

# Letters

## *The Cape Verde Warbler on Fogo*

It was interesting to see the account by Jens Hering and Elmar Fuchs (*Brit. Birds* 102: 17–24) on the discovery of the Cape Verde Warbler *Acrocephalus brevipennis* on the island of Fogo. In the past, its absence from the island was very surprising but no-one, including a number of good ornithologists, had managed to find it. I did not visit the island myself when I was in the archipelago in 1951, but passed almost close enough to hear any singing birds there. I suggest that the birds currently missing from the adjacent island of Brava, which lies within sight of Fogo, may have moved there. The observation that the birds now on Fogo prefer cultivated areas, as they did on Brava, where they avoided the ravines (in which the species occurs on Santiago), supports this.

The Cape Verde Islands are prone to intermittent droughts, and seem likely to have been affected by the African ones of the 1970s. The Cape Verde Warbler does not at first sight

appear likely to move around, but it is related to long-distance migrants. It seems likely that an essential strategy for the species, in common with other birds of wetland habitats, is to disperse either when its habitat dries up or when the population is high, under more favourable conditions. There are past records of its presence, and then absence, and then reappearance on the island of São Nicolau. Perhaps its former absence from the large islands of Fogo and São Antão reflected some deficiency of the food available there, since repaired on Fogo by the advance of human civilisation. Its future may hang by a slender thread, since it was said in the past that the splendid Fogo coffee crop was bought up entirely by one London hotel, implying that it was not yet very large, so the appearance of the warbler may be a tribute to its growing success. Let's hope that they keep it up.

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## *Wilson's Storm-petrels seen from mainland Britain*

When BBRC removed 17 species from its list at the end of 2005 (*Brit. Birds* 100: 16–19), a few seasoned rarity finders felt that it may have gone a little too far. Clearly, the statistics must ultimately decide what stays and what goes, but why was Wilson's Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus* removed? BBRC had accepted only 16 records of that species from mainland Britain since 1958 (nine from Cornwall, five from Pembrokeshire and singles from Somerset and Cumbria). None was on the east coast of Britain and none had been seen by the very experienced petrel watchers in Lancashire & N Merseyside and Cheshire & Wirral. The only British record prior to 1958 was one obtained in Cornwall in August 1838; other records listed by Witherby *et al.* (1938–41) have since been discredited.

BBRC's statistics were greatly swelled by pelagic records of Wilson's Storm-petrel, the vast majority in the Southwestern Approaches. The only North Sea record was 20 km off Northumberland on 1st September 2002, although two of the five Scottish records were in

sea-area Fair Isle, well north of Shetland and close to the North Sea. The species is thus very rarely observed from mainland Britain and almost non-existent in the North Sea. Why didn't BBRC simply retain the species on its list for records claimed from mainland Britain or for all records apart from those in the Southwestern Approaches? In the first year after it was removed from the BBRC list, one was seen off Hartlepool, Cleveland, on 7th September 2006. This was accepted and published (*Cleveland Bird Report* 2006) but for some, without BBRC endorsement it will always sit uneasily on the record books. This record may be perfectly acceptable, and I make no comment on that, but surely it is time for BBRC to reconsider its position and return Wilson's Storm-petrel to its list in the format suggested above.

When the late Peter Grant and I first figured out a numbering system for BBRC rarities during a transatlantic flight in October 1976, I don't think either of us thought that this would

ultimately lead to the removal of a mainland record of Wilson's Storm-petrel as a BBRC rarity! An alternative approach would be for mainland recorders to request that BBRC considers such records. The Committee has always been prepared to consider exceptional records of species previously on the list, and this offer was reiterated recently (*Brit. Birds* 102:

275). Records don't come much more exceptional than the first record of a pelagic species from the east coast.

**Reference**

Witherby, H. F., Jourdain, F. C. R., Ticehurst, N. F., & Tucker, B. W. 1938–41. *The Handbook of British Birds*. Witherby, London.

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**EDITORIAL COMMENT** Adam Rowlands, BBRC Chairman, has replied as follows: 'Dave Britton makes a valid point regarding the geographical rarity of Wilson's Storm-petrels in many parts of Britain/British waters. The issue of geographical rarity in general has been debated at length at successive BBRC AGMs when we have been discussing potential species to be removed from the Committee's list because they have surpassed the national statistical threshold for rarity status. When the Rarities Committee was first established in 1958, records of a number of species with a restricted range in Britain were assessed by the Committee from areas where they were considered to be rarities. These included Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* (outside Scotland), Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* (away from the coast between the Wash and the Isle of Wight), Dartford Warbler *Sylvia undata* (outside England) and Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus* (outside East Anglia) among 11 species to which this geographical caveat applied (*Brit. Birds* 52: 241–244). These four species were among nine of the geographical rarities dropped in 1963 (*Brit. Birds* 56: 394) and this caveat has not been applied to the assessment of any species subsequently, despite the fact that Dartford Warbler would (statistically) still be worthy of the Committee's attention in Scotland and the Northern Isles, as would Golden Eagle in English counties south of Yorkshire. Whenever BBRC elects to drop a species that has met the statistical threshold, the Committee members are often aware that this may cause issues in parts of Britain where the species is extremely rare (for example Arctic Redpoll *Carduelis hornemanni* on the south coast of England, European Serin *Serinus serinus* in Scotland and Parrot Crossbill *Loxia pytyopsittacus* away from its Scottish breeding grounds). However, rather than attempt to determine a series of geographical caveats to address this, we have decided that the simplest approach is to use the national figures to determine rarity, which ensures that we remain true to our core objective of maintaining an accurate database of records of the occurrence of rare taxa in Britain. If we assessed only a proportion of the records of an individual species, for example Wilson's Storm-petrels observed from the mainland while ignoring the at-sea records, the statistics that we collected would not truly reflect our core aims.

'We will of course continue to offer support to regional and county records committees with species with which they are unfamiliar, but this relies on the discretion of the committee involved. We consider this to be a more appropriate use of our finite time and resources than introducing more complicated geographical caveats for individual species.'