

Green Warbler on Scilly: new to Britain

Nigel Hudson

Abstract Britain's only Green Warbler *Phylloscopus nitidus* was discovered on St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, on 26th September 1983, where it remained until 4th October. The taxonomic position of Green Warbler has oscillated since then, between separate species and subspecies of the Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides* complex, but it is currently recognised as a full species, and is described as such here. A brief review of the distribution, associated weather conditions leading up to its discovery, and taxonomy are presented.



Brian J. Small

Although it is 27 years since Britain's only Green Warbler *Phylloscopus nitidus* was discovered, at the Garrison on St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, on 26th September 1983, details of this record have never appeared in *BB*. Having been accepted by both BBRC and BOURC, the record was added to Category A of the British List as Green Warbler (BOU 1986), which was then considered a distinct species. Here it remained until Britain's first 'Two-barred Greenish Warbler' *P. t. plumbeitarsus* was accepted, in 1992. This set in motion a review of the taxonomic status of the Greenish Warbler *P. trochiloides* complex

(BOU 1992), which concluded that Two-barred Greenish Warbler should be treated as a race of Greenish Warbler. And, furthermore, that 'Green Warbler... should similarly be treated as a race of *P. trochiloides* (Svensson 1992). Further research on this group of warblers is desirable.' It was to take until 2008 to reverse this position, when BOURC accepted the recommendation of its Taxonomic Sub-committee (TSC) that Green Warbler should, once again, be recognised as a distinct species. This short summary documents this unique record and places it within the context of other arrivals on Scilly at the time.



26. Green Warbler *Phylloscopus nitidus*, St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, September 1983. Possibly the only photograph in existence of the first British record.

Scilly, September 1983

The following account was written by J. H. Ross and published originally in the *Isles of Scilly Bird Report* for 1983 (Ross 1983).

'At 13.05 hrs [on 26th September], I was trying to locate an Icterine Warbler [*Hippolais icterina*] which we had just lost in the low elms along the southeast wall of the Garrison, when I heard a strangely familiar call. It sounded very similar to [that of] the Greenish Warblers *Phylloscopus trochiloides* which I had encountered earlier in the year in Nepal and, on looking up, [I] saw a medium-sized *Phylloscopus* warbler with a rather bright yellowish wing-bar. I immediately called over my companions, P. T. Bell, A. G. Ross, P. Holt and D. Richardson and we obtained excellent views of the bird down to about four metres. At this stage we identified it as an unusual Greenish Warbler. We were all unsure as to whether that species could show rather bright yellow wing-bars, supercilia and throat in some plumage or subspecies we had not yet met. At 13.50 hrs we left the bird, having shown it to, amongst others, B. Reed, as we wished to see the Thrush Nightingale [*Luscinia luscinia*]. During two further viewing sessions we obtained further good views after it had been re-identified as Green Warbler *P. nitidus*. The following description is compiled from our field notes.

Description

'About the same size as a Willow Warbler *P. trochilus*, but appeared rather shorter-tailed.

Undertail-coverts reached halfway down the undertail and the wing-tips extended to the same point. Feeding behaviour fiery and dashing like Greenish Warbler, often hovering for short bursts and occasionally flicking wings. A bright warbler, at times recalling Wood Warbler *P. sibilatrix* in general plumage tones, though this varied greatly according to light conditions.

'Crown, mantle, nape and rump all appeared uniform, a bright, almost lime green, appearing duller in poor light. Eye-stripe narrow and dark. Very slight paler eyering where it made contact with the eye-stripe. Ear-coverts surprisingly pale, coloured in fact as a continuation of the throat colour, although a fraction less bright. Supercilia long, as Greenish Warbler, reaching to hind crown and coloured bright yellow, the shade equivalent to that of throat and of the wing-bar. Also a fraction broader behind the eye, bulging up very slightly above the eye, but generally straight except when head pulled back into feathering, when turned up distinctly at the rear.

'Wing-bar formed through bright yellow fringes to greater coverts, rather short, and broader than [that of] Greenish Warbler by a fraction; also a shade broader at distal end. Flash of similarly bright yellow at bend of wing when closed. Secondaries and tertials centred dark, possibly brownish shade. Both sets of feathers finely fringed yellow, the secondary fringes combining to form a rather obvious wing-panel. Primaries darkest, fringed very narrowly indeed with the same yellow tone. Upper surface of rectrices dark (brownish?) with paler, yellowish-green-toned fringes; outer pair whitish or broadly edged whitish. Tip of tail neatly rounded with central notch.

'Throat and upper breast washed uniformly rather bright yellow, this colour continuing onto ear-coverts. Rest of underparts pale yellow, almost uniform but yellower on sides of vent and undertail-coverts. In shade, the underparts assumed a much greener appearance, especially about the throat. In good light, the throat and upper breast seemed of equivalent brightness to Wood Warbler.

'Legs pale: pale brown or brownish-flesh. Bill dark with paler base to lower mandible.

Bill rather long and stout when compared to an adjacent Willow Warbler. Eye dark.

'Call note *'serweeur'*, similar to, but more drawn out and rather more emphatically trisyllabic than [that of] Greenish Warbler with emphasis on central 'ee' sound; high-pitched, slurred and shrill.'

Note that although not mentioned in the BOURC report that first published the record (BOU 1986), the Scilly bird was listed as a first-winter in both the BOU 7th Checklist (BOU 2006) and Slack (2009), presumably on the basis that the wing feathers, as described above, were clearly extremely fresh, and also because of the overall brightness of the plumage.

Range and distribution

The breeding range of the Green Warbler is centred on the mountains of southwest Asia, where it is a common and widespread species. Breeding occurs west to the mountains of northeastern Turkey, and throughout the Caucasus Mountains in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and probably also extends north into Ukraine (Snow & Perrins 1998). The species also breeds in the mountains to the south of the Caspian Sea in Iran, then east through the Kopet Dagh and mountains forming the watershed for the Tedjen and Murghab rivers in western Afghanistan. Breeding may also occur in the mountains to southeastern Uzbekistan, western Tajikistan, and Baluchistan in Pakistan; although birds have been seen here during the breeding season, breeding has not yet been proven.

The Green Warbler winters entirely in the Indian subcontinent. In India, wintering birds occur mainly along the Western Ghats, extending from the region of Mumbai (Bombay) south to Cochin. It is widespread and often abundant throughout Sri Lanka during the winter months, ranging from coastal lowlands to the mountains.

On migration, it appears to enter the subcontinent from the northwest, passing mainly through Gilgit, Baluchistan and Sind Provinces in Pakistan. Roberts (1992) provided a useful summary of its status here, with first arrivals appearing in the first week of September and stragglers continuing until early November. However, he also found it to

be a regular visitor to his Karachi garden from early September to the end of February, suggesting that some birds overwinter to the northwest of the main wintering range. Spring migration out of India appears to follow a more easterly route, through the eastern peninsula north to western Bengal and Sikkim and west through the foothills of the Himalayas (Vaurie 1959; Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). In contrast to the situation in autumn, there are relatively few reports from Pakistan at this season (Roberts 1992).

Prevailing weather conditions and associated species in September 1983

As with most vagrants arriving from the east, it is just not possible to establish the circumstances which led to the arrival of the Scilly bird in Britain. It may have set off from the breeding grounds several weeks before its eventual discovery, or it may have been actively migrating from the outset. Assuming that it had been on passage since departing the breeding grounds, perhaps the most likely scenario was that it left the breeding range in easterly winds to the south of an anticyclone over Russia, probably between 18th and 22nd September. This high-pressure zone was linked to another over central Europe, which became the dominant high by 23rd, maintaining large cloud-free areas and light winds across central and southern Europe. By 24th September, the high had moved south of the Alps, and a new high developed over Britain & Ireland, which moved into Belgium by 25th. The probability is that the bird would have spent most of this period of light and variable winds in the fine anticyclonic weather conditions, heading in a direction opposite to that of normal migration with a track taking it over central Europe. Its final leg into Scilly took place in a light southeasterly wind. There is no suggestion that it encountered any adverse weather or that winds were sufficiently strong enough to affect its course.

Its arrival on St Mary's coincided with a period of fine and settled weather, and light southeasterly winds. These conditions brought a flurry of rarities to Scilly, culminating on 26th September when, in addition to the Green Warbler, a Thrush Nightingale and

Paddyfield Warbler *Acrocephalus agricola* were also discovered. As westerly winds (which brought a Bobolink *Dolichonyx oryzivorus* to St Mary's on 22nd September and a Baltimore Oriole *Icterus galbula* to St Agnes on 23rd) swung round to the east, an influx of birds from southern and eastern Europe began. In addition to the expected scarce migrants such as Icterine and Barred Warblers *Sylvia nisoria*, Scilly experienced an exciting run of birds that provided a strong supporting cast to the Green Warbler. As well as the Thrush Nightingale and Paddyfield Warbler, other (then) national rarities that arrived immediately prior to the Green Warbler included a Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla* on 23rd September, a

Subalpine Warbler *S. cantillans* and a Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator* on 24th and an Arctic Warbler *P. borealis* on 25th.

Other European records

There have been just three other records of Green Warbler in northern and western Europe. One was shot on Helgoland, Germany, on 11th October 1867 (Gätke 1895); one was trapped on the Faeroe Islands on 8th June 1997 (Sørensen & Jensen 2001); and one was trapped at Ottenby, Öland, Sweden, on 29th May 2003 (Irwin & Hellström 2007). In the case of the two trapped birds, their identification was supported by DNA analysis of blood samples. Slightly further afield, the species has occurred twice

in Greece, on 18th September 1998 and 27th September 2000; while in Israel, there are four records, on 27th October 1987, 24th–29th August 2004, 1st May 2008 and 14th October 2009 (plates 27 & 28).

Identification

At the time of its discovery, Green Warbler was barely on the radar of most birders; in fact, probably very few were even aware of its existence. In the intervening period, its distinctive appearance has become more widely appreciated, although this has not led to further discoveries, at least not in Britain.

Green Warbler is one of the more distinctive *Phylloscopus* warblers,



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27 & 28. First-winter Green Warbler *Phylloscopus nitidus*, Netiv Halamed-He, Israel, 14th October 2009. The combination of the yellow wash to the supercilium, ear-coverts, throat, breast and tips to the greater coverts and the conspicuously green upperparts is typical of most Green Warblers. If seen well, first-winter birds in autumn should be separable from adults by their bright, crisp and unworn appearance. Adult Green Warblers moult after arrival in the wintering area, so a vagrant adult in autumn should appear worn and faded.

and easier to identify than many species in this confusing genus. Its unique combination of fairly bright green upperparts, and a Wood Warbler-like yellow wash to the throat, breast and supercilium, as well as the greater-covert wing-bar, makes it readily recognisable. Although not difficult to identify when seen well, this species often frequents the upper canopy, and so the main challenge is to see it well enough to establish that all the diagnostic characters are present. In particular, light reflecting off leaves can appear to give Greenish Warblers a yellowish-green wash to the underparts, so care is required. For a detailed identification review, see van der Vliet *et al.* (2001). One of the authors of that paper, Peter Kennerley, has provided the following summary of the identification criteria:

Separation of Green and Greenish Warblers is usually straightforward. Both species are illustrated and described in Svensson *et al.* (1999) and Jonsson (1992), although few observers will have had first-hand experience of the Green Warbler. Of those who have seen it, most will be familiar with adults on the breeding grounds in northeast Turkey, Georgia or Armenia, or with wintering birds in southern India or Sri Lanka. A potential Green Warbler encountered in a vagrant context requires careful and detailed examination, and ideally the submission should be supported by a sound recording of the call.

Although Green Warbler has a slightly more rounded wing than Greenish, it has yet to be established whether this is a useful character for their separation. Otherwise, there are no structural differences between this species pair and their separation relies on colour differences, which can be obvious on some birds but subtle on others. Overall, the Green Warbler is a brighter bird than Greenish, which generally has a slight greyish cast to the pale green upperparts. A typical fresh Green Warbler, including adults in spring and first-winters in autumn, will appear brighter, richer green above than Greenish (but will rarely approach the moss-green of Wood Warbler, as sometimes quoted). The brighter yellow and green tones to the head of Green are usually quite apparent, with the yellow supercilium and

ear-coverts tending to merge with the green crown and nape, creating the impression of a softer, less contrasting appearance to the head. The supercilia of Green extend to the bill base but do not meet above the bill as they (typically but not invariably) do in Greenish. They are usually broadest in front of the eye and appear conspicuously yellow, but behind the eye they narrow slightly, become paler yellow and terminate above the rear ear-coverts, often having a slight upwards inflection.

Green Warblers show a yellow wash to the throat and upper breast. On some birds this is more extensive and continues onto the flanks and even the undertail-coverts, but it varies in strength and on many individuals it is absent, particularly worn birds. However, even worn birds usually retain the yellow wash on the throat and upper breast.

Particular care is needed with worn birds, which are duller than birds in fresh plumage and may closely resemble Greenish Warbler. Another potential pitfall is an unusually bright Greenish Warbler. Two such individuals occurred in autumn 2009, at Landguard Bird Observatory, Suffolk, in September, and at Church Cove, Cornwall, in October. The identity of the Landguard bird as Greenish Warbler was quickly resolved, but the Church Cove bird became the subject of much debate and was eventually determined only by reference to sonograms made from recordings of the call, which established it to be a Greenish.

The contact calls of both species are very similar, usually described as a distinctive *chivee*. That of Greenish Warbler is clearly disyllabic. In comparison, the call of Green Warbler has a slightly slurred, trisyllabic quality, sounding slightly louder and delivered with an explosive quality which has been likened to a sneeze. In Sri Lanka, however, where Green Warbler is common and Greenish Warbler rare, some calls are inseparable from those of Indian-wintering Greenish. Whether these are given by Green or Greenish Warblers is uncertain as they invariably come from unseen individuals high in the tree canopy. But it does raise the possibility that some calls of Green Warbler may be inseparable from those of Greenish. Calls and sonograms of the calls of Green, Greenish (races *P. t. viridanus* and *P. t.*

plumbeitarsus) and Arctic Warblers are available on the Dutch Birding website at www.dutchbirding.nl/journal.php?page_id=169

Taxonomy

Green Warbler was described by Blyth (1843) from a bird collected at Kolkata (Calcutta) which he named *Phylloscopus nitidus*. (At the same time – just two pages further on in the same journal – Blyth described the western race of Greenish Warbler *P. viridanus*, also from Calcutta, and which he treated as a full species distinct from *P. trochiloides*, which had been described in 1837, again from Calcutta, but this time by Sundevall.) As the Green Warbler is a distinctive taxon, its status remained unchanged for over a century, even during the first half of the twentieth century, a period of taxonomic upheaval when many distinctive species, particularly in Asia, were treated as races of wide-ranging species, or even treated as synonyms and disappeared from view. Throughout this period, many authorities and taxonomists including Vaurie (1959), Williamson (1962) and Voous (1977) continued to treat it as a full species, although Ticehurst (1938) expressed reservations and tentatively regarded it as a race of Greenish. It was not until the BOURC recommended its treatment as a race of Greenish Warbler in 1992 that questions regarding its taxonomic position were seriously raised.

As recently as 2003, Collinson *et al.* (2003) published a review of the taxonomic status of the six races comprising the Greenish Warbler complex, which maintained it as a race of Greenish Warbler. They demonstrated that five races form a ‘ring species’ that encircles the Himalayas and deserts of central Asia, with the two races closing the ring (*P. t. viridanus* from Europe and western Siberia and *P. t. plumbeitarsus* from eastern Siberia) behaving as two distinct species, without interbreeding, where they meet and overlap in central Siberia. Despite this, they concluded that the clinal nature of variation across the entire Greenish Warbler complex made it impossible to draw biologically meaningful dividing lines between the various subspecies. Although Green Warbler does not fall within this group of five races, its distribution being entirely allopatric with

this group, it was considered that there was insufficient evidence to justify the recognition of Green Warbler as a distinct species, and no change to its classification was recommended.

In 2008, however, BOURC adopted the recommendations of the TSC (Knox *et al.* 2008) and recognised Green Warbler as a distinct species (BOU 2009). This decision is based upon the combination of diagnostic plumage characters, distinct and diagnostic song and differences in mtDNA sequences. Taken together, these confirmed that the overall level of difference between *nitidus* and other Greenish Warblers is similar to or greater than that found between other closely related *Phylloscopus* species (Knox *et al.* 2008).

Acknowledgments

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* After trying and failing to contact J. H. Ross, Nigel Hudson kindly agreed to write this paper in his role as Isles of Scilly recorder. Although he did not see the bird himself, he felt that it was important to document the record formally in *BB*. The original description, from the Isles of Scilly Bird Report for 1983, appears here unchanged (apart from very minor editing) and forms the centrepiece of this account.

Editorial comment

Bob McGowan, Chairman of BOURC, commented: 'Nigel Hudson's paper has comprehensively reported on the finding details and taxonomic history of this unique record of Green Warbler.

'In an article on Asian leaf warblers written over half a century ago, Horace G. Alexander commented briefly on the likelihood of particular taxa occurring in Britain (Alexander 1955). He pointed out that, at the time, Pallas's Leaf Warbler *P. proregulus* had reached Britain twice – and Helgoland at least three times; noting that [Eastern] Crowned Warbler *P. coronatus* and Green Warbler *P. trochiloides nitidus* had also apparently been recorded on Helgoland, Alexander rather prophetically wrote 'almost anything is possible'. He also, incidentally, acknowledged the potential species status of *nitidus*.

'Following the occurrence of the immature Green Warbler at St Mary's in autumn 1983, the taxon was admitted to the British List. Though some birds might present identification challenges, well-marked individuals, such as this one, are not difficult to identify in the field and acceptance was fairly straightforward. Alexander, then living in Pennsylvania, was 94 when the bird was reported; one wonders whether he heard the news.

'As noted above, *nitidus* was subsequently (in 1992) treated as a race of Greenish Warbler with the caveat that further research on the group was desirable. The complex taxonomic nature of Greenish Warbler was summarised by Collinson (2006). Although *P. t. plumbeitarsus* (Two-barred Greenish Warbler) and *nitidus* had previously failed to meet BOU guidelines for species status (Collinson *et al.* 2003), it was nevertheless noted that there was now a 'strong argument' that the latter might be fully diagnosable. Evidence for the split comprised features of plumage, biometrics, vocalisation and genetics, and this TSC recommendation was adopted by BOURC in 2009 (BOU 2009).

'Of course, it seems only right to acknowledge the Eastern Crowned Warbler at South Shields, Durham, in October 2009. Assuming that it is accepted, this will be the second of Alexander's long-predicted *Phylloscopus* vagrants.'