hand, it showed absolutely no signs of captivity, having fresh, unbroken remiges and rectrices, and undamaged claws and bill.

**Behaviour** Kept very close to the dry-stone dyke and often disappeared into it for spells at a time. Typical chat-like behaviour, hopping along the ground and suddenly stopping to pick something from the ground. Often raised its tail to about 75 degrees and 'bounced' it down again, with a little 'shiver' at the end.

**Head** Crown olive-brown. Buffish-grey supercilium, barely discernible behind the eye. Lores grey-brown. Ear-coverts olive-brown with buff flecks giving a mottled appearance. Distinct buff-white eye-ring. Whitish submoustachial but feathers fringed olive-grey, giving scalloped effect, and merged with rest of underparts. Faintest of thin dark malar stripes formed a division between submoustachial and less scalloped whitish chin/throat.

**Upperparts** Mantle, back, scapulars olive-brown as crown. Rump contrasting lighter brown colour. Tail distinctly rufous, like a Common Nightingale's *Luscinia megarhynchos*. This was very obvious in good light or when sun shone, but became quite hard to see as the light faded or in deep shade. Wings were brown, contrasting with mantle. Greater coverts had small buff tips (like a young Robin and other chats), except the innermost two, which had been moulted and were more olive and lacked buff tips (noted in the hand). The innermost tertial had a small buff tip (also noted in the hand).

**Underparts** Chin whitish (noted as being very lightly fringed olive-grey in the hand). Throat and breast whitish with heavy olive-grey scalloping (fringes to feathers), lightest on lower breast.

Flanks heavily mottled grey, extending onto sides of belly. Central belly and undertail-coverts white. Underwing buff-white but with thin olive fringing on some axillaries.

**Bare parts** Bill dark with pale-pink gape and base to lower mandible. Legs pale pink, quite long. Eye showed dark brown iris, grey orbital ring and distinct buff-white eye-ring.

**Call** A Robin-like screech was made as it was extracted from the mist-net. Otherwise silent.

**Age** It was aged as a first-winter by the unmoulted juvenile greater coverts (all but the innermost two) and pointed tips to the tail feathers. The pale base to the lower mandible may also be a feature associated with first-winter birds.

#### Biometric data

Wing length	69 mm
Tail length	50.5 mm
Weight	17.3 g
P2	=P6/P7
Emarginated primaries	P3, P4, P5
Wing point	P4
Primary projection	17.1 mm
Fat score	2+/8
Pectoral muscle	2+/3
Primaries numbered ascendantly (P1 being the shortest, outermost primary)	

### Weather conditions

October 2004 was notable for its anomalous pressure patterns. The mean Icelandic low-pressure area was displaced some 750–1,000 km further southeast than normal. This led to more frequent frontal depressions passing over Scotland, accompanied by record rainfall and more frequent winds with easterly components over the northern UK, Fennoscandia and north-western Siberia. Consequently, weather patterns over the region were particularly changeable. It is not possible, therefore, to predict the route or timing of the arrival of the Rufous-tailed Robin with any great precision. It had probably arrived in the northern North Sea sector no later than 20th or 21st October, and may have possibly arrived as early as 16th or 17th October, when an east-northeasterly airstream extended from the Baltic region to northern Scotland, and which coincided with the arrival of the Chestnut-eared Bunting *Emberiza fucata* on Fair Isle one week earlier.

### The supporting cast

Throughout September, weather conditions across Shetland had been largely unsuitable for the arrival of birds from eastern Europe and Siberia, making this one of the worst early autumn periods on record. Although Whalsay enjoyed Britain's fourth Brown Shrike *Lanius cristatus* from 19th to 24th September, little else of interest (by Shetland standards) was discovered during the month. Things began to change for the better on 29th September, when a Red-flanked Bluetail *Tarsiger cyanurus* was discovered on Fair Isle, followed on 1st October by the first of three Pallas's Grasshopper Warblers *Locustella certhiola* (surprisingly all on Foula this year, on 1st; 1st to 5th; 2nd) and the first of four White's Thrushes *Zoothera dauma* (Out Skerries, on 1st; Voe, Mainland, on 2nd; Maywick, Mainland, on 7th; Swining, Mainland, between 10th and 22nd). There then followed a procession of superb birds from the east, which appeared throughout the length and breadth of Shetland during the month, making this

perhaps the most exhilarating late autumn on record for Britain's northernmost county. Along with the Pallas's Grasshopper Warblers and White's Thrushes came an almost daily onslaught of exciting rarities, including Yellow-breasted Bunting *Emberiza aureola* (Toab, Mainland, from 1st to 2nd), Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum* (Foula, from 2nd to 7th; Skaw, Unst, on 15th), Lanceolated Warbler *L. lanceolata* (Fair Isle, on 4th; Bressay, on 26th), Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata* (Fair Isle, on 5th), Pechora Pipit *Anthus gustavi* (Foula, from 5th to 12th and 9th to 20th), Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola* (Foula, on 7th), Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka* (Whalsay, on 10th; Scousburgh, Mainland, on 23rd), Chestnut-eared Bunting (Fair Isle, from 15th to 20th), Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus* (Vidlin, Mainland, on 17th), Dusky Warbler *Phylloscopus fuscatus* (Fair Isle, from 18th to 19th), Olive-backed Pipit *A. hodgsoni* (Fair Isle, on 20th) and Isabelline Wheatear *Oe. isabellina* (Sumburgh Head, Mainland, from 22nd to 25th) (Rogers 2005). This wealth of rarities was accompanied by a host of scarce migrants that included several Richard's Pipits *A. richardi*, four 'Siberian Stonechats' *Saxicola*



113. First-winter Rufous-tailed Robin *Luscinia sibilans*, Fair Isle, Shetland, October 2004.

Hugh Harrop

*torquatus maurus*, Yellow-browed *Ph. inornatus* and Pallas's Leaf Warblers *Ph. proregulus*, Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva*, Little *E. pusilla* and Rustic Buntings *E. rustica*, and an unprecedented arrival of 'Northern Bullfinches'. Britain's first Rufous-tailed Robin (and Chestnut-eared Bunting) could scarcely have better supporting credentials, although how a Common Yellowthroat *Geothlypis trichas* made it to Foula on 9th to 10th October in these conditions is, perhaps, the greatest mystery of all.

### Distribution and migration

The breeding range extends across much of south-central and southeastern Siberia, from central and northern Sakhalin in the Sea of Okhotsk, west to the upper reaches of the Yenisey River, and north to 62°N along the Tunguska River (Vaurie 1959). Consequently, its range overlaps with those of many species which regularly occur in western Europe in late autumn, including Dusky and Pallas's Leaf Warblers. The wintering range extends from south-eastern China to northern Vietnam, Laos and northern Thailand (Robson 2000; Carey *et al.* 2001).

Departure from the northwestern region of the breeding range commences in early September (Dement'ev & Gladkov 1954) and by mid October most birds have been left, the mean daily maximum temperatures over central Siberia having usually fallen below 0°C, although it is possible that the recent marked climate warming may have resulted in later departures. To the east, migrants commonly pass along the east coast of northeastern China

from mid September onwards. Although shy, it is numerous at Beidaihe and Happy Island, Hebei Province, in late September and into the first few days of October. Migrants presumably remain at these latitudes until cold weather forces them to move south, so passage through China appears to be slow and protracted. To the south, it is an uncommon passage migrant through Hong Kong, Guangdong Province, where the earliest autumn occurrence is 16th October, but October occurrences here are particularly unusual. Migrants typically start to appear in Hong Kong in early November and new arrivals peak around the third and fourth weeks of the month, before passage tails off in early December (Carey *et al.* 2001).

### Acknowledgments

My thanks go to Norman Elkins for preparing a summary of the prevailing weather conditions across northern Europe for the days leading up to the discovery of the Rufous-tailed Robin.

### References

- Carey, G. J., Chalmers, M. L., Diskin, D. A., Kennerley, P. R., Leader, P. J., Leven, M. R., Lewthwaite, R. W., Melville, D. S., Turnbull, M., & Young, L. 2001. *The Avifauna of Hong Kong*. Hong Kong Bird Watching Society, Hong Kong.
- Dement'ev, G. P., & Gladkov, N. A. (eds.). 1954 (translated 1968). *Birds of the Soviet Union*. Vol. 6. Israel Program for Scientific Translations, Jerusalem.
- Robson, C. R. 2000. *A Field Guide to the Birds of South-east Asia*. New Holland, London.
- Rogers, M. J., and the Rarities Committee. 2005. Report on rare birds in Great Britain in 2004. *Brit. Birds* 98: 628–694.
- Vaurie, C. 1959. *The Birds of the Palearctic Fauna. A Systematic Reference. Order Passeriformes*. Witherby, London.

Deryk N. Shaw

Fair Isle Bird Observatory, Fair Isle, Shetland ZE2 9JU



### EDITORIAL COMMENT

Europe's first Rufous-tailed Robin caught many observers by surprise, both because of its unexpected occurrence and because it was a species that many were unfamiliar with. This situation changed overnight and for observers across Europe a new target had appeared on their rarity radar. Armed with this new knowledge, it took just over a year for Europe's second to be found. Unexpectedly, however, this was not an autumn vagrant at a migration hotspot, but was found hopping along an unfrozen ditch by a sewage-farm at Białystok, eastern Poland, on 30th December 2005. It remained until the following day and was also seen by just a handful of birders.

Colin Bradshaw, Chairman of the British Birds Rarities Committee, commented: Given the quality of the submission, which included description, photographs and biometrics, this bird was easier to assess than to identify initially. Confusion with Veery is understandable as this is the only other similar species that shows the extensive scalloping on the underparts. In addition, as the photographs show, the long but robust pink legs, the rotund body shape and the relatively short tail are all more in keeping with a *Catharus* thrush than most of the chats we are familiar with. Once the observers had set

their thoughts in this direction, it took a while to rectify the initial mistake but, fortunately, this didn't cause any major problems.'

Eric Meek, Chairman of the British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee, commented: 'So, yet another long-distance migrant from Siberia makes it to our shores! Is it just the fact that I have lived on the east coast all my life that makes a Siberian vagrant even more exciting than a transatlantic one? I don't think so – it's the thought of the sheer remoteness of where this bird probably originated that makes it so special. That, together with the fact that this bird is such a skulker of the woodland floor (if my experience of one at Beidaihe is anything to go by) that it was going to have to turn up somewhere as devoid of vegetation as Fair Isle to stand any chance of being found!

'The paucity of migrants in the early autumn of 2004 was notable, but Deryk Shaw's paper clearly shows how this situation altered during the latter part of that migration season, with an almost continuous run of Siberian passerines arriving in Shetland, of which the Rufous-tailed Robin formed a part. The breathtaking excitement of the find and the understandable initial belief that it must be a *Catharus* thrush are all there. But spare a thought for the undocumented story of a certain editor of *British Birds* who, believing the bird to be a Hermit Thrush, a species which he had previously seen on Fair Isle, opted not to travel on the *Cyfish*!

'Members of the BOURC were unanimous in accepting the record onto Category A of the British List.'



Rebecca nason

114. First-winter Rufous-tailed Robin *Luscinia sibilans*, Fair Isle, Shetland, October 2004.