

British Birds

VOLUME 76 NUMBER 6 JUNE 1983

Rock Sparrow: new to Britain and Ireland



S. J. M. Gantlett and R. G. Millington

At 08.00 GMT on 14th June 1981, we were walking from the 'North Hide' at Cley, Norfolk, towards the Coastguard's carpark. RGM idly lifted his binoculars to look at a couple of small birds feeding on the ground under the Eye Field fence. Without speaking, he intimated that it might be worthwhile for SJMG also to raise his binoculars.



97. Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia*, Spain, May 1961 (Arthur Gilpin)

One of the birds was a male Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*, but the other was a sparrow-like bird with a boldly striped head. The initial thoughts that it might be a Lapland Bunting *Calcarius lapponicus* were quickly superseded by thoughts of Nearctic sparrows and various rare buntings. RGM then suggested that it might be a Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia*. At this point, the bird flitted up onto the fence, exhibiting a shortish dark tail tipped with prominent white spots, which confirmed the identification for SJMG, who was familiar with Rock Sparrow in Europe.

For the next ten minutes, we watched the bird, at ranges of about 50-100m, as it fed along the ruts in the turfed gravel strip between the beach and the field. It flitted up onto the fence a few times and we both compiled detailed descriptions. SJMG then left to alert other observers: J. McLaughlin, M. Eldridge and C. Jones were fortunate to arrive in time and joined RGM still watching the bird. At 08.30 it flew up, for no apparent reason, and headed strongly westward across the Eye Field. It was never seen again, in spite of much searching.

It was a sandy-brown sparrow similar in size to House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, but plumper in proportions, with the strikingly striped head the most obvious feature. The following detailed description is compiled from notes made at the time and immediately afterwards:

HEAD Broad crown-stripe creamy/off-white. width, meeting just above bill. Supercilium
Dark brown lateral crown-stripes of even long, extending from before eye, flaring out

broader behind eye and curving down onto sides of nape, clear buffy-white with distinct yellowish-peach wash towards rear. Dark brown eye-stripe extending back from eye, broadest immediately behind eye and at rear (where forming large dark area on upper rear ear-coverts). Narrow, but distinct, pale creamy eye-ring. Ear-coverts and lores warm buffish-grey, bordered below by slightly darker smudgy grey moustachial stripe. Submoustachial stripe and chin off-white, with pale grey-brown smudgy malar stripes.

UPPERPARTS Mantle and scapulars buffish-grey strongly streaked with blackish-brown and with yellowish feather edgings. Strong pale cream-coloured 'braces' down either side of mantle. Rump and longish uppertail-coverts buffish-grey streaked lightly with dull brown. Median and greater coverts dark centred, edged sandy-brown and with whitish tips forming double, narrow but distinct, wing-bars. Upper wing-bar stronger and paler, lower narrower with yellowish-

peach wash (as supercilium). Primaries and secondaries dark brown, edged paler. Large tertials blackish, edged broadly with pale warm sandy-brown and with distinct white spots on tips. Tail shortish and notched, blackish-brown with prominent creamy-white spot showing on tip at rest. White spot at tip of each tail feather, showing in flight as broken white bar at end of tail.

UNDERPARTS Off-white with subdued pale greyish-brown wash and with a distinctly darker brown smudge on sides of upper breast. Dull buff mark across throat. Flanks strongly streaked with dark brown. Small, oblong, pale clear yellow patch visible on centre of upper breast only when bird looked up when face-on, otherwise apparently obscured by throat feathers.

BARE PARTS Fairly large, conical, sparrow-like bill flesh-pink, darker grey-brown on upper mandible and tip. Eye dark. Legs and feet flesh-yellow and strikingly thick and sturdy.

An active and nervous bird, it fed on the ground in a horizontal, hunched posture, when it was stouter-looking than House Sparrow, but of a similar size. Though having a rather shuffling gait on the ground, it was bold and alert-looking when perched on the fence.

In Norfolk, 14th June 1981 was clear and sunny with a very warm southwesterly wind of about force 5. The whole of Continental Europe was bathed in a high-pressure system and, in particular, Iberia (a possible area of the bird's origin) was experiencing an exceptional heatwave at this time: Lisbon's temperature of 102°F was the highest for 13 years and in Seville it reached 111°F.

There was much visible migration in progress at Cley during the morning. Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris* were passing west at the rate of about 2,000 per hour; Lapwings *Vanellus vanellus* and Turtle Doves *Streptopelia turtur* were also passing west. The Rock Sparrow, too, was probably on passage: it was not seen at 07.30 when we walked past the same spot, and it clearly left at 08.30.

Dr Colin Harrison (1982, *An Atlas of the Birds of the Western Palaearctic*) gave the range of Rock Sparrow as most of southern Europe, eastwards through Turkey and Iran to the Himalayas, and also northernmost Africa. It is described as a resident and partial migrant. The species has, however, wandered to north France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Of nine Belgian records, four were in the 19th Century, three in the 1950s and singles in 1960 and 1968; six of the seven dated records were in October and the seventh was on 1st November (in 1968). The two Dutch records were both in the 19th Century, when the species may have bred farther north (to southern Germany and Switzerland).

S. J. M. Gantlett, 14 Bracken Way, Grimston, Norfolk
R. G. Millington, The Annexe, The Grange, New Buckenham, Norfolk NR16 2AU