Fan-tailed Warbler in Co. Cork:
a species new to Britain and Ireland

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On 23rd April 1962, by East Bog on Ballyieragh, the western part of Cape Clear Island, Co. Cork, an unfamiliar call attracted my attention. I traced it to a small warbler in some sedges and during the next 20 minutes was able to watch the bird continuously. It remained motionless in the sedges, occasionally calling ‘tew’, until approached within about 15 metres when it either fluttered weakly to another clump or flew to a height of about three metres and then, with a bouncing, hovering action (somewhat similar to that of an agitated Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*), uttered a repeated ‘chip chip chip...’ before dropping almost vertically into the sedges. After watching it for several minutes in good light (though no sun) and completely calm conditions, I strongly suspected that it was a Fan-tailed Warbler *Cisticola juncidis*, a species I had seen in Spain seven months previously, and further observation confirmed this.

Stationary in a sedge clump, it was hunched and looked rather like a Wren *Troglytes troglodytes*, this resemblance being enhanced by the cocking of its tail. Climbing about in sedges, it appeared more like a small, short-winged, short-tailed *Acrocephalus* warbler. Flying from one clump to another, it looked dark rufous and its short tail seemed very narrow, but as it dived into the next clump its tail was widely fanned and sometimes also cocked; in the bouncing song-flight it was always fanned. The bird looked smaller than a Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* seen a few minutes earlier, but the only direct comparisons were with Meadow Pipits *Anthus pratensis* and a Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*.

The most conspicuous plumage characters were a rufous-buff back heavily streaked with dark brown—rather reminiscent of an Aquatic Warbler *A. paludicola* but with a less sandy base colour—and a bright buff crown with dark rufous streaks. From the side there seemed to be a narrow, faint, pale creamy-buff supercilium, wider behind than in front of the eye, but a view from above showed that this was just one of several pale lines running the length of the crown. The wings looked rounded, both in flight and at rest; the primaries, secondaries and coverts were all orange-buff-brown, each feather edged slightly paler, but without distinct wing-bars or panels. The rump was unstreaked buffish. At rest the bird usually held its rufous-brown tail tightly closed, but when it dived into sedges whitish tips showed on at least two or three of the outer feathers, and all the feathers were increasingly dark from base to tip, being darkest immediately before
the whitish spots. The underparts were whitish with a noticeable orange-buff wash on the breast and flanks. The eyes were dark, with a complete pale creamy orbital ring, the legs pale pinkish-fawn and the bill short, weak and pale—the upper mandible fawn and the lower pale pinkish. (A full account, including an exact transcript of my field notes, was published in *Cape Clear Bird Obs. Rep.*, 11: 38-39.)

Having obtained a field description, I decided to fetch other observers. When I returned 40 minutes later with my wife and Robert Gillmor, however, we could not relocate the bird, nor was it found during intensive searches of this and adjacent areas later in the day. Thus I was, unfortunately, the only observer. The bird had arrived with light south-easterly winds and coincided with a small influx of Willow Warblers *P. trochilus*, Chiffchaffs, Swallows *Hirundo rustica*, Sand Martins *Riparia riparia* and House Martins *Delichon urbica* (Sharrock 1962).

The Records Committee of the British Ornithologists' Union rejected this record when it was first submitted in 1962. P. A. D. Hollom, then the honorary secretary, wrote (*in litt.* to J.T.R.S., quoted in *Cape Clear Bird Obs. Rep.*, 5: 3) of the 'difficulty of the genus *Cisticola*, the apparently rather sedentary nature . . ., the lack of vagrant records [of the Fan-tailed Warbler] north of the breeding range . . .'. These points are discussed below at some length. After subsequent correspondence with D. I. M. Wallace, I resubmitted the record in 1969 and, partly because of new evidence that the species is not as sedentary as was formerly thought, it was then accepted (*Ibis*, 113: 420-423; *Irish Bird Report*, 17: 52).

**IDENTIFICATION AND WORLD BREEDING RANGE**

There was no doubt that the bird was a grass-warbler *Cisticola*, but it was with some horror that I later realised that Lynes (1930) had recognised 40 species and 154 races within this genus. Two species are about the size of a Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria*, however, and a further 23 are larger than a Whitethroat *S. communis* or a Garden Warbler *S. borin*. This leaves 15 ranging in size from a Pallas's Warbler *P. proregulus* to a Willow Warbler, but four of these have plain backs, two more have bright red tops to their heads, another has a plain black upperside to its tail without the whitish spots at the end, and a further five have very short tails (three-fifths of the wing length or less) as well as, in four cases, plain red or black tops to their heads. Thus the identification was narrowed on plumage and structure alone to three species—*junecidis*, *cherina* and *haesitata*—all with backs patterned, head tops strongly brown-streaked, and tails three-quarters of the wing length or longer and tipped with white on both uppersides and undersides.
Turning to voice, the song flight of the bird on Cape Clear Island closely resembled those of *juncidis* and *cherina*, but was quite different from that described for *haesitata*. It was also quite different from those of *aridula*, *brunnescens*, *ayresii* and *exilis*—four species which, although already eliminated on at least one plumage feature, are sufficiently similar in appearance to merit reconsideration. Lynes noted that the habits of *cherina* are ‘like juncidis and the “call” so similar that the bird has the same onomatopoeic vernacular name *Tin-Tin* as *juncidis* has in Spain’; *cherina* is closely allied to *juncidis* and ‘season for season and sex for sex, differing from that bird by little more than its colder coloration in summer, brownish not reddish rump and relatively shorter and more rounded wing’. It is, however, confined to Madagascar, where it is sedentary, and *haesitata* is similarly found only on Socotra. White (1960) has even suggested that *cherina* and *haesitata* may merely be well-marked insular races of *juncidis* rather than distinct species. Thus the bird on Cape Clear Island can be positively identified as either *C. juncidis* or *C. (j.) cherina* and the latter may be eliminated on geographical grounds.

*C. juncidis* has a south Palearctic, Ethiopian, Oriental and Australian breeding distribution, extending from Iberia and France east to Japan and south to South Africa and northern Australia (Voous 1960) (fig. 1, inset). It is the only *Cisticola* in Europe or north Africa. Lynes recognised 13 races and Vaurie (1969) 15, five of them Palearctic but only two European: *C. j. cisticola* (which breeds in Iberia, Balearic Islands, and France on the coasts of both the Atlantic from Vendée southwards and the Mediterranean, as well as north Africa from Morocco to Tunisia) and *C. j. juncidis* (which intergrades with *C. j. cisticola* on the Mediterranean coast of France and otherwise breeds in Italy, Sicily, Corsica, Sardinia, southernmost Yugoslavia, Albania, Greece and western Turkey). Racial determination can be firmly established only by direct comparison with skins, but the dark coloration of the Irish bird and other features suggest that it is more likely to have been *C. j. cisticola*. 
Fig. 1. Breeding distribution of Fan-tailed Warblers *Cisticola juncidis* in France (based on a preliminary map produced for the French *Atlas Ornithologique* and other references cited in the text). Inset, world distribution with the breeding range shown in black (modified from Voous 1960)
DISTRIBUTION IN FRANCE

In France, the headquarters of the Fan-tailed Warbler are on the Mediterranean coast from Pyrénées-Orientales to Alpes-Maritimes, where Blondel (1969) considered this to be one of only four completely sedentary birds in the Camargue. Even there, however, the population is not static: it was nearly wiped out in a cold spell at the end of the winter of 1955/56 and the species was then almost absent during 1956 and 1957, but after that it rapidly reappeared and was abundant in all suitable localities by 1958. Guichard (1959) attributed this to recolonisation from Iberia and North Africa.

Fan-tailed Warblers were recorded in Gironde in 1913 (Mayaud 1956) and during 1936-39 they colonised parts of the Atlantic coast between Basses-Pyrénées and Vendée. They were wiped out there in the hard winter of 1939/40, but were found again in Vendée in 1959 and in Basses-Pyrénées in 1962 at localities where they had been absent in 1956 and 1960 respectively (Roux 1959, Mayaud 1960, 1963). They were present in spring and autumn 1959 well inland in Haute-Garonne (Affre 1960), and in 1937 and 1953 breeding occurred even farther from the coast in Ain (Meylan 1937, Laferrère 1954).

In 1970 and 1971 fieldwork for the French Atlas Ornithologique showed the presence of breeding Fan-tailed Warblers along the Mediterranean coastal strip, in Haute-Garonne, in inland as well as coastal Aude, and throughout the whole coastal area of Vendée and Charente-Maritime, but not on the Atlantic coast south of this, nor in Ain (L. J. Yeatman in litt.). In 1972 there was a further strong expansion of range to the north, with breeding proved near Quiberon and probable south of Brest (both Brittany) and with birds also present on the northwest coast of Brittany and near Calais, a mere step from south-east England (L. J. Yeatman and D. I. North in litt.).

Thus there is a pattern in France of widespread distribution in the 1930's, near-extinction in the hard winter of 1939/40, breeding well north of the Mediterranean area in 1953, near-extinction even on the Mediterranean coast in the hard winter of 1955/56, a rapid recovery by 1958, and firm colonisation, which is still being maintained, in the northern part of the Atlantic coast since 1959 (fig. 1). In Spain, too, the species was particularly abundant in the northern Costa Brava in 1960-62 (Wallace and Sage 1969), while there are now many observations for the north coast province of Santander and other parts of Cantabria (Dr F. Bernis per J. D. R. Vernon in litt.). The 1962 Irish record, therefore, appears to have coincided with a phase of expansion and also, of course, with the spread northwards and westwards of other species such as Cetti’s Warbler Cettia cetti and Penduline Tit Remiz...
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*pendulinus* (summarised in Ferguson-Lees 1964 and in Raines and Bell 1967).

**Evidence of Migration**

Apart from *C. j. tinnabulans*, which is mainly a summer visitor to the lower Yangtze basin (Lynes 1930), all the races of the Fan-tailed Warbler are usually considered to be sedentary. The species was, however, described as scarce on Malta in early September during the 19th century and four were recorded there in June 1967 (De Lucca 1967). At Gibraltar, Lathbury (1970) noted a pronounced movement in autumn (when up to four or five were seen in a day during August-October), but little evidence of any in spring (though there were four there in spring 1968, the last on 20th April), and he considered that this indicated an irregular passage across the Straits of Gibraltar to and from North Africa.

The widespread world distribution suggests that this is a successful and dynamic species. The northward expansions in the west of its range are matched by southward movements in Australia: after temporary colonisations near Normanton, Queensland (Mathews 1914) and Darwin, Northern Territory (Givens and Hitchcock 1953)—the areas shown by Voous (1960)—a more extensive population was discovered at six localities between Townsville and Proserpine on the Pacific coast of north-east Queensland in 1964 and 1965 (Lavery and Seton 1967)—the area shown in fig. 1 (inset).

The following records of Fan-tailed Warblers on board ships result from an inexhaustive search of the literature:

(1) One with 19 other assorted landbirds, including a White-spotted Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica cyanecula* and a Subalpine Warbler *Sylvia cantillans*, on S.S. *Joseph-Frering* at 34°14′N, 11°19′W—350 km WNW of Casablanca, Morocco, and 400 km south-west of Cape St Vincent, Portugal—on 14th March 1961 (Tuck 1961).

(2) One on board a ship 3 km south of Pantellaria in the Sicilian Channel on 24th July 1963 (Cheke 1967).

(3) One on S.S. *Beaverpine* off Cape St Vincent on 30th July 1964 (Tuck 1965).

It is clear that, as well as being prone to rapid extensions of range when the population is at a high level after mild winters, Fan-tailed Warblers are not as completely sedentary as was once supposed. Records of vagrants (usually males) beyond the breeding range are to be expected in a species in the process of expansion.

**Behaviour and Voice**

The striped plumage and neutral colouring of Fan-tailed Warblers, together with the skulking and secretive behaviour of all except the singing males, make them difficult to observe. The species can creep through grass with the agility of a mouse or remain motionless with the head withdrawn—an almost invisible little bundle of feathers—
and its tail may be depressed or cocked. When flushed, it may make short, low flights or shoot off at some height and then plummet to earth again. In the song flight, the male rises to a maximum of 30 metres and, with the tail fanned, executes in one place a ‘dance’ of small vertical bounds interspersed with short dips; the monotonous song itself consists of distinct notes—variously written as ‘zipp’, ‘zit’, ‘tzt’ and ‘dzeep’—uttered at half- to two-second intervals at each bound or dip. When the bird is excited or alarmed, a similar note—‘zit’ or ‘tsipp’—is rapidly repeated, occasionally without the accompanying acrobatic flight. A further alarm note is of a lower tone than the song—a single ‘zipp’ or ‘tew’. Where song-posts are available, particularly telegraph wires, the song may be delivered from these without any aerial flight. It may be terminated by a series of five hard ‘plick’ notes uttered very rapidly. (Data from Lynes 1930, Guichard 1959, Peterson et al. 1966, Pringle 1968, Rogers 1968, and Blondel 1969.)

HABITAT AND BREEDING

Throughout the range, the breeding habitat includes grass or waste lands and edges of cultivation, often in or close to damp spots. In the Camargue Fan-tailed Warblers favour the vicinity of tamarisks, elms and other trees at the edges of unmaintained ditches within the sea-lavender sward, though in most other areas they tend to avoid trees. They do not nest in reeds Phragmites or areas with mud and glasswort Salicornia. The habitats in Australia are open coastal plains behind sand dunes, subject to flooding by extremely high tides, and the species also breeds commonly in such areas in north-east Spain. The main requirement appears to be the presence of soft, narrow-bladed grass for nest construction. Various grasses or club-rush Scirpus are suitable, but usually not sedge Carex or rush Juncus, the leaves of which are not supple enough (though in the Coto Doñana, Spain, the species is stated to nest commonly in clumps of these plants fringing the marismas). Although frequently feeding in crops, Fan-tailed Warblers seldom breed there, but aberrant nests have been found in clover Trifolium. This may be due partly to disturbance and destruction (four to five weeks are needed from nest-building to fledging), but mainly to the unsuitability of crop plants for nest construction.

In South Africa ten pairs were located in 60 acres (24 ha) of grassland, but the nearest nests were only 90 feet (27.5 metres) apart. The song flights of neighbouring males often cross with no sign of competition and there seems to be no proper territory, the adults defending only the area within about a dozen metres of the nest.

The nest itself is almost invariably made from living grass leaves, which are folded to provide a foundation and then sewn together with
cobweb fixed to each leaf horizontally to give a chain effect. Up to 80 or more leaves from one clump are knitted together in this way, some being pierced by the bill and the cobweb passed through the hole. The adhesive from the web is also used as a glue. The base sometimes consists of small dry grass stalks, even grass mowings, and the lining is of more cobweb, often mixed with plant down or tiny fragments torn from the vegetation. Wool has been used in sheep-farming areas, but feathers are not incorporated. The completed nest is ‘soda bottle’ or ‘tear’ shaped, 12-15 cm high with a maximum width of 6 cm. It is built a few centimetres down from the top of the grass and, therefore, may be 15-75 cm off the ground. The entrance hole is at the top, sometimes slightly extending down one side. The nest may be inclined at up to 10° from the vertical and in such cases the entrance faces away from the prevailing wind (for example, north or north-east in South Africa and west in Australia). The whole structure looks fragile, but is, in fact, very solid and can withstand considerable impact. The grass continues to grow and the nest, looking like a large moth cocoon, is almost invisible beyond five metres, the cobwebs hardly showing against the living stems. Both adults build, and take eight to ten days to complete the construction.

The three to six eggs—very thin-shelled and plain blue or white, or blotched reddish, black or brown—are laid at daily intervals, usually in the morning. The female alone incubates, for about twelve days. The nestlings are fed by both parents and hiss when disturbed; fledging takes about 13 days. Three broods are normal and in Europe clutches are usually completed in mid-April, the first week of June and the second week of August. The nests are readily deserted if there is disturbance from human beings or domestic stock. There seem to be few natural predators, flooding and fire being the chief hazards to the nests and cold weather the main cause of mortality in the adults. (Data for this section from Lynes 1930, Jourdain and Lynes 1936, Nicholson et al. 1957, Hoffmann 1958, Valverde 1958, Guichard 1959, Comins 1964, Lavery and Seton 1967, and Pringle 1968.)

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