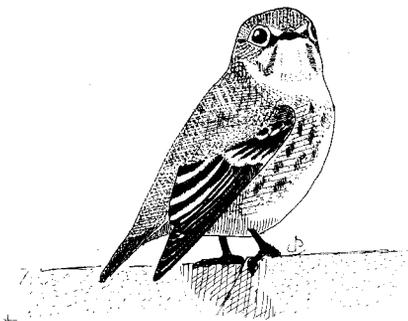


# British Birds

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## Identification of brown flycatchers

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The genus *Muscicapa* contains a group of brown flycatchers which consists of the familiar Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* and three species that have not yet occurred in Britain, but which have been predicted as potential vagrants (Wallace 1980): Brown Flycatcher *M. dauurica* (formerly *latirostris*), Siberian Flycatcher *M. sibirica* and Grey-streaked Flycatcher *M. griseisticta*. The Brown Flycatcher has been reported in the Faroes (Williamson *et al.* 1951), Norway (Hyatt & Mylne 1952) and Denmark (Christensen 1960), although Nisbet & Neufeldt (1975) considered that none of these records was adequately documented. Subsequently, Brown Flycatchers have been trapped and photographed on Heligoland, Germany, in August 1982 and in Sweden in September 1987 (Fleet 1982; Douhan 1989). One old specimen and two sight records of this species in Britain have been rejected (BOURC 1963, 1971).

Despite the possibility that these species may occur in Western Europe, there is very little detailed information on their identification in the literature. King *et al.* (1975) summarised the main points, and Nisbet & Neufeldt (1975) and Svensson (1984) provided useful information on the identification of Brown Flycatcher; while this paper was in typescript, the same topic was surveyed in Swedish by Alström & Hirschfeld (1989).

### Taxonomy and distribution

The subfamily Muscicapinae contains a large and diverse group of Old World flycatchers, which is split into a number of genera. The status of some of these is rather questionable, but all authors place the four species

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This paper has been in proof since July, and we apologise to the authors for the delay in publication. EDS

under consideration in the genus *Muscicapa*. The taxonomy of Brown Flycatcher is complicated. There are several races which are short-distance migrants. One, *M. d. williamsoni*, is regarded as a separate species by some authors. The nominate race is the only long-distance migrant and is the only race likely to occur in Western Europe; our discussions will, therefore, consider only this race.

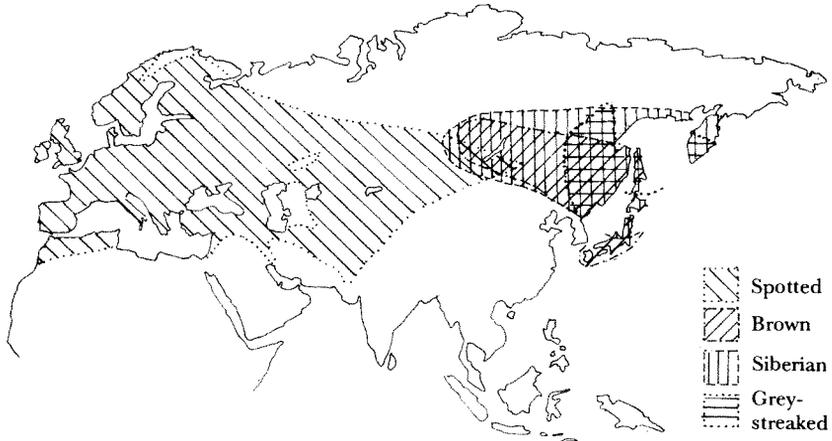


Fig. 1. Breeding distributions of Spotted *Muscicapa striata*, Brown *M. dauurica*, Siberian *M. sibirica* and Grey-streaked Flycatchers *M. griseisticta*. Ranges of non-migratory Himalayan races of Brown and Siberian not shown. Spotted winters in Africa; Brown and Siberian winter in southeast Asia, Philippines and west Indonesia; Grey-streaked winters in Philippines, east Indonesia and New Guinea (after Voous 1960, Harrison 1982, and Wild Bird Society of Japan 1982)

Brown and Siberian are largely sympatric (fig. 1), but are separated ecologically. When breeding, Brown is found mainly in broad-leaved forest, whilst Siberian is normally found in conifers (Dementiev & Gladkov 1954). Flint *et al.* (1984) described Grey-streaked as uncommon in the USSR. On the wintering grounds, all species inhabit a variety of forest and woodland types, Brown also being found commonly in parks and gardens (King *et al.* 1975).

### Moult

In fresh plumage, all four species show pale fringes to the wing-coverts, tertials and secondaries, which wear off with time. This creates variations in plumage at different times of the year, so an understanding of moult patterns is pertinent to identification.

There is usually a complete moult after the birds arrive in their winter quarters. This is certainly the case for Spotted and Siberian, but no information is available for Grey-streaked. Brown is exceptional in that it undergoes a complete moult prior to the autumn migration. Thus, in winter and spring, Brown looks more worn than the other species. During the autumn migration, all Brown Flycatchers are in fresh plumage, unlike the adults of the other three species.

**Identification**

These four species comprise a remarkably uniform group of brown flycatchers, all with pale underparts. Given the difficulty of putting subtle colour variations into words, we feel that it is better to use a combination of plumage pattern and jizz to separate them.

*Species pairs*

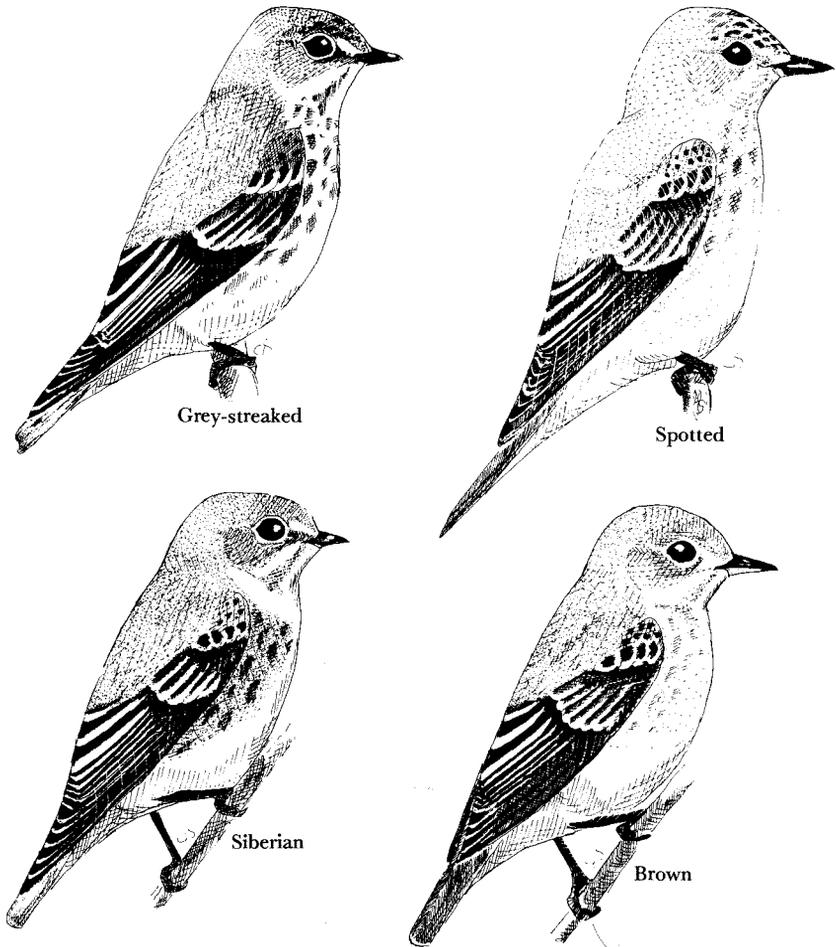
For identification purposes, the four species fall rather neatly into two species pairs: Spotted and Grey-streaked, and Brown and Siberian (table 1). Each pair shares a number of field characters, and it is perhaps best to place any member of this group into a species pair before attempting specific identification.

Spotted and Grey-streaked are both rather elongated flycatchers, with slim outlines. They have conical-shaped bills, which show only a small amount of yellow at the base of the lower mandible. The most important shared feature is the clearly defined streaking on the breast and forehead.

In contrast, both Brown and Siberian are smaller, and look plumper, with a more-rounded head shape. They both have a noticeably broad base to the bill. Except in extremely close views, the crown and forehead appear unmarked.

279. Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*, Suffolk, June 1930/31 (David & Eric Hosking)





Figs. 2 & 3. Four brown flycatchers *Muscicapa*: Grey-streaked *M. griseisticta*, Spotted *M. striata*, Siberian *M. sibirica* and Brown *M. dauurica* (Colin Bradshaw)

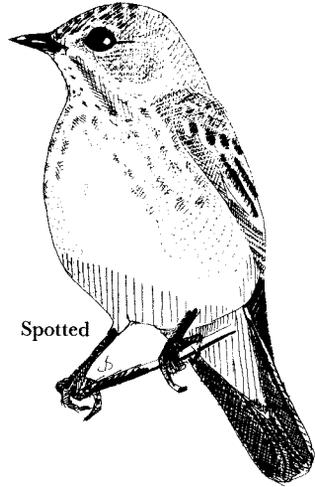
### Specific identification

#### SPOTTED AND GREY-STREAKED FLYCATCHERS

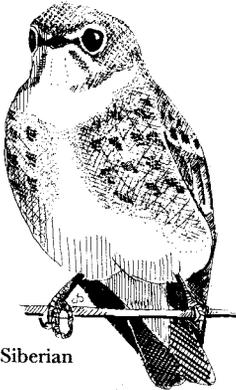
Although they are very similar, the familiarity of Spotted to European observers should enable these two species to be separated without much difficulty. The main structural difference between them is the wing-to-tail ratio. The wings of Grey-streaked are noticeably long, extending almost to the tip of the tail, whereas those of Spotted extend to no more than halfway down the tail. Although the brown upperparts of Grey-streaked are darker than the grey-brown upperparts of Spotted, it is the 'face' and underparts pattern to which particular attention should be paid. Grey-streaked shows a triangular, clear, white throat patch, which extends from the bill to the well-demarcated line of streaks on the upper breast; Spotted



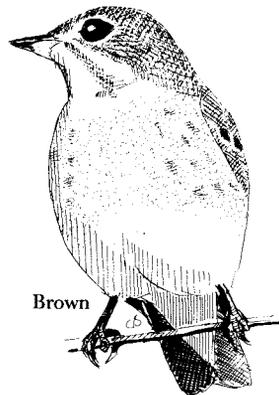
Grey-streaked



Spotted



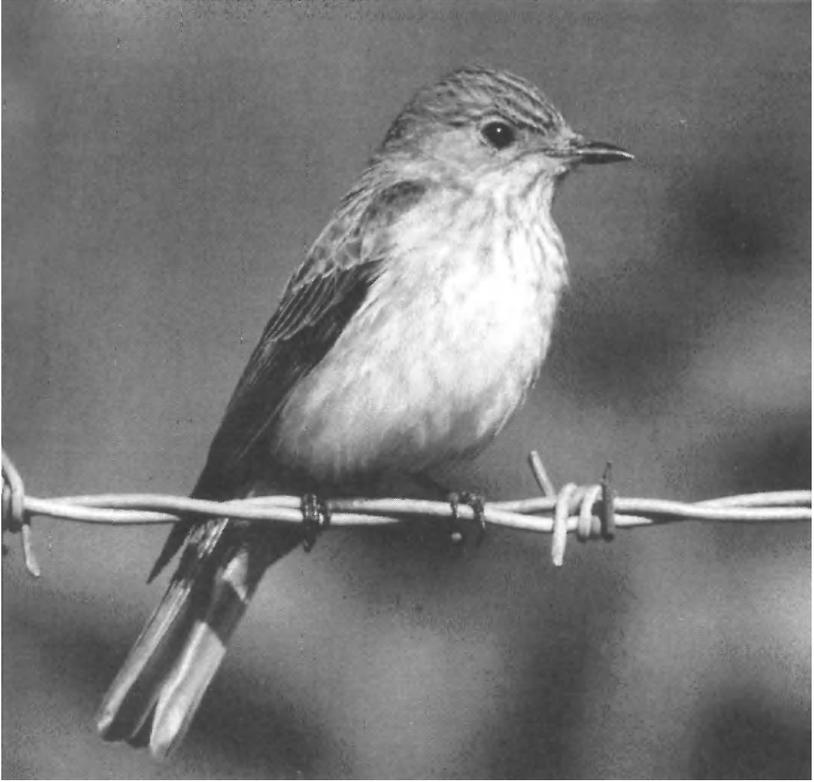
Siberian



Brown

does not show this feature, since the throat is covered by fine, brown streaking. A malar stripe is present on both species, but is much finer on Spotted. The breast streaking is darker brown and broader on Grey-streaked. Both species have streaking on the flanks. On Grey-streaked, the white of the belly extends to a point, creating a well-defined inverted V, which is absent on Spotted. Spotted frequently shows a pale-buff wash across the breast, becoming richer on the flanks, unlike Grey-streaked, which has a clear, white ground colour to the breast and a greyish wash to the flanks.

The head pattern provides more identification features, the most striking being the clear white eye-ring and loreal patch of Grey-streaked. This contrasts with the fine, ill-defined, greyish-buff colour of these features on Spotted. The streaking on the crown is usually less extensive on Grey-streaked, being confined to the forehead and forecrown, whereas it extends on to the nape of Spotted. Spotted shows fine streaking in the submoustachial region, unlike Grey-streaked.



280. Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*, Berkshire, July 1971 (Gordon Langsbury)

281. First-winter male Grey-streaked Flycatcher *Muscicapa griseisticta*, Japan, September 1983 (Takao Baba)





282. Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*, Warwickshire, July 1986 (Mark Hamblin)



283. First-winter male Grey-streaked Flycatcher *Muscicapa griseisticta*, Japan, September 1983 (Takao Baba)



284. Grey-streaked Flycatcher *Muscicapa griseisticta*, Japan, October 1980 (Takao Baba)

#### BROWN AND SIBERIAN FLYCATCHERS

The separation of these two species is complicated by the subtle differences between them and the alterations in appearance caused by variations in wear and light intensity. The safest characteristics are structural. First, the wing-to-tail ratio differs. On Siberian, the wing extends at least three-quarters of the way along the tail, and sometimes reaches the tip—whereas on Brown the wing does not extend more than halfway along the tail. The general effect is to make Siberian appear short-tailed. Secondly, the bill shape and bill colour differ. Siberian has a broad-based, short bill, and, although there is some yellow, this is rarely visible

285. First-winter Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica*, Thailand, October 1988 (P. D. Round)



in the field. Brown has a longer, broad-based, vertically compressed bill, of which at least the proximal half of the lower mandible (and sometimes all but the tip) is yellow. The underparts of Siberian show a sooty-grey suffusion across the breast and down the flanks, with a well-defined, but narrow, white, inverted V extending from the belly to the centre of the



286. Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica*, Thailand, March 1987 (*Protpimol Sukhavanija*)

287. Siberian Flycatcher *Muscicapa sibirica*, Thailand, April 1981 (*P. D. Round*)





288. Siberian Flycatcher *Muscicapa sibirica*, Thailand, April 1981 (P. D. Round)



289. Adult Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica*, Thailand, October 1988 (P. D. Round)

lower breast. While Brown shows a basically similar pattern, the suffusion is never so dark, and the inverted V is, therefore, never so well defined. Both species show blurred streaking on the breast, which in fresh plumage, but which wear may eliminate completely. Both species show a white throat, but on Siberian the broader and darker malar stripes make it appear narrower and more contrasting than on Brown.

The head patterns of the two species are also similar, both showing a



290. Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica*, China, 1986 (*M. Turton*)



291. Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica*, Thailand, March 1986 (*Protpimol Sukhavanija*)

white eye-ring and loreal patch. On Siberian, both features are narrower and more distinct, the latter being due to the slightly darker colour of the rest of the head. On Brown, the loreal patch extends to the top of the broader eye-ring, and both features are more diffuse along their margins. Both species show a pale submoustachial stripe, which is often bisected by an upturn in the brown malar stripe.

In autumn plumage, the presence, absence, or relative extent of the



292. First-winter Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica*, Thailand, October 1988 (P. D. Round)



293. Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica*, Hong Kong, September 1986 (Ray Tipper)

wing-bars are in our opinion of no value as specific identification features. In spring plumage, however, there is a marked difference. Siberian has broad, off-white fringes to the tertials and wing-coverts, giving a noticeable, pale wing-bar. The pattern recalls that of Spotted Flycatcher. On Brown Flycatcher, all the pale fringes to the wing feathers have been lost through abrasion, and it has, at best, only very diffuse markings. The upperparts of Siberian are a darker sooty-brown, compared with the mid to pale brown of Brown. This difference is, however, not always marked.



294. Siberian Flycatcher *Muscicapa sibirica*, China, 1986 (M. Turton)



295. Siberian Flycatcher *Muscicapa sibirica*, China, 1986 (M. Turton)

Other useful pointers to Brown include its more rotund appearance, noticeably larger-looking eye, and more-rounded crown.

The recent Swedish paper by Per Alström and Erik Hirschfeld (1989) has drawn attention to the problem of separating unusually streaked Siberian from Grey-streaked. They suggested a number of points for

Table 1. Summary of plumage and other identification features of four flycatchers

	<i>Muscicapa</i>			
	Spotted <i>M. striata</i>	Grey-streaked <i>M. griseisticta</i>	Brown <i>M. dauurica</i>	Siberian <i>M. sibirica</i>
Crown	Grey-brown, forehead pale brown, feather shafts forming clearly visible streaks, which become broader and more diffuse on nape	Brown; streaking on forehead only	Pale-brown; some mottling on forehead visible at very close quarters	Sooty-brown; mottling on forehead slightly more extensive than on Brown
Lores and eye-ring	Narrow, diffuse, pale eye-ring; white or pale-buff loreal patch	Distinct white eye-ring; triangular, white loreal patch	Conspicuous pale (white to buff) eye-ring; triangular, whitish loreal patch	Whitish eye-ring; thinner, pale loreal stripe, an extension of eye-ring
Throat and ear-coverts	Sub-moustachial area white to buff, finely streaked brown; thin, dark malar stripe; throat off-white with variable amount of streaking	Broad white sub-moustachial stripe, finely dotted brown at front; broad, brown malar stripe, curving upwards to ear-coverts; throat clear white from bill to upper breast	Off-white sub-moustachial stripe; brown malar stripe, which sometimes curves upwards like that of Grey-streaked	Similar to Brown, but malar stripe usually broader and whitish throat patch narrower
Underparts	Breast and flanks streaked brown; often shows buffish wash on flanks	Like Spotted, but streaking darker and broader; well-defined demarcation between white throat and start of streaks; ground colour clear white, with grey wash on flanks; white of belly extends to centre of lower breast, producing ill-defined, inverted V	Variable, from clear white to pale-brown wash across breast and flanks; fades to white from centre of breast to belly	Well marked, with heavy, sooty-grey suffusion along flanks and across breast; white of belly extends to centre of lower breast, to produce obvious, narrow, white, inverted V
Undertail-coverts	White to pale buff-brown	White	White	White, occasionally with dark crescents

	Spotted <i>M. striata</i>	Grey-streaked <i>M. griseisticta</i>	Brown <i>M. dauurica</i>	Siberian <i>M. sibirica</i>
Mantle and rump	Grey-brown, with some streaking on mantle; first-years often have uppertail-coverts tipped white	Grey-brown	Grey-brown	Mid-brown; sometimes shows white tips on sides of rump
Tertials	Brown, with pale inner web and narrow pale fringes in fresh plumage	Darker than Spotted, with well-defined, narrow, white fringes	Brown, slightly darker than mantle; white fringes broader than on Spotted or Grey-streaked	Like Brown (see text for separation in spring)
Wing-coverts	Grey-brown; extent of pale fringes dependent on amount of wear; in fresh plumage, pale tips create wing-bar, although this disrupted by fringes; on worn adults, uniform grey-brown	Similar to Spotted, but more contrasting, owing to darker ground colour	In fresh plumage, shows narrow wing-bar on greater coverts, but this lost with wear; indistinct, fine fringes to median and greater coverts often not visible in field	Like Brown (see text for separation in spring)
Remiges	In fresh plumage, pale fringes to secondaries form wing-panel, which is lost with wear; primaries dull brown	Like Spotted, but whole wing darker	Primaries darker brown than secondaries	Like Brown
Lower mandible	Pale yellowish base, extent of which varies, but always less than half length of bill	Like Spotted, but, on average, pale base less extensive	On average, has the most extensive pale-yellow base; frequently appears to be dark only at tip	Small amount of pale yellow, usually not visible in field

separating them. First, although Siberian is streaked, this is never so distinct or extensive as on Grey-streaked; furthermore, the streaking on Siberian is against a brown background as opposed to a white one on Grey-streaked. Secondly, Grey-streaked is larger, with a larger bill. Thirdly, the submoustachial stripe is less distinct on Grey-streaked. Fourthly, Siberian has dark crescents on the undertail-coverts, a characteristic exclusive to this species; this is, however, not always visible in the field, and its apparent absence does not eliminate Siberian.

## Acknowledgments

We should like to thank Tony Baker, Alan Dean, Simon Harrap, Chris Heard, Tim Inskipp, Steve Madge, Tony Marr, Phil Round, Graham Speight and Mick Turton for supplying information and advice.

## Summary

The identification of four species in the genus *Muscicapa*—Spotted *M. striata*, Brown *M. dauurica*, Siberian *M. sibirica* and Grey-streaked Flycatchers *M. griseisticta*—is discussed. The main criteria for separating the species are the patterns of streaking on the breast and the wing-to-tail ratios. The characteristics of the four species are listed in table 1.

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