

Chinese Pond Heron: new to Britain

Abstract A Chinese Pond Heron *Ardeola bacchus* was present at locations in Hythe and Saltwood, Kent, from 17th January to 25th March 2014, on which date it was found dead. The initial identification based on field characters was later confirmed by DNA analysis. The condition of the plumage was consistent with that of a first-winter bird, and the progression of moult and wear was typical of a wild individual. It showed no obvious signs of captive origin and no birds were known in any European zoos or collections in 2014. After review, it was accepted onto Category A of the British List. This, along with other European records, prompted the review of an earlier British record: an adult in breeding plumage at Eccles-on-Sea, Norfolk, on 31st October 2004, and East Dean, Hampshire, on 13th November 2004. That bird was also accepted, and now becomes the first British record.

Chinese Pond Heron in Norfolk, October 2004

October 2004 was exceptional for east Asian vagrants, with two species new to Britain being discovered, both on Fair Isle – Chestnut-eared Bunting *Emberiza fucata* on 15th–20th and Rufous-tailed Robin *Larvivora sibilans* on 23rd.

On 31st October, I was birding around my local patch at Eccles-on-Sea in Norfolk when one of my neighbours, Bob Sterry, pulled up alongside me and reported a strange bird at a small pond he had dug in the field behind his house. He said that he had been trying to identify it from his bird book but had been unable to come up with a good match, although he wondered if it might be some sort of grebe.

His house is situated directly behind the coastal sand dunes, with an area of Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa* scrub running down one side of the plot, next to both the house and the pond. The pond is largely surrounded by rank vegetation along with the stumps of a few felled trees, and is stocked with large numbers of small goldfish.

I was intrigued, and went along to the house with him. There, I was astonished to find a superb Chinese Pond Heron *Ardeola bacchus* in full breeding plumage standing on

a tree stump by the pond. The bird seemed settled so I went home for my camera. By the time I returned, the bird had moved off the stump and down into the pond-side vegetation. As I approached, the bird became aware of my presence and flew off. I hoped that it would return and discussed the possibility of allowing access for other birders if it did so. Rather reluctantly, it was agreed that I could bring a couple of local birders onto the site, but Bob was adamant that there was to be no public release of the news.

After almost an hour, the bird reappeared. It perched in some distant trees before making a gradual return to the pond via a number of raised perches. I left the house and, after making a rather more cautious approach, succeeded in photographing it (plates 192 & 193). By the time of its departure, at about 3.00 pm, it had been seen by just two other birders. Unfortunately, it did not return and could not be relocated in the area despite extensive searching.

Astonishingly, two weeks later, on 13th November, the same bird was seen again, at East Dean, in Hampshire. It made a similarly short stay before flying off, and was not seen again.

Description

In terms of size and structure, the bird resembled a Squacco Heron *A. ralloides*. Its head, neck and breast were a rich chestnut colour, as were the head plumes; the chin/throat was white and there was a thin white stripe down the centre of the breast. The mantle was slate-grey, delicately fringing the wing-coverts. The grey also seemed to underlie the chestnut on the sides of the neck. The rest of the underparts, wings and tail were pure white. The legs were bright orange-yellow, the bill similar but with a black tip and top edge.

Condition and origin

The bird seemed in perfect condition with no visible damage to the plumage, and was unringed. I have in the past spent ten years working for the RSPCA, in which time I've picked up and transported numerous birds. In my experience, birds that have been kept in captivity almost invariably show some damage to the primary tips and tail feathers, and almost always have soiled feathering around the tail, undertail-coverts and vent. Other common indicators of confinement include feather damage around the base of the bill, and the condition of the legs and feet

being less than immaculate. The pond heron showed none of these signs and I would be astonished if it had been transported while in this plumage.

The Chinese Pond Heron is kept in captivity but only extremely rarely. In October 2004 the only known captive bird in Britain was housed securely in London Zoo and had moulted into winter plumage by 31st October (Gantlett 2004). In early 2004 an outbreak of bird flu in Europe resulted in the EU introducing legislation to temporarily control the importation of wild birds to prevent the spread of avian influenza and Newcastle's disease (Commission Decision 2004/402/EC, dated 26th April 2004). Although this temporary ban did not come into force until 30th April 2005 (and became permanent in 2007), the fact that there was an outbreak of bird flu at the time would have resulted in stricter controls on the bird trade from the Far East into Europe, making the escape of a recently arrived transported bird most unlikely. For a captive bird to have delayed its moult, it would almost certainly have had to be kept under climate-controlled conditions, which are neither cheap nor easy to manage with such a large bird – making it unlikely that the collector would be careless with its security.

Neil Bowman



192 & 193 (right). Chinese Pond Heron *Ardeola bacchus*, Eccles-on-Sea, Norfolk, 31st October 2004.

Moreover, after such an escape it would have had to fly a considerable distance, perhaps from mainland Europe, to reach Norfolk and then on to Hampshire; that seems unlikely for a captive bird that had been kept indoors with limited flight opportunities.

Behaviour

In October 2004 I had no prior experience of wild Chinese Pond Herons. I found the Norfolk bird to be neither unduly jumpy nor excessively approachable. Since then, I have travelled extensively in eastern Asia and seen many Chinese Pond Herons, which ranged from being very shy to absurdly approachable; the Norfolk bird fitted somewhere in the middle of this range. It is interesting that, like many tired migrants arriving on the east coast, it dropped into the first suitable habitat it encountered, and although there was an abundant food supply in the pond, it quickly moved on. Its visit to Hampshire was equally brief. Such a brief 'pit stop' might be expected of a bird on active migration, pausing just long enough to feed, then continuing.

Earlier extralimital records

Prior to the Eccles bird the only European records of Chinese Pond Heron came from Norway (an adult at Hellesylt, Møre og Romsdal, in October 1973), and Hungary (an

adult female at Virágoskút fishponds, Hortobágy, on 14th–22nd August 2000). At the time (in 2004), both records were considered to relate to formerly captive birds and were placed in Category D of their respective national lists. Both birds were in breeding plumage, and the circumstances of the Eccles bird are similar to those of the Norwegian one, in that both were discovered in breeding plumage in late autumn in northern Europe. Although it is very late in the year for these birds not to have moulted, this delay could potentially have been influenced by vagrancy to Europe.

Delayed moult is extremely rare in the Chinese Pond Heron but not unprecedented. Garner (2014) discussed an individual photographed in Bangkok, Thailand, by David Gandy, which retained most of its breeding plumage into October. Typically, however, almost all Chinese Pond Herons are in non-breeding plumage in late October. It is possible that the Eccles bird originated from a more northerly population; those breeding in northern China are long-distance migrants and perhaps the source of the birds that winter in southeast Asia, whereas the species is present throughout the year in southern China.

These extralimital European records of Chinese Pond Herons in breeding plumage



Neil Bowman

raise the issue of whether juvenile or winter-plumaged birds might also be occurring. Could other late-autumn *Ardeola* herons in drab, non-breeding plumage have been Chinese Pond Herons, but overlooked as Squacco Herons? The identification of a winter-plumaged bird in Kent (below) confirms that vagrancy by Chinese Pond Herons to Europe is possible, and as identification skills continue to improve it seems likely that more will be recorded. What is certain is that every late-autumn *Ardeola* heron reaching northern Europe will be scrutinised like never before.

Neil Bowman, Clare Cottage, Eccles-on-Sea, Norfolk NR12 0SW;
e-mail neilbbowman@aol.com

Acknowledgments

My thanks go to Bob Sterry, who told me about the bird in his garden; to Mick Fiszer and Andy Kane (the two other observers of the bird) for their assistance in documenting this record; and also to Tim Allwood for his work in presenting the resubmission, which led to its acceptance by BBRC and BOURC.

References

- Gantlett, S. 2004. The Chinese Pond Heron in Norfolk and Hampshire – a new British bird? *Birding World* 17(11): 472–473.
- Garner, M. 2014. Chinese Pond Heron in breeding plumage in October (and November!). <http://birdingfrontiers.com/2014/10/27/chinese-pond-heron-in-breeding-plumage>



Chinese Pond Heron in Kent, 2014

On 17th January 2014, Michael Dawson (MD) received a phone call from his neighbours, Valerie and Trevor Greening, to report a strange, heron-like bird on the lily pads of a pond within the shared grounds of their apartment block in North Road West, in Hythe, Kent. MD went over to their flat and, sure enough, there was the bird. It took off as he arrived and the most striking feature was its white wings. It returned quite quickly and MD managed to take a few photographs.

The pond in question is secluded, set in large, wooded grounds and with a surface area of perhaps 100 m² or more. Water-lilies cover about 20% of the surface, there is a significant area of reeds in one corner and the pond contains many small fish. The bird continued to make regular visits to the pond that day and on most days until 24th January. It seemed to be of a nervous disposition and flew into nearby trees at the slightest disturbance. That behaviour proved to be typical throughout its stay, making it particularly difficult to photograph.

Still unsure of the bird's identity, despite looking at images on the internet and in a bird book, MD e-mailed the photographs to the RSPB at their Pulborough Brooks reserve on 27th January. Their reply was that the photographs appeared to show a Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides* and they recom-

mended that he should report the bird to the Kent recorder, Barry Wright.

On seeing the photographs, Barry Wright suggested to MD that he should contact Ian Roberts (IR), also a Hythe resident, which he did on 3rd February (although there had been no further sightings at the pond since 24th January). Coincidentally, that same evening, Dungeness warden David Walker contacted IR to say that he had received an e-mail from Mike Kirk who had recently seen a 'Squacco Heron' in his garden in Saltwood, close to the location where MD had seen the bird in Hythe.

On 4th February, IR went to look for the heron in Saltwood. Almost as soon as he arrived, a Squacco-type heron flew across the road and dropped into the garden; frustratingly, the bird was not visible from the road, and he didn't see it again that day. IR received photos of the bird, from Mike Kirk and Nigel Baker, one of which was particularly intriguing as it appeared to show a dark 'curtain' across the lower breast and possibly some maroon coloration to the breast sides. Although Squacco Heron remained the most likely outcome despite the exceptional mid-winter date, it was also clear that the possibility of one of the other pond herons needed to be considered.

Some local birders began to search the

surrounding area and on the afternoon of 11th February Steve Broyd located the bird in a publicly accessible area by Turnpike Hill in Hythe, which meant that the news could be broadcast more widely. A few images were also taken that afternoon and more on the following days. Over the next four weeks, it was seen regularly at Turnpike Hill and at other locations in the Hythe and Saltwood area, ranging as far west as Green Lane, near Hythe Roughs, and north to the centre of Saltwood, although the gardens at the end of Redbrooks Way were a favoured site. It could be frustratingly elusive, going missing for days at a time, and always remained rather flighty and wary, never allowing a close approach.

Identification

With the opportunity to study the bird in detail, and with better photographs available, the identification could be considered more carefully. Photographs, in particular Paul Rowe's excellent series of images (plates 194–196), revealed maroon feathering in the head pattern and underparts. Although it closely resembled a Squacco Heron, the few traces of breeding plumage pointed more towards a Chinese Pond Heron *A. bacchus*.

A literature search revealed very little on the identification of pond herons in non-breeding plumage. Fortunately, Martin Garner contacted IR to say that he had looked at the subject with Ian Lewington as part of the research for the *Rare Birds of North America* (Howell *et al.* 2014), and had studied skins at the Natural History Museum. With support from Martin and his Birding Frontiers website (Garner 2014a,b,c) to guide us through the identification maze, the final identification, as Chinese Pond Heron, proved to be rather straightforward as no other pond heron species has maroon feathering in these areas.

Additional features that appeared to rule out Squacco Heron included the dark loreal markings and thick, orange-based bill, though these characters need further research. The identification was later confirmed through DNA analysis (see below).

Description

The bird's size and structure was similar to

that of a Squacco Heron, and it was mostly in non-breeding plumage. Fortunately, the fact that it had begun to moult into breeding plumage helped greatly in establishing its identification. The bird showed no obvious signs of being of captive origin – it was unringed, the bill and feet were in good condition, the plumage was not noticeably damaged or soiled, and it was wary.

Head The lores were yellow with a short dark streak in front of the yellow eye. The crown was dark-streaked but the rest of the head was paler, buffish in colour and mottled darker. Some pale maroon feathering could be seen on the lower crown (just above/behind the eye), below the eye (bordering a noticeable white spot below the gape) and on the sides of the breast. It has been suggested that this may have developed during the bird's stay; however, the earliest photos (taken on or about 21st January) are rather poor and so this is uncertain, but it was definitely noticeable by 13th February. The sequence of photographs by Paul Rowe shows that the plumage had altered very little over the following three weeks to 6th March.

Upperparts The mantle was quite dark, with an almost purplish hue in certain light conditions and photographs. The wings appeared pure white in flight, but photos show some darker markings on the primary coverts and primaries; together with the shape of the primary tips, these suggest that the bird was probably a first-winter (2CY). The tail was also white.

Underparts The breast was buffish, with distinct darker streaks, and some maroon feathering at the breast sides. The lower breast was somewhat darker, giving the distinct 'curtain effect' across the lower breast referred to earlier. The belly and vent were whitish, contrasting with the darker breast.

Bill The bill was thick throughout its length and distinctly two-toned, with a bright orange-yellow base to the lower mandible contrasting with the mostly dark upper mandible (with orange-yellow along the lower edge) and tip (approximately one-third of the bill).

Legs and feet The legs and feet were yellowish, with darker claws.

Age The bird appeared to be a second-calendar-year (first-winter) owing to the dark areas in the outer primaries and the rather tapered and worn tips to those feathers (plate 197). Adults at this time of year have mostly/ entirely white wing-tips, and broad, rounded tips to the primaries. The inner three or more primaries have more rounded, fresher-looking tips, consistent with photographs of known 2CY birds at this time of year.

Distribution and vagrancy of the Chinese Pond Heron

The breeding range of Chinese Pond Heron extends across most of central, southern and eastern China, north to Jilin, Liaoning and Nei Mongol provinces in northeast China. It also breeds in northernmost Burma, northern Vietnam and in small numbers in southern Japan. Outside the breeding season northern breeders are strongly migratory, whereas in the southern parts of the breeding range birds are resident; northern birds apparently 'leapfrog' the southern



Paul Rowe



Paul Rowe



Paul Rowe

194–196. First-winter Chinese Pond Heron *Ardeola bacchus*, Hythe, Kent, 8th March 2014.

breeders to winter farther south.

Extralimital records are discussed in more detail elsewhere in this issue (pp. 345–354), but prior to the bird in Kent, Chinese Pond Heron had been reported in Europe on five occasions:

- An adult shot at Hellesylt, Møre og Romsdal, Norway, in autumn 1973, probably October
- An adult female at Virágoskút fishponds, Hortobágy, Hungary on 14th–22nd August 2000
- An adult in Norfolk then Hampshire, in October–November 2004 (see above)
- An adult at Rautavaara, Finland, on 17th July 2007
- An adult at Turkansaari, Oulu, Finland, in August 2012

More recently, an adult in breeding plumage appeared in southwest Denmark on 21st June 2016, and what was presumably the same bird was found at Mandal, Vest-Agder, Norway, on 23rd June 2016 (<https://artsobservasjoner.no/image/635831>). A decision

on the origin and status of this individual was not available at the time of writing.

Captive pond herons in Europe

In 2005, a temporary ban on the import of wild birds into the EU came into effect as part of measures to prevent outbreaks of the H5N1 strain of bird flu. This became a permanent ban from July 2007 (CITES 2007; RSPB 2007), so no Chinese Pond Herons will have been legally imported into the EU in recent years. Some trade in wild birds has continued illegally since the ban, although there is limited information on this. While the numbers of Chinese Pond Herons involved has decreased considerably since the ban, the export of wild birds from China into Europe does continue (Li & Jiang 2014). It is difficult to judge the extent to which species are currently held in zoos and public collections, and impossible to know for private collections. The Zootierliste website (www.zootierliste.de/en/?klasse=2&ordnung=208&familie=20801&art=2050124) aims to provide a ‘database for the current and

Table 1. List of European zoos and bird collections known to have held Chinese Pond Herons *Ardeola bacchus* in captivity. In the ‘dates held’ column a question mark indicates that the last year in which the birds were held is unknown, but that they were not in captivity in 2014.

	zoo or collection	dates held	notes
Germany	Berlin (Tierpark Friedrichsfelde)	1961 to ?	two young birds in 1996 did not survive
	Berlin (Zoologischer Garten)	In the 1930s	
	Halle (Zoo)	1963 to ?	
	Timmendorfer Strand (Vogelpark Niendorf)	2012*	see below
Netherlands	Alphen aan den Rijn (Vogelpark Avifauna)	1992 to 1999	none bred
	Arnhem (Burgers’ Zoo)	1992 to 1998	bred 1996, 1997
UK	Bratton Fleming (Exmoor Zoological Park)	2005 to ?**	see below
	Chester (Zoo)	1970 to 1971	none bred
	London (Zoo)	1959 to ? 1998 to 2005	two young birds in 1999 did not survive

Notes:

* The Vogelpark Niendorf currently has a photograph of the species on its website (www.vogelpark-niendorf.de/reiher.html) though it is not listed in the ‘current inventory’ (undated) on the Zootierliste website, only the ‘former inventory’ (also undated, but presumably 2012). The park is situated on the north coast of Germany, northeast of Hamburg.

** The website of the Exmoor Zoological Park does not give an end date for the former holding, but the species does not appear in its current list (www.exmoorzoo.co.uk/about-the-zoo-north-devon-species).

Table 2. Numbers of Chinese Pond Heron *Ardeola bacchus*, Indian Pond Heron *A. grayii*, Javan Pond Heron *A. speciosa* and Squacco Heron *A. ralloides* legally held in captivity in Europe. Current refers to 2014, while former refers to earlier years. Numbers held in captivity in the UK are listed in parentheses. Source: Zootierliste www.zootierliste.de/en/?klasse=2&ordnung=208&familie=20801&art=2050124

	Chinese Pond Heron	Indian Pond Heron	Javan Pond Heron	Squacco Heron
current	0 (0)	3 (0)	6 (0)	11 (1)
former	8 (3)	7 (2)	7 (3)	21 (3)

former vertebrate inventories of European zoos and other public collections'. In 2014, this website listed no known holdings of Chinese Pond Herons in Europe, and only nine former holdings (table 1).

In summary, it appears that the Chinese Pond Heron was always rare in captivity prior to the import ban, with very limited

breeding success. It is not currently known in captivity in Europe, but is a long-distance migrant with extralimital records in continental Europe, North America and Australia. Based on the Zootierliste website, it would seem that the other pond heron species are slightly more frequently held in captivity in Europe (table 2).

Phil Palmer



Phil Palmer



197 & 198. First-winter Chinese Pond Heron *Ardeola bacchus*, Hythe, Kent, 4th March 2014.

Any pond heron in Europe, particularly in northern Europe where the Squacco Heron is a rarity, is likely to attract attention. For example, an Indian Pond Heron *A. grayii* in Belgium in July 1988 appeared in a number of publications (e.g. Lewington *et al.* 1991), but was considered to have been of captive origin and is not included on the official Belgian List. It has not been possible to trace any other occurrences of this species in Europe. Notably, there are now six published records of Chinese Pond Heron in Europe (with a decision on the 2016 bird in Denmark and Norway still pending) but only one of Indian Pond Heron, whereas the latter species is (slightly) more frequently found in captivity.

DNA analysis

The Kent bird was last seen alive on 13th March. On 25th March it was found freshly dead (but dismembered) at Orchard Valley in Hythe by Gill and Mike Badcock. The head was photographed but this had disappeared later the same day, and by the time that IR was informed, on 3rd April, just a few wing and body feathers remained. These were collected and a sample sent to Martin Collinson at the University of Aberdeen for DNA analysis, which confirmed the identification as Chinese Pond Heron. Martin commented that the bird was '100% identical to the four database sequences of Chinese Pond Heron for the COI gene... There is one Squacco Heron and one Indian Pond Heron in the database, and it is 4–5% different from them. Unfortunately there is no Javan Pond Heron [*A. speciosa*] DNA sequenced at all, so unless we can find a sample I cannot include that in the analysis; however... it is inconceivable really that Javan would show an identical DNA sequence.'

Ian Roberts, 6 St Hilda's Road, Hythe, Kent CT21 6HF; e-mail ian_rober@yahoo.co.uk
 Michael Dawson, Flat 2, Colleton Park, 101 North Road, Hythe, Kent CT21 4AS

Acknowledgments

Many people were instrumental in locating and identifying this bird, and enabling visiting birders to catch up with it, and our thanks go to them all. In particular, we would like to thank Mike Kirk and Nigel Baker for sharing their photographs, taken in early February 2014, which added impetus to the search to locate the bird. Special thanks are also due to Barry Wright and David Walker for kindly passing on early news of the bird's presence, without which it is unlikely it would have been looked for and located, and for their insightful discussions on its identity; and to Steve Broyd for locating the bird in a public area, thereby enabling it to be twitchable. The late Martin Garner provided invaluable input into the debate on identification and ageing. We are indebted to Steve Gantlett, Phil Palmer and Paul Rowe for providing their excellent and instructive images, some of which appear in this article. Gill and Mike Badcock deserve particular mention for alerting us to the presence of the dead bird and for allowing access to their property to collect the remains. Martin Collinson is thanked for undertaking the DNA analysis and Chris Bromley for arranging for the stable-isotope analysis to be performed. Geir Mobakken provided an update on the Norwegian records. Last, but not least, we thank the many tolerant residents in the Tumpike Hill and Redbrooks Way area, and also the visiting birders who were well behaved, friendly and respectful of the local residents' privacy.

References

- CITES. 2007. https://cites.org/eng/news/pr/2007/070111_EU_bird_ban.shtml
- Garner, M. 2014a. Rare pond heron in Kent. <http://birdingfrontiers.com/2014/02/06/rare-pond-heron-in-kent>
- 2014b. Identification of Chinese Pond Heron. <http://birdingfrontiers.com/2014/02/13/identification-of-chinese-pond-heron>
- 2014c. Chinese Pond Heron in breeding plumage in October (and November!). <http://birdingfrontiers.com/2014/10/27/chinese-pond-heron-in-breeding-plumage>
- Howell, S. N. G., Lewington, I., & Russell, W. 2014. *Rare Birds of North America*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Lewington, I., Alström, P., & Colston, P. 1991. *A Field Guide to the Rare Birds of Britain and Europe*. HarperCollins, London.
- Li, L., & Jiang, Z. 2014. *International Trade of CITES Listed Bird Species in China*. <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0085012>
- RSPB. 2007. <http://www.rspb.org.uk/forprofessionals/policy/wildbirdslaw/birdtradeban.aspx>



Editorial comment Paul French, BBRC Chairman, commented: 'The protracted identification of the Kent bird was played out in the public domain and most BBRC members have followed that debate with great interest, leaving very little to add to the comprehensive summary of events above. BBRC considered the plumage and DNA evidence to be conclusive and accepted the identification unanimously in a single circulation before passing the record on to BOURC. This occurrence prompted the resubmission of the 2004 Norfolk record. The identification of this bird had already been accepted by BBRC on its first submission, so the record was simply redirected to BOURC for reappraisal.'

‘As alluded to above, it seems likely that this species could easily go undetected in many parts of its potential vagrancy shadow, and the challenge of identifying birds in non-breeding plumage will now feature more heavily in the minds of those lucky enough to find an autumn ‘pond heron’. However, Squacco Heron remains by far the most likely species to occur, and BBRC will take a pragmatic view that individuals not seen well enough to rule out Chinese Pond Heron will still be acceptable as Squacco Heron.’

Andrew Harrop, Chairman of BOURC, commented; ‘The assessment of these records by BOURC provides a good example of how conclusions shift in the light of additional evidence. When the 2004 record was first assessed, it was known that the Chinese Pond Heron was very rare in captivity in Europe, but concerns about what was considered to be anomalous plumage combined with advice about the possibility of birds in private collections resulted in a majority vote to place the record in Category E. Nonetheless, it was noted that there were extralimital records of Chinese Pond Heron from Alaska, Hungary and Norway, some or all of which may have involved genuine vagrants.

‘The 2014 record involved a bird for which there were no reasonable barriers to acceptance: its age, plumage, the results of stable-isotope analysis and continued rarity in captivity all supported a natural origin. It was placed in Category A by a unanimous vote after a single circulation. Following this decision, a reappraisal of the 2004 record was requested. Between the first and second circulations it had been shown that a small number of wild birds (in Thailand) retained breeding plumage into October and November, while no evidence had been found to confirm the presence of birds in private collections. BOURC is conscious that absence of evidence does not equate to evidence of absence, but the growing number of extralimital records of Chinese Pond Heron contrasts with the very small and apparently declining numbers in captivity in Europe. The second circulation resulted in a majority vote to place the record in Category A.

‘It should be understood that BOURC’s decisions about the categorisation of these two records are not based on absolute proof but rather on the balance of evidence. Most decisions about provenance are of this nature, and Category D continues to be used as a holding category for records which are especially problematic.’

Request

Two predominantly pale grey European Stonechats *Saxicola rubicola* were discovered in Britain in 2016: one overwintered at Dungeness, Kent, and another at Richmond Park, Greater London (plate 199). DNA analysis showed that they were either *S. r. rubicola* or *S. r. hibernans* (Martin Collinson pers. comm.). Their occurrence prompted others to recall similar birds that overwintered in the London area, at Dartford in 2001/02 and Rainham in 2009/10.



199. European Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola*, Richmond Park, Greater London, December 2016.

The most likely reason for the birds’ appearance is that they have a pigmentation mutation that prohibits the production of pheomelanin (Hein Van Grouw pers. comm.). The result would be that brown and buff feathers would be grey, just as in these four stonechats. There is a remote possibility that this mutation is both heritable and well established and that there is a small population of stonechats that all look exactly like these ones do, slowly evolving into a new taxon.

If you have seen a wild bird of *any* species (including stonechats) anywhere in the world that would normally be brown and/or buff but was instead grey, then please send the details, preferably with photographs, to Adam Wilson (widswilson@hotmail.com).