

Rarities Committee news

BBRC AGM 2011

The 2011 BBRC AGM was held in Oxford on 12th–13th March. We had not expected the opportunity to connect with a top-class rarity when that location was agreed a year in advance (members were able to visit Chipping Norton to see the wintering Oriental Turtle Dove *Streptopelia orientalis* prior to the main business commencing) and credit must go to local member Nic Hallam for such exemplary planning! We were delighted to be joined by Martin Collinson, BOURC Chairman and *BB* Editorial Board Member, for the whole meeting and Andrew Harrop, BOURC Secretary, for the Sunday morning session. Ian Packer, from the BB 2000 main board, also joined us on the Saturday afternoon and for the traditional Saturday evening social, which was held at the Kings Arms in Sandford-on-Thames. In addition, on the Friday, several members visited the Natural History Museum at Tring, where we were joined by Peter Kennerley, David Pearson and Brian Small, and where the extensive specimen collection helped us to progress some identification issues. We are extremely grateful to the staff at the NHM, particularly Robert Prŷs-Jones, for facilitating our visit. Numerous issues were discussed during the three days, a number of which will form the basis of future articles in *BB*, but some of the key items are summarised below.

RSPB sponsorship

As described in the lead editorial in this issue, we are delighted to confirm RSPB sponsorship for the Committee's work, supporting and enhancing the long-running and invaluable financial support from Zeiss.

Record assessment

We plan to publish an article that will clarify issues raised by observers in relation to the level of detail required for a record to be accepted. It has long been recognised that any process of record adjudication will have inherent flaws, and that a small proportion of good records will not be accepted while some erroneous records may be. We try hard to

apply consistent standards but ultimately all records are still assessed on a case-by-case basis, because all the circumstances relating to the sighting have to be considered as an important part of the evidence. Some particular aspects of this general topic are discussed further below.

Non-photographed records

There is an increasing perception among birders that photographs are now essential for a record to be accepted. In fact, the proportion of accepted records for which the bird was photographed has remained more or less constant over the last five years, at about two-thirds of the total. Clearly it is not true that all records must be supported by photographs, although that *is* the case for certain taxa and circumstances. These will be explored further in the forthcoming article.

Heard-only records

We discussed the criteria for records involving birds that have been identified principally by calls. Explicit criteria were published in 1998 for fly-over records of one species often claimed on call – Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus* (which at the time was a BBRC rarity; see *Brit. Birds* 91: 500) – but these serve as the basis for more general guidelines: observers must see the bird sufficiently well to determine that it belongs to the family being claimed (in this case that it's a pipit), and there must be a full account of three or more calls from an observer with prior experience of the species. Birders are encouraged to obtain sound recordings wherever possible and these are extremely valuable in situations where vocalisations are critical for the identification of a singing vagrant (e.g. Iberian Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus ibericus*). In the case of singing vagrants where sound recordings are not available, the previous experience of observers will be of particular importance.

Documenting trapped rarities

This issue remains a concern. Despite the

publication of an article in the BTO's *Ringers' Bulletin* (winter 2009, pp. 4–5), the quality of some submitted descriptions remains well below par. Good-quality descriptions of trapped birds, along with relevant biometrics, improve our knowledge of the taxon concerned and provide a valuable source of information. We are liaising with staff from the BTO Ringing Unit to investigate further ways to raise awareness among ringers and improve recording standards, but we take this opportunity to emphasise the value of taking a detailed description together with all relevant biometrics, plumage details and good-quality photographs whenever possible, realising of course that the bird's welfare must always be the first priority.

Species pairs or groups

We are currently reviewing the taxa which we consider as species pairs or groups (see BBRC's constitution, Appendix IV, at www.bbrc.org.uk). Once the review is completed we will update our position on those taxa to be considered and published as species pairs or groups in the annual report.

Records of rare species for which only subspecies are assessed by BBRC

Recent correspondence with recorders in Scotland has identified concerns over species for which only certain subspecies are assessed by BBRC – for example, Subalpine Warbler *Sylvia cantillans* and Arctic Redpoll *Carduelis hornemanni* (*S. c. cantillans* and *C. h. exilipes* are not currently considered by BBRC). If a record submitted to BBRC (as one of the rarer subspecies) is found not proven, it may nonetheless still be an acceptable record (either of the commoner form or as subspecies undetermined) at a local level, and it is important that such records are not lost from the system. The BBRC Secretary will attempt to report any not proven decisions to the observer(s) and recorder concerned, to ensure that the record can be reconsidered by the local committee where necessary.

Informal submissions

The principle of informal submissions for taxa where identification criteria are still evolving was introduced in the RIACT paper (*Brit. Birds* 99: 619–645). We have now

received several such submissions, and these have certainly helped us to develop assessment criteria. As this is a new and innovative method of documentation, our approach to such submissions has necessarily evolved during this period. Following discussions at the AGM, it was agreed that this approach should be limited to the most difficult taxa in terms of identification. Observers who are unsure as to whether they should consider an informal submission are encouraged to contact the Secretary and Chairman for advice.

Observer credits

We discussed whether individuals who had identified certain rarities from photos on the internet should be credited in our annual report, but we concluded that our default position is that they would not be named. It is often difficult to establish who first identified the bird in such circumstances and there is a danger of us becoming embroiled in accusations of 'poaching' if we go down this route! Nonetheless, we are well aware that these situations are likely to become more frequent and so we intend to treat such records on a case-by-case basis, and provide reference to key individuals in the identification process in the species comment of the report when appropriate.

Intergrades and hybrids

A number of challenging examples were discussed! We determined that records of birds that were potential intergrades, but which could equally be rare variants of certain taxa, would in future be published in the report. This would include, for example, Black-headed Wagtails *Motacilla flava feldegg* that show limited pale feathering in the supercilium. It could also include gulls that were considered to have originated as hybrids from Pacific populations, and for which all the potential parent species would thus be considered as vagrants in their own right. This approach is consistent with our comments about 'southern' Yellow Wagtails in the 2009 report (*Brit. Birds* 103: 624). However, details of hybrids that might involve a cross between a rare taxon and a resident species or regular visitor to Britain (e.g. a suspected hybrid between a

Canvasback *Aythya valisineria* and a Common Pochard *A. ferina*) would not be published. In such cases, the pairing may have occurred in western Europe (in which case the individual is not a genuine vagrant), while the matter of captive origin also clouds the issue for wildfowl in particular. In relation to issues of provenance, we once again encourage local input to help us try to determine the origin of potential vagrants.

Website development

We have embarked on the process of developing our website and are grateful for the financial support of BB 2000 in doing so. The new site will feature an online submission process that will make the task of compiling a description for BBRC's assessment easier for observers. The new site should go live before the autumn and we look forward to feedback from observers and recorders in due course.

Adam Rowlands



BBRC
British Birds Rarities Committee



BBRC is sponsored by Carl Zeiss Ltd and the RSPB

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News and comment

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Opinions expressed in this feature are not necessarily those of *British Birds*

Great Indian Bustard joins the Critical list

One of the world's largest flying birds is now on the brink of extinction, according to the latest IUCN Red List for birds, released by BirdLife. The Great Indian Bustard *Ardeotis nigriceps* has been listed as Critically Endangered, with a population estimate of just 250 individuals.

Standing a metre in height and weighing in at nearly 15 kg, the Great Indian Bustard was once widespread across the grasslands of India and Pakistan but hunting and habitat loss mean that it's now restricted to small and isolated fragments of its former range. 'In an ever more crowded world, species that need lots of space, such as the Great Indian Bustard, are losing out. However, we are the ones who lose in the long run, as the services that nature provides us with start to disappear,' said Dr Leon Bennun, BirdLife's Director of Science and Policy.

Larger landbirds are disappearing with frightening speed across the developing world as a burgeoning human population piles unsustainable pressure on the natural world. The catastrophic

decline in Asian *Gyps* vultures has been well documented. Now vulture populations in Africa are crashing too – a vivid illustration is the listing of the formerly abundant Hooded Vulture *Necrosyrtes monachus* as Endangered in the 2011 Red List.

A further disturbing report comes from the West African island nation of São Tomé where hunters have targeted the Critically Endangered Dwarf Olive Ibis *Bostrychia bocagei*, whose protected National Park home now abuts land given a concession for an oil-palm plantation.

The latest Red List now includes 1,253 bird species in the threatened categories of Vulnerable, Endangered and Critically Endangered – 12% of the world's birds. These comprise 189 species classed as Critically Endangered (facing an extremely high risk of extinction), 381 species assessed as Endangered (very high risk of extinction) and 683 listed as Vulnerable (high risk of extinction). An additional 843 species are considered Near Threatened because they are assessed as