

Hooded Warbler in the Isles of Scilly: a species new to Britain and Ireland

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At about 16.00 hours on 20th September 1970, Clive Totty and P. G. Williams flushed a green and yellow warbler-like bird from the sedge around the Pool, St Agnes, Isles of Scilly. It immediately dived back into cover, but they flushed it twice more before it finally disappeared in a thicket of gorse and bracken. They were at a loss to identify it, though they agreed that it looked rather like a large *Phylloscopus* or a *Hippolais* but behaved more like an *Acrocephalus*. They told G. W. Edwards and K.D.E. of it, but later searches then and during the following morning proved fruitless.

K.C.O., who was staying on St Mary's during this period, visited St Agnes on 21st. At about 15.00 hours he was walking round the Pool when by chance he disturbed a very green 'warbler' with yellow underparts, which at first he took to be a large *Phylloscopus*. He flushed it three times, since it seemed extremely reluctant to show itself on the sedge tops; it had rather short wings and a long tail, and its flight and general behaviour seemed more typical of *Acrocephalus* than *Phylloscopus*. At 15.45 he lost it in near-by bracken. Half an hour later, on his way to the quay, he met G.W.E. and K.D.E. and informed them of the bird. They then proceeded to the Pool and sat on an adjacent sea-wall in the hope of sighting it, but with no success. At 17.00 hours, therefore, they began quartering the sedge. Eventually they flushed a large, relatively small-bodied, long-tailed and short-winged warbler; the upperparts were olive-green and the underparts bright yellow. They flushed it twice more at close range; both observers remarked on the fact that the tips of the tail-feathers were pointed, and noted a well-defined yellow supercilium. The flight was low, direct and fairly fast, and the bird re-entered cover by veering to one side and diving in. After giving further brief views, it perched on a bracken frond 15 yards away for about two minutes, being clearly visible in full sunlight. It was somewhat similar to a rather green and yellow Melodious Warbler *H. polyglotta*, but it had a noticeably long tail and its bill was large, heavy and quite unlike that of any European warbler. The closed wings appeared to reach only to the tips of the uppertail-coverts. It constantly flicked and spread its tail, and K.D.E. noticed that white patches were momentarily revealed (at this stage G.W.E. had been concentrating on the head and body). K.D.E. could think of no European warbler that fitted, and his mind then turned to the possibility of an American warbler. From Peterson (1947), he tenta-

tively identified the bird as a female or immature Hooded Warbler *Wilsonia citrina*.

The bird was not seen at all on 22nd, owing to adverse weather. At 10.40 hours on 23rd, G.W.E. and K.D.E. met K.C.O., Mrs Ann Robinson, C.T. and P.G.W. at the Pool; K.D.E. did not reveal his suspicion of the bird's identity. At 10.50 it was flushed from the sedge, and during the following one and a half hours a number of views were had, some better than others, but as before it proved very reluctant to settle in the open for more than a few seconds. Eventually it perched in full view in the bare branches of a small dead bush, where it stayed for about seven minutes. Excellent views were obtained at a range of some eight yards, with the sun behind the observers. They remarked on the large, heavy bill and white tail patches; except when preening, the bird was constantly flicking up and fanning its tail, showing these spots on the inner webs which, however, were visible only when it was fully flexed. An unsuccessful attempt was then made to trap it. On three or four occasions, while being driven through the bracken, it was seen running along the ground with frequent pauses, in a manner recalling a pipit *Anthus sp.* Twice it left the area and flew across open ground, at a height of about ten feet, to a hedgerow of tamarisks 150 yards away, each time diving into the base of the trees about three feet above ground level. At 13.40 hours a break was called. The warbler was located again at 16.05 hours and watched by all observers at distances of 15 to 25 yards while it fed among the tamarisks, moving about clumsily in the foliage like a *Hippolais*, but now and then flying out, hovering and fly-catching in the manner of a *Phylloscopus*. It was finally lost to view at 16.20.

The following details are taken from the full description compiled on 23rd from field notes made at the time of observation:

Size and shape: Appeared about same size as, but smaller-bodied than, Sedge Warbler *A. schoenobaenus* (seen within eight feet) or Melodious Warbler, or a quarter as large again as Chiffchaff *P. collybita* (seen within five feet). In flight resembled long-tailed Sedge Warbler, with short rounded wings, but when perched looked 'deep-bellied' like *Hippolais*. Bill large, thick and heavy, very similar to that of Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*; a third of total length of head. Forehead fairly steep, with peak above eye. Exposed primaries formed only a quarter of length of closed wings, which appeared to droop far more than those of Chiffchaff; primaries reached to tips of uppertail-coverts. Tail rather square-ended, with rounded corners, forming about a third of total length; when spread, tail-feathers pointed at tips. *Plumage:* Forehead olive-green, with small yellow area at base of bill; crown and nape olive-green; supercilium bright yellow, extending from yellow at front of forehead over eye and curving down to just behind eye; ear-coverts patchy, yellow tinged olive and merging into supercilium at rear; lores olive; mantle and scapulars olive-green; rump and uppertail-coverts olive-green, slightly paler; chin, throat, breast, belly and flanks bright yellow; undertail-coverts yellow, slightly paler; wing-coverts olive, slightly darker than mantle; no wing-bars; primaries and secondaries grey-brown, edges of outer webs olive. Tail grey-brown, edges of outer webs

olive; tips of inner webs of outer three feathers grey-brown, but rest of inner webs white reaching two-thirds of distance to uppertail-coverts and forming three large, distinctive patches on each side, invisible when tail closed but very obvious when fully fanned; when hovering, tail spread and white patches visible on undertail as far as coverts. Central tail-feathers slightly darker than rest. *Soft parts*: Upper mandible dark horn; lower mandible horn, paler at base; eye dark; legs and feet flesh-coloured.

By the evening of 23rd all the observers concerned were agreed that the bird was very probably a female or immature Hooded Warbler, but the only American books available at the time were Peterson (1947) and Robbins *et al.* (1966) and their text and plates for this species differ in some respects; there were also a number of slight discrepancies between each of them and this particular individual. It was decided, therefore, not to submit the record until skin examinations had been carried out. After their return from the islands, K.C.O., G.W.E. and K.D.E. made separate visits to the British Museum (Natural History), and P.G.W. visited the Liverpool Museums; all four independently confirmed the identification. A full account of the occurrence was then submitted, and the record was finally accepted as the first of the Hooded Warbler in Britain and Europe. In the course of circulation it was forwarded to James Baird, of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, who commented as follows:

'The attached adds up to a very convincing record of a Hooded Warbler. Aside from the more obvious plumage characters, the white in the tail is important in separating the Hooded from the smaller but similarly coloured Wilson's Warbler [*W. pusilla*]. Especially critical was the observation that the tail was fanned (flicked open). I would not say that the skulking is usual in the Hooded. It is a bird of low growth and underbrush, but is not particularly shy. I think that its shyness was due to the exigencies of the moment. All in all, a good record.'

This species is a common summer visitor to the eastern half of the United States and marginally to extreme southern Ontario. It winters from central Mexico to Panama. Bent (1953) provided a very full account of its habits, habitats, distribution, breeding biology, migrations and plumages, as well as a fine photograph of an adult female (his plate 75); Palmer (1894) described the plumages and moults of young birds in more detail.

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