



The Carl Zeiss Award 2015

First introduced in December 1991 (*Brit. Birds* 84: 589), the Carl Zeiss Award has previously been awarded to the photograph or series of photographs that BBRC has judged to be the ‘most helpful, interesting and/or instructive’ during the processes of record assessment in the preceding year. Of course, ‘helpful, interesting and/or instructive’ are subjective terms and, when reviewing the hundreds of submissions we receive, trying to define and reach a consensus on these criteria often leads to in-depth discussions and debate. That debate helps the voting process, both of the records themselves and in terms of the candidates for this award. The winner has traditionally been chosen by combining the votes of individual Committee members, and there have been some memorable winners in recent years, including the Islay Ascension Frigatebird *Fregata aquila* in 2014 and the Co. Durham Eastern Crowned Warbler *Phylloscopus coronatus* in 2010 – and some memorable runners-up too, not least the Kent Tufted Puffin *Fratercula cirrhata*, also in 2010.

Since the last award, however, and as a result of meetings in November 2014 and at the BBRC AGM in March 2015, we have decided to give a slightly different and broader emphasis to the Carl Zeiss Award in the future. And so, beginning with the current award, and mindful that 2016 will mark the 25th anniversary of this very popular competition, we intend to present the award for the best overall submission of the year. Our hope is that this will encourage those birders lucky enough to find or identify something special to put that little bit of extra effort into their submission. This may well include an instructive series of digital images, but our award will not be limited to photographs. Sketches, paintings, detailed notes and sound recordings may all form a central part of a good submission, and we intend that from now on the award will reflect this.

The shortlist for 2015 comprised six

submissions. The top three are described and illustrated in more detail in a moment but, in no particular order, the three just missing out on a podium finish are as follows. The submission for the Eastern Bonelli’s Warbler *Phylloscopus orientalis* at Scalloway, Shetland, in October 2014, featured accounts and descriptions by three observers (Howard Fearn, James Hanlon and Phil Harris), all of whom heard the diagnostic call. The photographs of the bird, notably those by Michael McKee and Rebecca Nason, would have been worthy winners of previous Carl Zeiss Awards, and the only thing missing from the submission was a recording of the call, which was not possible despite the best efforts of many observers.

Nick Whitehouse’s submission of a Blyth’s Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum* at Spurn, Yorkshire, in June 2014, documents a great example of a bird heard, seen and identified in the field, with the incontrovertible back-up provided by in-the-hand details after the bird was trapped by members of the Spurn Bird Observatory. The in-hand description by Paul Collins was complete, describing the wing formula and complemented by a photograph showing this.

The record of the Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus* at Pendeen, Cornwall, in November 2014 was unfortunately not submitted by the finders, but Dave Parker did an excellent job in his role as county recorder, pulling together an extremely helpful and instructive series of photographs that depicted the shrike in different poses and in different lights. This may well prove to be an acceptable ‘Turkestan Shrike’ *L. i. phoenicuroides* in due course, due in no small part to the quality of Dave’s submission.

In third place this year is Mark Warren’s submission of a trapped Eurasian Scops Owl *Otus scops* on North Ronaldsay, Orkney, on 15th–16th June 2014. Most people would be tempted to simply photograph such a marvellous little bird and not think too much more about what would surely be a simple

and straightforward submission. This, however, was not the case for Mark. He wanted to age the owl, but this proved difficult in the limited time available (not wishing to keep the bird in the hand unnecessarily). So he photographed the spread wing and set about trying to age the bird from the photos. It wasn't a simple task, but his thoughts and reasoning were clearly laid out in his submission and the committee appreciated the extra lengths he had gone to. We often find that there is rather little detail submitted by the ringers who handle rare birds, and in part this may be the result of the time pressure they are under (and the excitement/stress!), but this is a great example of what can be achieved with a bit of extra effort.

This year's runner-up is the submission by Ian Andrews and Marc Eden of a Booted Warbler *Iduna caligata* at Torness, Lothian, on 11th–23rd October 2014. As well as being the first for Lothian,



Alison Duncan



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311. Eurasian Scops Owl *Otus scops*, North Ronaldsay, Orkney, in June 2014. Several features are visible that support Mark's assessment that this bird was a first-summer. Although not especially worn, the outer primaries are relatively pointed, while the pattern on the primaries also seems to fit a first-summer better, including the less obvious bars and markings on the inner webs, and an overall more random patterning. In adults the spots and marks are more uniform and consistent across the feather including at the tip. This pattern is visible on the secondaries as well, although they do appear to be quite rounded at the tips. There also appears to be a moult limit within both the greater and the median coverts, with the pattern of the outer four greater coverts being different from that on the inner feathers – although we cannot be sure that this reflects two generations of feathers. The two visible tail feathers appear to show a pattern matching that of first-summer Scops Owls in images found online. One potential problem is that a first-summer Scops Owl should have moulted some primaries/secondaries, yet there was no obvious moult limit in the flight feathers. Given the available evidence, BBRC chose to leave this bird unaged.

this individual showed an unfamiliar (at least in a British context) pattern of moult, with two generations of flight and tail feathers visible in the field. Illustrated by an excellent series of photographs, this bird was described in detail in the record submission to BBRC (and in Andrews & Eden 2015). The submission covered the moult and ageing in some detail, and they distilled opinion from various sources. They concluded that the bird was a moulting adult, although the views of various experts consulted were by no means

unanimous. Nonetheless, the principle of using moult and feather condition to establish the age of a bird is an integral part of the identification of many more subtle species; the process has long been familiar to ringers, of course, and nowadays, when most birders have a decent camera, it is often possible to analyse these aspects without trapping the bird.

This year's winner is Martin Perrow's submission of an Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* on Blakeney Point, Norfolk, on



Peter Macdonald

312. Booted Warbler *Iduna caligata*, Torness, Lothian, 12th October 2014. The suspended moult within the primaries is very clear in this individual; the three innermost primaries are new feathers – blackish, glossy and unworn. The remaining primaries are from an earlier generation, being much paler, brownish and faded, with some wear evident at the tips. While there are various supporting characters that may inform the debate on ageing (including what appear to be fault bars in the tail, which is generally an indicator of a bird of the year), the key issue is how old the older feathers are. Are they juvenile feathers, and thus perhaps three months older than the newer ones; or were they replaced during a complete moult on the bird's wintering grounds, and thus perhaps ten months or so older than the new feathers? Booted Warblers with suspended moult are uncommon among vagrants in western Europe and generally cause much debate. Given the conflicting opinions received, we opted to leave this bird unaged.



Ian Andrews



Peter Macdonald



313. The Blakeney Point wheatear, Norfolk, September 2014. Note the largely white underwing-coverts. It is only in plate 313c that the grey bases to the greater underwing-coverts are visible; these are lost completely in the out-of-focus plate 313e. The apparently white underwing-coverts, coupled with plain whitish tarsal feathering and the overall sandy coloration and upright stance, made an identification in the field as Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* entirely understandable. However, also visible in these images are the rather dark centres to the median coverts in plate 313a; the small bill and uniform supercilium, extending well beyond the eye in plate 313b; and the darker block of primary coverts and the rather narrow terminal tail band in plate 313d.

16th September 2014. This submission was notable in a number of ways. Firstly, although it was a single-observer record, it was supported by a host of photographs and detailed field notes. Secondly, the bird was actually an extremely difficult one to identify, and ultimately the Committee found the record not proven. It is probably fair to say that the quality of the submission was almost the reason the Committee was able to find it 'NP', since the range of photographs showed a combination of anomalous features, even though the overall impression was highly suggestive of Isabelline.

There are two features, shown in the images, which were particularly troubling for

voters. Firstly, the underwing-coverts appear to be white; and secondly the tibial feathering was whitish and unmarked. These are both excellent features for Isabelline, and indeed white underwing-coverts are diagnostic. In assessing this record, we sought input from a variety of specialists outwith the Committee; in particular, the input from Killian Mullarney demonstrated that, in rare cases, first-winter Northern Wheatear *O. oenanthe* can show extensively pale underwings. However, in such cases they do still have grey bases to the greater coverts, and in the best of the images of the underwing of the Blakeney bird grey bases are indeed visible. Once the apparently diagnostic underwing was shown

to be unsafe, it was easier to conclude that the rest of the plumage and structural features were also not diagnostic of Isabelline, and the record was found not proven on a second circulation.

Nonetheless, this documented record adds greatly to our knowledge of this potentially tricky species, and all voting members felt that they had learnt a great deal from Martin's hard work and careful approach. There is no doubt that this record will influence the way in which we look at future submissions of Isabelline Wheatear, and as a consequence Martin's submission is a worthy winner of this year's Carl Zeiss Award. It also, perhaps helpfully, reinforces the point that difficult identifications are rarely straightforward, but that when the submission quality is as high as it was in this case, the chances of arriving – eventually – at the correct outcome, and of learning more about the subject matter in the process, are high.

Martin was presented with his prize, a pair

of the exceptional ZEISS Victory SF 10 × 42 binoculars, at the British Birdwatching Fair at Rutland Water in August. Further details will be posted on the BBRC website (www.bbrc.org.uk) in due course, where a selection of previous winning images can be viewed along with links to the previous competition write-ups in *BB*.

Acknowledgments

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Reference

Andrews, I. J., & Eden, M. 2015. Booted Warbler; Torness, 11–23 October 2014 – first record for Lothian. *Scottish Birds* 35: 78–81.

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BBRC

British Birds Rarities Committee



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