

Chestnut-eared Bunting on Fair Isle:

new to Britain

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ABSTRACT A Chestnut-eared Bunting *Emberiza fucata* was discovered on Fair Isle, Shetland, on 15th October 2004. It remained on the island until 20th October and during its stay it was seen by approximately 120 birders. In the hand it was identified as a first-winter, possibly a male, of the nominate form, which breeds in northeast Asia to the east of Lake Baikal. Its arrival coincided with that of two other vagrants from the Eastern Palearctic, a Rufous-tailed Robin *Luscinia sibilans* on Fair Isle on 23rd October, and an Eastern Crowned Warbler *Phylloscopus coronatus* in Finland, also on 23rd October. This represents the first record of Chestnut-eared Bunting for Britain and the Western Palearctic.

September 2004 was dominated by westerly winds, and talk of the worst autumn on record had filled the Fair Isle Bird Observatory lounge. The wind finally switched to a light southeasterly on 29th September, and a stunning male Red-flanked Bluetail *Tarsiger cyanurus* was discovered that afternoon, spectacularly rescuing September from becoming a completely rarity-free month! October began to make further amends, with a Lanceolated

Warbler *Locustella lanceolata* closely followed by a Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata* in the first few days of the month. As high pressure began to dominate over northern Europe, a constant easterly airstream set in, bringing with it a flood of common and scarce migrants.

During lunch on 15th October, Hywel Maggs mentioned that he'd had brief views of an odd 'Little Bunting' [*Emberiza pusilla*] in the bird-cover crop (one planted specifically to

attract autumn migrants) at Skadan, near the South Lighthouse. He takes up the story: 'I arrived at the Skadan crop at about 11.00 hrs. I walked along the kale and immediately a ticking bunting flew out and landed momentarily in a clearing, side-on. I thought this must be the Little Bunting that had been present at Lower Leogh the previous afternoon. I managed to register the prominent eye-ring but was slightly perplexed by a number of plumage details. The bird quickly flew again, this time into dense cover in the breezy conditions. I decided to approach closer and could see it feeding on grain among the crop. I noticed that it appeared to have bold pale mantle straps, a yellowish wash to the sides of the breast (I never saw the bird front-on) and a less than typical head pattern for Little Bunting. It also appeared to be slightly large in flight for Little Bunting, but I thought that the windy viewing conditions could have affected my judgement. I couldn't think of anything else it could be apart from a particularly odd Little Bunting, and texted DNS and Alan Bull (AJB). I left the crop after the bird flew off with the resident flock of House Sparrows *Passer domesticus*. I met up with AJB shortly afterwards and discussed some of the features I had seen but when I left the isle that afternoon, I was still under the impression that it was just a particularly odd Little Bunting.'

I eventually caught up with the bird late that afternoon and in the rapidly fading light I also thought that it looked a bit odd: surely its tail was too long, it appeared to lack the black ear-covert surround, and I thought I saw a chestnut rump (but decided I must have been mistaken). I ran through all the other European buntings but could not come up with a better fit than Little Bunting, and decided that it must be that species. A Little Bunting had been seen in the Leogh ditch on 12th and 14th, and perhaps this was the same individual? The long tail was perhaps just a trick of the light as was the chestnut rump, and I put the lack of black in the face down to it perhaps being very fresh and having buff tips to the feathers which were concealing the black. However, it was really niggling me and I asked my assistant warden, Rebecca Nason (RN), to look out for it during census the next morning, as it was in her 'patch'.

The following day, RN reported that the bunting was still present, so after lunch a small posse went to have a look, but getting good views was difficult in the strong wind. It spent most of its time sheltering in the oats and was giving only brief flight views when flushed, but it usually hovered for a second before dropping into the oats. With these views, however, it was agreed that it did look odd – and was certainly NOT a Little Bunting! We pieced together that

it showed characteristics associated with Little Bunting, Ortolan Bunting *E. hortulana* and Yellowhammer *E. citrinella* but did not entirely fit any of these species. It had an Ortolan Bunting-like look, with greyish nape, pale buff submoustachial and throat, obvious whitish eye-ring and a light orange-brown wash across the underparts, but also chestnut ear-coverts with a pale spot at the rear, a typical feature of Little Bunting. After an hour of poor views, we were no nearer to making a positive identification and the decision was taken to



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127. First-winter Chestnut-eared Bunting *Emberiza fucata*, Fair Isle, Shetland, October 2004.

trap it. A net was erected and the bird easily coaxed into it.

Once the bird was in the hand, the questions really began. It definitely had a chestnut rump but other features (e.g. pale eye-ring, lack of wing-bars, a two-toned bill) ruled out all the obvious suspects (Yellowhammer, Yellow-breasted *E. aureola*, Chestnut *E. rutila*, Pine *E. leucocephalos* and Rustic Buntings *E. rustica*). The bird was taken back to the Observatory, where I took a full description and detailed measurements. Phil Harris then remembered reading an article by Steve Votier on vagrant eastern buntings (Votier 2001). He returned a few moments later with the relevant issue and slapped the page down on the bench in front of me. There staring me in the face was a rear-view shot of our bird: Chestnut-eared Bunting *E. fucata*!

We searched frantically for more information in the books available to us and, of course, all the features slotted neatly into place – chestnut ear-coverts, obvious whitish eye-ring, partially hidden chestnut breast-band, faint orange-buff wash, longish tail.... We were stunned! We had a first for the Western Palearctic! Reading the caption beneath the photo, ‘...Chestnut-eared Buntings breed in northeast China and Korea and are middle- to long-distance migrants to their wintering grounds in southeast Asia. This species has not been recorded in western Europe, but a bit of blind optimism never hurts!...’, had us leaping round the room! Measurements established that it was of the nominate, northerly breeding race, which is a long-distance migrant, while the unmoulted alula feather, pointed rectrices and grey-brown iris indicated that it was a first-winter.

News was released on the local Shetland grapevine and *Birdline Scotland*. The bird was then shown to the assembled crowd of Observatory visitors, staff and interested islanders. Several photos were taken and it was returned to the Skadan. Here it remained until 20th October and was seen by approximately 120 visiting birders.



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128. First-winter Chestnut-eared Bunting *Emberiza fucata*, Fair Isle, Shetland, October 2004.

Detailed description

General appearance

A medium-sized bunting with typically ‘complicated’ plumage. The main features were chestnut ear-coverts with a pale buff spot at the rear; an obvious pale eye-ring; pale buff submoustachial; dark upper-breast streaking with a partially hidden chestnut band below; and chestnut lower back and rump. Proportionately, it had fairly short wings and a long tail.

Behaviour

It did not move far on the ground, feeding among the oat crop with very short hops. When disturbed, it would fly around the immediate area before dropping back into the crop, always hovering for a second or two before it dropped. Occasionally it perched in the (relative) open on some leaning corn stalks. It kept to itself, not really mingling with the sparrow flock or Bramblings *Fringilla montifringilla*.

Head

Narrow yellowish-brown central crown stripe, bordered by thicker black- and brown-streaked lateral stripes. Supercilium ginger from bill to eye; wider and more greyish yellow-brown behind eye, merging with similarly coloured nape. Loes grey, distinct cream eye-ring. Chestnut ear-coverts were slightly paler-centred and had a noticeable pale buff spot at the rear. The broad, creamy-buff submoustachial ran around the lower border of the ear-coverts. Blackish-streaked malar, narrow at bill base but widening from the base

and merging with breast streaking. Chin and throat creamy-buff, as submoustachial.

Upperparts

Nape greyish yellow-brown with just a few darker flecks. Mantle streaked black on a chestnut background with two broad, light greyish-brown braces. Scapulars chestnut with narrow black centres. Lower back and rump chestnut with a few narrow black shaft-streaks, more so on lower rump. Uppertail-coverts dark brown with black shaft-streaks and greyish edges. Central tail blackish-centred with light chestnut fringes. Outer tail with much white. Rest of tail blackish with diffuse grey tips. All feathers of equal age and pointed. Primaries dark, grey-brown edged chestnut-brown, secondaries edged chestnut. Greater coverts black-centred with broad light chestnut fringes. Median coverts with similar black centres (coming to a point) bordered chestnut fading to buffish-yellow fringing and tip. Lesser coverts chestnut with narrow black central streaks. Tertiaries black-centred with light chestnut edging, fading to almost white fringes and tips. Edging narrow on inner web and broad on outer web.

Underparts

Yellowish-buff wash across chin, throat and upper breast. Narrow blackish-streaked malar widening from lower mandible to upper breast, where it merged with a gorget of streaks across breast. Below this was a

narrow chestnut band fading to a broad, light chestnut-yellow band across lower breast. In the hand it could be seen that there was actually a broad chestnut band across the lower breast, hidden by light chestnut fringes. Light buff-tinged chestnut wash down flanks with a few bold brown streaks. Belly white, unmarked. Undertail-coverts light buff, tinged chestnut, similar to flanks. Colours of wash to underparts quite hard to decide owing to apparent changes with angle and light conditions – appearing buff at times but yellower at others.

Bare parts

Bill: upper mandible dark horn, lower mandible greyish pink, culmen straight. Legs pink. Iris dark brown, eye-ring cream, distinct, except for small area at front which was ginger and therefore less obvious.

Call

An explosive 'tzic' similar to that of Rustic Bunting, often delivered (but not always) when flushed or when coming in to land.

Biometrics

Wing length	75 mm
Tail length	64 mm
Weight	21.1 g
Primary projection	4.8 mm
Emarginated primaries	P3, P4, P5, P6
(primaries numbered ascendantly)	
P2	=P5/P6
Wing point	P3, P4, P5
P6 to wing point	3.1 mm
P7 to wing point	7.6 mm
P8 to wing point	11.9 mm
P9 to wing point	14.4 mm
P10 to wing point	16.4 mm
Secondaries to wing point	17.0 mm
Bill length (to skull)	14.8 mm
Bill length (to feathers)	10.9 mm
Fat score	1/8
Pectoral muscle	1/8

Age and sex

The bird was aged as a first-winter based upon the fact that it had retained the juvenile alula feather, showed pointed rectrices (although adults of this species do have pointed feathers, these are slightly wider and less pointed than those of first-winter birds) and a grey-brown iris (adults have a chestnut iris). It was sexed as a male on wing length and tail length, based upon criteria outlined in Byers *et al.* (1995), although BOURC's view was that it was probably a male, rather than accepting it as a definite male.

Weather conditions and associated arrivals

As with the Rufous-tailed Robin *Luscinia sibilans* which arrived on the island on 23rd October 2004 (Shaw 2006), it is not possible to



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predict the timing and duration of the passage of this far-eastern bird with any precision as the bird had probably been en route for some weeks. During the days preceding its arrival, conditions over Eurasia suggested that a southern route may have been taken. The change in wind direction at the end of September, after a month predominated by westerly winds, was brought about by a developing eastward-moving anticyclone. Only weak easterly winds were present on its southern flank as it moved into Russia, but another anticyclone, this time more intense, took a similar track across Scandinavia on 10th

October before turning southeast into southern Russia by 13th October. A strong east to south-easterly airflow on its southern flank extended across Europe from as far east as Kazakhstan, although winds previously in that region were weak. Strong southwesterly winds to the north of this high-pressure region probably prevented a higher-latitude movement. Indeed, westerly winds were more frequent than normal over northern Asia in October.

Throughout October 2004, the easterly airstream brought a superb run of rarities to Shetland from breeding grounds extending from eastern Europe to western Asia, with many originating from east of the Ural Mountains and beyond. Heading this list of outstanding rarities were the two species new to the Western Palearctic, Chestnut-eared Bunting and Rufous-tailed Robin. With these came many 'lesser' rarities, including Richard's *Anthus richardi*, Olive-backed *A. hodgsoni* and Pechora Pipits *A. gustavi*, Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*, several 'Siberian Stonechats' *Saxicola torquatus maurus*, Isabelline *Oenanthe isabellina* and Pied Wheatears *O. pleschanka*, several White's Thrushes *Zoothera dauma* and Pallas's Grasshopper Warblers *Locustella certhiola*, Lanceolated, Blyth's Reed *Acrocephalus dumetorum*, Booted, Pallas's Leaf *Phylloscopus proregulus*, Yellow-browed *P. inornatus* and Dusky Warblers *P. fuscatus*, Isabelline Shrike *Lanius*



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130. A rarity in the hand on Fair Isle always draws a crowd, the balance of islanders and visiting birders depending on the time of year. Here, Brian Wilson is arriving fresh from repair work at the local school, while two of the younger islanders, Lachlan Shaw (in the Celtic hat) and Lowri Best, are already there. Lachlan, at least, has an island list that most UK twitchers would be extremely envious of!

isabellinus, and Rustic, Little and Yellow-breasted Buntings. Details of the dates and locations of many of these can be found in Rogers *et al.* (2005) and Shaw (2006).

Distribution

Within Asia, Chestnut-eared Bunting has a fragmented breeding distribution and three recognised races. The breeding range of the nominate race *E. f. fucata* extends from eastern Transbaikalia, to the east of Lake Baikal to the upper and middle reaches of the Amur River in extreme eastern Russia, north and east to at least the region of Khabarovsk, and into northeastern Mongolia, northeastern China, the Korean Peninsula, and the islands of Hokkaido and northern Honshu in northern Japan. This form is a long-distance migrant, wintering from southern Japan and southern China south to northern Thailand, and is the most likely to occur as a vagrant in western Europe. Two other races occur to the south of the nominate form. Both are smaller and either largely resident or short-distance and/or altitudinal migrants. The race *E. f. kuatunensis* breeds in southeast China, where it is a short-distance migrant. It winters in the southern part of its breeding range, but it is uncertain whether those reaching coastal regions are this form or the nominate. In the Himalayas, *E. f. arcuata* breeds from the North West Frontier Province, Pakistan, east to Nepal

and Darjeeling, India. To the east, it appears to be absent from Bhutan and the eastern Himalayas but reappears in southeastern Tibet, Yunnan, western Guizhou, Sichuan and southern Shaanxi provinces, China. The Himalayan breeders are altitudinal migrants which winter in the foothills and adjacent plains of northern India and Pakistan, while birds wintering in Bangladesh, northeastern India and Burma may originate from Chinese populations, but there are no ringing recoveries to support this.

Having a breeding distribution that lies entirely to the east of Lake Baikal, Chestnut-eared Bunting would appear to be an unlikely vagrant to reach Britain. However, its range does overlap with the ranges of two other vagrant buntings which have reached Britain: Black-faced *E. spodocephala* and Yellow-browed Bunting *E. chrysophrys*, although both do breed well to the west of Lake Baikal as well as east of it.

Likelihood of escape

Rare buntings are sometimes tainted with the stigma of being escapes from captivity. In its review of this record, BOURC investigated fully the likelihood of this bird originating from a captive source. Chestnut-eared Bunting is not

currently known in captive-bird trade (but there is some evidence that it has been previously traded). In addition, the outbreak of avian influenza in the Far East in 2004 curtailed legitimate trade of captive birds between the Far East and Europe. These bans were in place during autumn 2004 and would reduce the risk of captive origin even more (although a man was caught smuggling two Changeable Hawk-eagles *Spizaetus cirrhatius* (infected with avian influenza) into Europe from Thailand at this time, indicating that illegal trade in wild birds continued throughout the ban). The age of the Fair Isle bird, the date, the location and associated eastern vagrants are all supportive of natural vagrancy.

Acknowledgments

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EDITORIAL COMMENT Bob McGowan, BOURC Chairman, commented: ‘However unlikely it might have seemed to some, the credentials for natural vagrancy of the Fair Isle record were solidly based. As a trapped bird, the biometrics and plumage characters established it as an individual from the migratory population, nominate *fucata*. Its age also conformed to the usual pattern of first-winter eastern vagrants, although it was not possible to ascertain the sex of the bird. The Committee analysed in considerable detail the migration timings, routes and distances of the species and were happy that a mid-October arrival date on Fair Isle was plausible for a vagrant Chestnut-eared Bunting. Certainly the support cast of other eastern vagrants, and in particular the Rufous-tailed Robin, virtually coincident on Fair Isle, was considered highly significant. As there was no strong ground for doubt about its wild origins, the Committee agreed to accept this onto Category A of the British List.’

Colin Bradshaw, BBRC Chairman, commented: ‘As Deryk has suggested, Chestnut-eared Bunting wasn’t on many birders’ radar and those who have seen the species have probably experienced wintering birds in Japan or in the foothills of the Himalayas, or spring migrants in China. It is thus not surprising that Fair Isle was slightly unprepared. Although various biometrics overlap with both Little and Rustic Bunting, its weight range of 20–25 g is nearly 50% greater than Little and is more akin to Cirl Bunting *E. cirrus*. The combination of size, chestnut cheeks, well-marked eye-ring and chestnut rump just about rules everything else out. Luckily, this was not a young female as they often lack obvious chestnut on the face and are more difficult to identify. Perhaps the combination of prominent pale eye-ring and submoustachial stripe with a chestnut rump and warm wash on the flanks would hint at what it was, but any such record would need to be extremely well documented.’

Footnote: Readers may be interested to know that, in addition to traditional travel routes to Shetland (flights from Scottish airports and the overnight ferry from Aberdeen), a direct flight from Stansted airport is now available from Atlantic Airways www.flyshetland.com