

Rarities Committee news

Assessment of 'African Chaffinch' claims in Britain

BBRC has recently completed detailed assessments of several claims of Common Chaffinches *Fringilla coelebs* of the African forms *africana/spodiogenys*. So far, claims of six different individuals have been assessed, including a well-publicised bird in Essex in 1994 (see *Birding World* 7: 132, 134).

All of the birds assessed so far have shown features which are strongly reminiscent of male 'African Chaffinches' and have appeared markedly different from European races of Common Chaffinch (*F. c. coelebs*, etc.). For example, the claimed birds have shared a tendency to show green or greenish (rather than rich warm brown) mantle tones, pale pink underparts and an extensive blue-grey hood (rather than a blue-grey crown and nape contrasting with rich pink cheeks). Nonetheless, despite such striking superficial similarities to North African birds, several other features have conspired to make the claimed birds differ significantly from typical North African Common Chaffinches.

In fact, there seem to be some common threads running through the claims which amount to a pattern of recurring anomalies. Some particular atypical traits found in the claimed birds include: a tendency to show an extensive grey wash on the breast (not found in African birds); unusually pale and colourless underparts, or underparts on which the pink col-

oration is either too orange for typical *africana/spodiogenys* or is unusually restricted; pink tones on the ear-coverts or malar area (where *africana/spodiogenys* is normally uniformly blue-grey); and rather dull green or brownish-green mantle tones (typically cleaner, brighter green in *africana/spodiogenys*).

Extensive studies of skins at the British Museum of Natural History, Tring, by Alan Knox (for BOURC) and Brian Small (for BBRC) have confirmed that no specimens of *africana/spodiogenys* there match the appearance of the various British claims in certain key particulars. At the request of Alan Knox, Christian Erard examined specimens held in Paris and confirmed that none there showed the extensive grey breast markings of the Essex bird in 1994 and some subsequent claims. Consequently, none of the birds assessed so far have been accepted as 'African Chaffinch'.

Nonetheless, the striking appearance of these birds must be acknowledged, as must the fact that in several respects, including some features not mentioned above, they do actually look much closer to North African than European birds. A paper is in preparation which will discuss the identification and assessment of these interesting birds in more detail, and consider possible reasons for their unusual appearance. With this in mind, we are keen to receive any previously unpublished or unsub-

mitted images of African-like Common Chaffinches in Britain for reference and possible inclusion in the paper. We would also be grateful for high-quality images of African Chaffinches taken in North Africa. Anyone providing such images will be acknowledged fully, and any photographs published will be paid for at the usual *BB* rates. Please send any material to the Editorial address (details inside front cover or on www.british-birds.co.uk). Informed comment on the possible causes of plumage aberrations which would cause birds to resemble North African forms is also welcomed.

The claims of African Chaffinches assessed so far include:

- Fingringhoe, Essex
9th-25th April 1994, also present in January 1995
 - St Mary's, Scilly
12th April 1994
 - Penrith, Cumbria
12th February 1998
 - Kendall, Cumbria
1st-5th March 1998
 - Fair Isle, Shetland
15th April to 1st May 1998
 - Wigton, Cumbria
27th-28th April 1998
- One further claim is awaiting assessment.



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