When will the Fan-tailed Warbler colonise Britain?

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Following the recent run of mild winters, this tiny grass warbler has increased in numbers and spread dramatically in Europe. It has nested only 80 km away, just across the English Channel.

The maps in most of the European field guides show the Fan-tailed Warbler *Cisticola juncidis* as essentially southern and largely Mediterranean, though Peterson *et al.* (1974) were able to add an extension along the Atlantic coasts of Iberia and France up to about 47°N in Vendée. In the 1950s, as might be expected for the sole European representative of

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this primarily African and generally tropical and subtropical genus of some 75 species of Old World grass warblers, the northern limits were the Mediterranean coast of France and the Po valley and western side of the Gulf of Venice in Italy; otherwise, the species was confined in the Mediterranean area to northwest Africa, the southern two thirds of Portugal and Spain (extending up through Cataluña), the larger west Mediterranean islands, Italy, southern Albania, Greece and some Greek islands, Cyprus, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Egypt. In many of these areas it was, and remains, rather local, as befits the northwestern edge of a much wider range in tropical Africa and southern Asia northeast to Japan and southeast to Australia. By 1959, however, Fan-tailed Warblers had begun to return to Vendée, on the west coast of France, which they had previously colonised during 1936-39 before being wiped out by the hard winter of 1939/40, and they continued to consolidate in that department and Charente-Maritime during the 1960s, without being found farther north or south. Thus, when a Fan-tailed Warbler was seen by one of us on Cape Clear Island, Co. Cork, in April 1962, the species bred no nearer than 400 km to these islands and was considered to be virtually sedentary (Sharrock 1972).

Since 1971, however, the Fan-tailed Warbler has been spreading so dramatically that by May 1976, in the foreword to The Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland, it was possible to cite this species as a strong contender among future colonists (Ferguson-Lees in Sharrock 1976). In fact, by the time that the Atlas was published in November 1976, there had been reports of single Fan-tailed Warblers in Norfolk in August 1976, at Cley on 24th and at Holme from 29th through to 5th September, which appear likely to be accepted as the first British records. The purpose of this short paper is to summarise the recent spread and to encourage British observers to watch out for this species during the coming breeding season.

Recent expansion

The spread up to 1970 (1972 in France) was summarised by Sharrock (1972) and, in general, there is therefore no need to repeat that information now. Nevertheless, certain points are worth making as background to the present situation. Apart from the Irish record, other observations indicated movement by this species in the mid 1960s. For example, single Fan-tailed Warblers appeared on ships 400 km off Cape St Vincent, Portugal, in March 1961, in the channel between Sicily and Tunisia in July 1963, and off Cape St Vincent again in July 1964. Then four arrived on Malta in June 1967 and, although three of those were promptly shot (De Lucca 1967), others were recorded on 17 dates in summer between then and 1972, and successful breeding was proved at two localities in 1973, when single singing males were seen in two other areas in May and two migrants also appeared on Gozo in October (Sultana and Gauci 1974). In Crete, too, to take another Mediterranean island, the species was recorded and suspected of nesting in 1967, subsequently spread
through most suitable areas, and was proved to be breeding in May 1975 (John Parrott in litt.).

Although the species has long bred very locally on the mainland of Greece and on certain of the Ionian Islands (see Bauer et al. 1969), it is absent from most of Yugoslavia and, indeed, was not referred to at all for that country by Matvejev and Vasić (1973), but in May and June 1974 a total of 45 ‘pairs’ was located in three river valleys in Istria, in the extreme northwest, where they had certainly not been present in 1953-57 and perhaps not since the 1880s (Rucner 1975). This expansion from the western side of the Gulf of Venice reflects the recent spread in northern Italy (Dr S. Frugis quoted by Appenzeller et al. 1974, Bianchi et al. 1972, Brichetti 1973), which in turn led to colonisation of Switzerland. There the species was found for the first time in 1972, when two males sang regularly in the Magadino delta, Tessin, from July to October and breeding was strongly suspected (Appenzeller et al. 1974). Subsequently, Fan-tailed Warblers were recorded in 1974 in the canton of Zoug, and in 1975 in Zoug, Argovie, Schwytz, Tessin and Vaud, breeding being proved in the last two (Gilléron 1976, Géroudet and Lévêque 1976); in 1976, singing males were found in Zoug, Schwytz, Vaud, St Gallen and Vallais (R. Winkler in litt.). Meanwhile, the species had also been found farther north in central Europe: in Vorarlberg, western Austria, in 1971 (Billeter et al. 1971), 1973 (Appenzeller et al. 1974) and 1975 (Géroudet and Lévêque 1976), as well as, we understand, in the southern Tirol in 1976 (Dr G. Berg-Schlosser per R. Lévêque); and in Baden-Württemberg, southern Germany, in 1975 (Knötzsch and Schuster 1976).

If the Yugoslavian, Swiss, Austrian and German records may be linked with the spread in northern Italy (though those in Vaud and Vallais may well have emanated from southeastern France), it is with the much more dramatic spread in western and northern France that we in Britain are most concerned. Fig. 1 reproduces the Fan-tailed Warbler map from the recently published French atlas (Yeatman 1976) and this obviously saves the need for much verbal description. It can be seen that the species now breeds in coastal marshes and river valleys right across southern France and up the west coast, and that it has established itself in several areas along the Channel coast. Much of this extensive pattern is, however, very recent: although this is the map for 1970-75, all the Channel coast records and most of those in Brittany, as well as those in the southwest or well inland, relate to the second half of that period (cf fig. 1 in Sharrock 1972, which was also based on the French atlas, up to 1972). As pointed out by Cruon and Vielliard (1975), there has been an ‘expansion spectaculaire depuis 1970 et surtout 1972’.

In 1972, in Brittany, breeding was proved near Quiberon, Morbihan, and probably took place just south of Brest, Finistère; that year the
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species was also present on the northwest coast of Brittany and near Calais, but otherwise not north of Vendée. By 1974, this range had been consolidated: breeding was confirmed or probable at several places in Finistère, on the border of Côtes du Nord and Ille-et-Vilaine and in the northern part of the Cherbourg peninsula, Manche; there were also many more records, not only in southern Brittany, Vendée and Charente-Maritime, but also in the southwest (Gironde, Landes and Basses-Pyrénées) and more than 100 km inland along such rivers as the Loire, Dordogne, Garonne and Adour. Then, in 1975, breeding was probable

Fig. 1. Breeding distribution of Fan-tailed Warbler Cisticola juncidis in France, 1970-75. Large dots show confirmed breeding, medium probable and small possible. Note the largely coastal and riverain pattern (after Yeatman 1976)

in the Calvados/Seine-Maritime area at the mouths of the Orne and the Seine, and confirmed in the extreme north at the mouth of the Somme and near Dunkerque. We do not yet have any picture of the records for 1976, but we understand that there are 'a lot more observations from France', including one in Alsace (R. Lévêque in litt.). Thus, Fan-tailed Warblers have now nested as close to England as about 160 km from Cornwall, 90 km from Dorset and 80 km from Kent.

Nor is this the whole story. In Spain, Fan-tailed Warblers have spread inland south of the Pyrenees in northern Cataluña and Aragon and they have also established themselves along the north coast, particularly in Santander (Dr F. Bernis per J. D. R. Vernon in litt.). In spring 1973, they were 'strikingly more numerous' in the basin of the Ebro in Spain than in 1971-72 (Limosa 47: 167). Much closer again to England, the species has already occurred in Belgium (a singing male at Jupille in August 1975)

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(Joiris and Noulard 1975) and on three occasions in the Netherlands (Friesland in August-September 1972, Zeeland in August 1973, and Zuid-Holland in September 1973) (Hermsen 1974, de Ridder 1974, Breek 1974); doubtless there are other records as yet unpublished.

What next?
Against this background, it can surely be only a matter of time before more occur in Britain and, judging by events in France, we suggest that breeding may soon follow. There are several areas with apparently suitable habitat on the English south coast. Fan-tailed Warblers do not nest in reeds Phragmites australis, usually not in sedge Carex or rush Juncus, and seldom in crops (though commonly feeding there); instead, they prefer grass or waste lands and edges of cultivation, often in or close to damp or marsh areas, building in grass or club-rush Scirpus.

Like the Bearded Tit Panurus biarmicus, this species is particularly vulnerable to severe winter weather and heavy snowfall, but it is currently enjoying considerable success as a result of the long succession of mild winters since those of 1961/62 and, particularly, 1962/63—though we must wait to see if it has received a setback as a result of the colder weather of 1976/77. As already pointed out, the French Atlantic coast department of Vendée was originally colonised as long ago as 1936-39, but the population was then exterminated by the hard winter of 1939/40 and it was another 20 years before recolonisation took place. The present population is by far the most widespread ever recorded in Europe, but it is still mainly maritime and delimited by the January 5°C isotherm (Yeatman 1974). If this isotherm is critical, then the possible places for nesting in our area may be limited to the south and west coasts of England and Wales, and Ireland.

The spread northwards has been compared with that of Cetti’s Warbler Cettia cetti (cf Bonham and Robertson 1975), but that species has been advancing since at least the 1920s, with temporary halts brought about by severe winters. The Fan-tailed Warbler’s range expansion seems to be of more recent origin and to be attributable almost entirely to the high population level resulting from mild winters. At Gibraltar, where Lathbury (1970) described up to four or five in a day during August-October 1965-69 as ‘a pronounced movement’, the numbers had built up to much more striking behaviour and movements of an apparently eruptive nature by July-August 1973-74, with a peak of as many as 70 departing southeast in a two-hour period on 30th July 1974 (Elkins 1976). As in the case of tits Parus, Bearded Tits and Dunnocks Prunella modularis, such events reflect high autumn numbers following successful breeding by populations already at a high density. There is some evidence that autumn wanderers, possibly including birds of the year, sing and even build nest frameworks in areas remote from those in which breeding has occurred: observers should beware of making premature assumptions.

Unless the colder weather of 1976/77 has caused a severe setback, however, we predict that Fan-tailed Warblers will soon colonise Britain, possibly in 1977. Observers should be alert for the monotonous but
highly characteristic song ‘dzeep dzeep dzeep . . .’, uttered during high, dipping flights over the territory. Patience is often needed to find one of these birds perched, but the song attracts attention at some distance.

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Summary

The remarkable spread of the Fan-tailed Warbler *Cisticola juncidis* in Europe since 1971 is described in some detail for Malta, Crete, Yugoslavia, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands, and briefly summarised for Italy and Spain; the first British reports are also mentioned. The cause of this expansion in range is considered to be the recent long succession of mild winters, which has resulted in an exceptionally high population; there is some evidence of eruptive movements in the western Mediterranean. The species has now nested only 80 km from England and observers in Britain are urged to be alert to the possibility of its predicted colonisation here.

References


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