Identification of *Hippolais* warblers

Hadoram Shirihai, David A. Christie and Alan Harris

**ABSTRACT** The criteria for the identification of all six *Hippolais* warblers have been constantly refined since the ground-breaking paper by D. I. M. Wallace (*Brit. Birds* 57: 282-301). This current paper not only reviews this accumulated knowledge, but also presents the results of new studies in Israel and elsewhere.

Since the first and only paper on the identification of all the warblers in the genus *Hippolais*, by Wallace (1964), much has been written on species within this difficult group, scattered among various journals (e.g. Shirihai 1987; Harrap 1988a,b, 1990; Ullman 1989; Fry 1990). In addition, the genus has been treated in a number of books (e.g. Williamson 1968; Hollom *et al.* 1988; Harris *et al.* 1989; Alström *et al.* 1991; Parmenter & Byers 1991; Cramp 1992; Jonsson 1992; Svensson 1992). These works have acted as standard references at different times during our studies of the genus over the last 15 years in Europe and the Middle East.

The present paper and plates have been prepared for publication in the forthcoming book *The Macmillan Birder’s Guide to European and Middle Eastern Birds*, and special attention has been paid to the shapes of the six species. Just before painting the plates, for example, AH travelled to Israel purposely to make comparative observations simultaneously on Upcher’s *H. languida*, Olive-tree *H. olivetorum* and Olivaceous Warblers *H. pallida*. Extensive details on biometrics, moult and geographical variation have been published in Williamson (1968), Glutz von Blotzheim & Bauer (1991), Cramp (1992) and Svensson (1992), and readers are recommended to consult these works for such additional information. Although the following text attempts to cover all the field aspects of the genus,
it was decided not to go into too much detailed description (this can be readily obtained from the plates and also from the above sources), but in a practical way to concentrate more on the principal difficulties encountered with this group and on those features which need to be seen and checked to enable safe identification to be made.

General distribution

Olive-tree and Upcher’s Warblers are Levant specialities. The former is confined as a breeding species to open woodland with oaks *Quercus* or groves of olives *Olea* or almonds *Amygdalus* with much scrub, from the southern Balkans to southwestern Turkey and south to northern Israel (late April to late August), wintering in East and Southern Africa. Upcher’s breeds in mountain scrub and rocky areas with very sparse thorn trees on slopes or in wadis, from Transcaucasia and lower Turkey south to central Israel (migration much as for Olive-tree; on passage in desert areas, both favour acacias *Acacia*). Olivaceous Warbler is a summer visitor to warm-temperate and subtropical habitats containing tamarisks *Tamarix* or damp woodland, often near water, but also in arid areas or in parks and olive groves; it breeds in Spain and North Africa, the Balkans, Turkey, the Levant and Arabia east to western China, occurring on passage mainly in August-September and April-May; it is a rare vagrant elsewhere in Europe. Booted Warbler *H. caligata* is a summer visitor to shrubby and tall herbaceous thickets, from European Russia east to the Yenisei and western Mongolia and south to the Caspian Sea area (winters chiefly India); a rare vagrant, mostly in autumn, to most of Europe and the Near East (has summered in northern and eastern Europe). Icterine *H. icterina* and Melodious Warblers *H. polyglotta* are summer visitors (mainly March-October). Icterine frequents mature dense broadleaf areas and tall shrubs, also forest edges, in warmer boreal to temperate zones of much of Europe east to central Russia and north Iran, occurring on passage in April-May and August to early October; Melodious breeds in similar habitats, but with lower/denser shrubs, in warm-temperate parts of central and west Europe and northwest Africa, occurring on passage in March-April and August-September.

Identification

The following points identify the genus: relatively short undertail-coverts (but beware some *Acrocephalus* warblers with short-looking undertail-coverts); usually square-ended tail; prominent flattish head and relatively long, strong and broad-based bill (except on Booted and some Olivaceous); frequently appear to have rather straight profile from mantle to tail, and rather front-heavy appearance, often seeming ‘clumsy and careless’ in movements through cover. Note, however, that Olivaceous has a somewhat more rounded tail (shorter outermost feathers), and individuals of this species have also been reported as having relatively long undertail-coverts, rendering their generic affiliation less obvious. Adult Icterine and Melodious are generally greenish and yellow, the other species predominantly greyish or greyish-brown, all with a bland facial expression, and often with variable pale wing-panel and pale outer rectrices.

Within the genus *Hippolais*, the main problems (depending on region) involve
separating Olive-tree from Upcher's, Upcher's from Olivaceous, Booted from some Olivaceous, and Icterine from Melodious (grey individuals of the last two, mainly first-winters, can also be confused with Olivaceous). All species undergo a complete moult in their winter quarters; so, fresh-plumaged birds in autumn are juveniles or first-winters and heavily worn autumn individuals are adults, while spring birds are fresh or very slightly worn. Individual variation, abrasion and bleaching, and occurrence of intermediates, are further complications.

OLIVE-TREE WARBLER *Hippolais olivetorum*

The largest *Hippolais* warbler (about 15 cm); characterised by long, broad, powerful bill, long(est) and pointed wing and primary projection, and long blackish-grey tail with the most prominent white edges (performs frequent tail-waving). Upperparts predominantly grey, often contrasting rather markedly with tail and extensive whitish wing-panel (beware heavily worn summer/autumn adult with wing-panel reduced or absent).

*Fresh plumage* Differs from Upcher's in heavier bill with orangey-yellow lower mandible (pinkish-grey on Upcher's), and larger size with much fuller tail, latter with a blacker grey ground colour (dark but browner on Upcher's) and with larger areas of a more pure white at tip and sides which are noticeable in flight and during tail-waving (on Upcher's, white quite prominent, but less pure, narrower and less contrasting); darker grey above, often with impression of lead-grey or light bluish suffusion (Upcher's is duller/paler grey-brown). Longer primary projection more or less equal to exposed tertials and with seven or eight widely spaced primary tips (on Upcher's, projection about three-quarters tertial length, with six slightly more closely spaced tips); and more prominent whitish edging to remiges and tertials forming extensive secondary-panel (on Upcher's, fringes narrower, greyer, forming indistinct panel, and tertial edging more diffuse). Also has moderately angled forehead (but when excited appears rather steep and shorter than on Upcher's) and crown (peak slightly behind eye), which never look distinctly flattish.

*Worn adult* Close to Upcher's in having indistinct wing-panel, and browner tail with less obvious white on outer feathers, but size, shape and actions, general upperparts colour, and bill (size, shape and colour) should separate the two. Other differences include: bluish-grey tarsi (greyish-brown or dark pinkish-grey on Upcher's); fairly indistinct supercilium, largely restricted to in front of eye or even absent (on Upcher's, rather indistinct but usually visible, from bill base and extending slightly behind eye); greater contrast between upperparts and underparts, head always darker (indistinct demarcation between these areas on Upcher's, on which tail and wings typically darker than rest of upperparts).

*Voice and behaviour* Call is much louder, a deep 'chuk' often recalling Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* (Upcher's is quite loud, but much less deep, approaching that of Olivaceous). Tail action more waving (like shrikes *Lanius*) and performed throughout year, whereas Upcher's cocks and fans tail up and down or from side to side (but tail movement most frequent and most strong on breeding grounds).

*Other confusion species* In the Levant, migrant Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria* in first-winter or first-summer plumage is occasionally misidentified as Olive-tree. Note
former's shorter and grey-based bill, variable amount of barring or pale edges on scapulars, flanks and undertail-coverts, whitish wingbars, well-fringed tertials and wing-coverts, and different behaviour.

Plate 33. Left, Olive-tree Warbler *Hippolais olivetorum*, fresh-plumaged adult, northern Israel, May 1993 (H. Shirihai)

Plate 34. Olive-tree Warbler *Hippolais olivetorum*, worn adult, Eilat, Israel, August 1985 (Per Alström). Autumn adult is rather worn and lacks distinctive plumage features (such as pale wing-panel), but still predominantly dark grey with slight bluish tone; latter feature, and bill size and colour, general size and shape and behaviour and actions, are the best distinctions (if not too worn, amount of white on outer tail feathers still diagnostic).
UPCHER’S WARBLER Hippolais languida

Smaller (about 14 cm) than Olive-tree, being less stocky and ‘pear-shaped’, but slightly larger (and remarkably heavier) than Olivaceous: Upcher’s is intermediate between the two, and the second-largest of the genus. Rather close to Olivaceous in general proportions and coloration, identification requiring caution. Tendency towards rounded head, and shows (mainly when excited) steeper, long forehead to crown, peaking just behind or well behind eye (together with thickest neck, tends to give heavy-headed appearance recalling a large Sylvia warbler); bill rather long and comparatively thicker than on Olivaceous, but owing to typically rounded large head does not look obviously long; tail long, thick and full. Otherwise, flight feathers, wing-coverts and tail dark brown, contrasting markedly with rest of upperparts, which are much paler and greyish or very pale greyish-brown; shows faint suggestion of wing-panel, shortish supercilium, and tail usually with conspicuous white tips and outer webs of outer feathers (unless very worn); legs and wings (and primary projection) long. Considerable individual variation exists, however: general proportions and size, and darkness or contrast of tail and wing, depend partly on angle of light and view and partly on background and habitat, as well as on degree of wear and abrasion (producing intermediates between Upcher’s and Olivaceous), and much practice and experience are therefore essential (and some individuals are still not safely separable). On breeding grounds, adult repeatedly waves tail vertically and horizontally (both fanned and, less often, closed) in circular movement quite like that of Olive-tree (as latter, also moves rather slowly through foliage); Olivaceous flicks tail downwards, which Upcher’s also does but predominantly during passage. When breeding, Upcher’s habitually perches on rocks, unlike other Hippolais. Combination of many or most of the following features is essential for field separation of Upcher’s from Olivaceous.

1. Size, proportions and behaviour Upcher’s is large (size of Common Whitethroat S. communis or larger), with longer, broad tail, thick bill, rounded heavy head joined to plump body by thick short neck, and much less pot-bellied appearance, and moves rather slowly and quite often perches prominently; relatively smaller Olivaceous recalls a small Acrocephalus through often relatively angular head shape and rather flattish forehead to crown and narrower but broad-based bill, longer and slimmer neck and rather elongated body, but tail is comparatively shorter (and less full), and Olivaceous has more horizontal posture with low belly and more nervous, clumsy and faster movements. (Much overlap, however, although differences in proportions most obvious when birds in action or flying between bushes.) In addition, Upcher’s has slightly longer primary projection (three-quarters tertial length) than Olivaceous (half to two-thirds) and usually shows longest and middle tertial tips closer together than inner two (spacing appears more equal on most Olivaceous), but this sometimes extremely difficult to see in the field and variation in both species, and differences in age and wear of feathers, render it of limited use. Tail-action differences are also important (see above).

2. Tail and wing colour Upcher’s’ darker tail and wings (including broad dark centres of coverts and tertials) are usually more striking (compared with Olivaceous), particularly on adults from late spring to autumn (when lack of paler fringes creates conspicuous, contrasting dark tail and wings), but beware that some

Plate 37. Upcher’s Warbler *Hippolais languida*, Israel, May 1987 (H. Shirihai)

Plate 38. Upcher’s Warbler *Hippolais languida*, Israel, June 1986 (H. Shirihai). Note contrast of darker wings and tail, and nature of tertial spacing.
Olivaceous may appear slightly darker and contrasting and a few Upcher's look paler and less contrasting (especially in strong desert light); note that these feathers appear darkest when viewed from behind or slightly from side, and paler in profile view. Most Upcher's in spring and fresh young in autumn show fairly marked and quite sharply defined whitish fringes to wing-coverts and tertials, as well as to remiges, with variable whitish secondary-panel (most Olivaceous also show clear pale fringes and may have suggestion of similar panel, but these are often buffish and diffuse). Both species show whitish tips and margins to the tail, but on Upcher's these are on average broader, more distinct (contrasting with darker tail) and usually obvious in flight; this feature, however, is not constant, and is relatively useless for birds with heavily worn plumage.

3. Other differences Upcher's usually tends to have paler crown (often with hint of darker stripe at sides of forecrown) and ear-coverts almost as pale as whitish throat and to be predominantly whitish below and distinctly grey above, whereas most Olivaceous have slightly darker and warmer ear-coverts (and sometimes crown), often well demarcated from whitish throat, often have very faint yellowish-brown suffusion to breast sides and flanks, and may show more-obvious brownish or olive or sandy tinge above (although many are identical to Upcher's). On both species, supercilium in front of eye can be either thin or rather broad or indistinct, but on most Upcher's tends to be slightly broader and whiter and equally strong to rear edge of eye (or to distance of less than eye diameter behind eye), while on Olivaceous it usually does not extend behind eye or on a few extends farther than eye diameter behind eye (but then only faint and indistinct). Upcher's lower mandible tends to have some pinkish (chiefly pinkish-yellow on Olivaceous), with gape point always reaching fore edge of eye-ring (ends slightly before on most Olivaceous), and has three or four rictal bristles (three on Olivaceous). Leg colour varies: on Upcher's mainly dark brownish-flesh (mainly greyish-flesh on Olivaceous). Upcher's 1st (shortest) primary reaches to about tips of primary coverts or is shorter (much longer on Olivaceous).
4. **Voice** Upcher’s ‘chuk’ is obviously louder and deeper than the ‘tchak’, ‘teak’ or ‘tek’ of Olivaceous; other rattling ‘churr’ calls are louder from Upcher’s. Latter’s song is very variable and with enormous amount of mimicry, slower in tempo, with rich and open vowel sounds, ‘unsteady’, melodious, with warbling quality: very different from Olivaceous, which gives highly distinctive, rhythmic, rising and falling song (repetition over a long cycle of 10-12 notes, with eighth or ninth note higher-pitched), like Reed Warbler’s *A. scirpaceus* but more monotonous, harsher, less gruff and more chattering. In Spain, song of Olivaceous is often compared to that of Sedge Warbler *A. schoenobaenus*.

**OLIVACEOUS WARBLER HIPPOLAI S PALLIDA**

More variable than other ‘grey-and-brown’ *Hippolais*. Much variation is geographical and highly marked, with three races: *opaca* (northwest Africa and Iberia), nominate *pallida* (northeast Africa, possibly together with other North and Central African populations), and *elaeica* (southeast Europe and Middle East; includes synonymised form *tamarici* of eastern part of range). General field characters and variations are as follows.

1. **Structure and jizz** Medium-sized (about 13 cm), with long, flattish but broad-based bill, longish tail somewhat more rounded (shorter outermost rectrices) than on congeners, and shortish primary projection (varies from half to two-thirds of tertial length); some, however, appear larger, relatively long-billed and long-tailed, with much broader bill base (race *opaca*), while others are rather smaller and daintier, with slightly shorter tail and bill and less broad bill base recalling *Acrocephalus* (race *elaeica*), and others even smaller, with much smaller bill and tail and very narrow bill base (easternmost *elaeica* and other small African races). Normally gives impression of long, low profile (flattish crown) with pot-belly, but quite delicate with elongated body.

2. **Call and behaviour** Has ‘tak’ calls recalling Lesser Whitethroat *S. curruca*, and with each call pumps tail downwards; many other *Hippolais* have similar call and may occasionally flick tail downwards, but this action is never so conspicuous (and not combined with call). Otherwise, quite nervous and clumsy in movements.

[Plate 40. Olivaceous Warbler *Hippolais pallida* of race *elaeica*, Eilat, Israel, September 1986 (H. Shirihai)]
3. *General coloration* Noticeably pale. Upperparts vary from fawn, through various shades of grey tinged with slightly colder olive (*opaca*) or greyish-brown (*elaeica*), to pallid plain grey or sandy (some North African individuals, a few Middle East populations), or predominantly greyish-brown (some easternmost *elaeica*); on some, upperparts colour can approach that of pale extremes of eastern Reed Warbler *A. s. fuscus* or even Marsh Warbler *A. palustris*. Underparts off-white, often with greyish or buffish wash on flanks and across breast. Wing usually appears slightly darker, with pale fringes forming variable (generally indis-
tinct) secondary-panel. Usually shows clear off-white outer-web fringe, tip and distal inner web of outer tail feathers, narrow but often quite sharply defined; this feature is quite variable in contrast and depth (and beware that, against light, outer tail of all *Hippolais* warblers looks pale). All races wear to a paler greyish-brown or greyish-olive (and are much more alike in colour) on breeding grounds.

Plate 43. Olivaceous Warbler *Hippolais pallida* of nominate race, Egypt, May 1951 (A. Ashjian). Note small size, short bill and short primary projection, but this race still has species’ typical head pattern, call and tail-flicking.

4. Supercilium and face Has typical bland facial expression of genus, with rather indistinct pale supercilium to in front of or above (or rarely to just behind) eye, although sometimes more distinct and occasionally extends behind eye (but largely faint), or often concolorous with lores (a few spring adults can show at least a hint of a faint darker border above supercilium); in the field, supercilium usually appears restricted to fore area. Otherwise, most have a pale area below the eye (actually surrounding eye), which may also contribute to the bland expression.

**BOOTED WARBLER Hippolais caligata**

The smallest of the genus (about 12 cm, little bigger than Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*), but does not appear correspondingly delicate. Characteristic in having comparatively heavy head with rather high crown and short, slender bill, and relatively shortish tail, but pot-belly and short wings (primary projection about half tertial length) make it look rather long-tailed. Strikingly pale brown above ('pale milky tea': valid for most fresh autumn immatures and most spring birds, but summer and autumn adult wears to very pale grey-whitish-sandy) and markedly pale off-white below. Unlike other *Hippolais*, has rather strong facial pattern, with prominent (though frequently diffuse) supercilium always extending well behind eye (to same distance as in front) and square-cut at rear, often with darker colour bordering upper edge, and also often offset by thin dark eye-stripe, which, combined with shortness of bill, can create *Phylloscopus*-like appearance. Wing feathers (including coverts and particularly tertials) typically darker-centred and with broad pale fringes, sometimes creating faint wing-panel. Tail fairly square, and outer feathers with variable whitish tip and edges to outer web and distal part of inner web, although this hard to see (or strongly reduced, even on fresh-plumaged individuals). At close range, often shows quite distinct pale eye-ring and, on some, more buffish suffusion on rump and uppertail-coverts. Very active, typically moving through undergrowth with slight upward flicking of tail and wings (but, unlike Olivaceous, no persistent tail-dipping); may also flycatch and, rarely, even hover (again recalling *Phylloscopus*). At distance, appears plain-headed. Much of Booted’s variation is geographical, but some also occurs within a single population. For example, some individuals have both the dark eye-stripe and the lateral crown-stripe reduced or lacking, and/or the supercilium weaker, shorter behind the eye or only just visible behind the eye, closely approaching the bare-faced expression of other *Hippolais*, and also often have a stronger and slightly longer bill, paler greyish-brown upperparts and paler cream underparts (such birds are normally of race *rama*, particularly in spring), all quite different from normal nominate *caligata* described above; many are intermediate in characters.

Often confused with Paddyfield Warbler *A. agricola*, chiefly in spring or when individuals worn, but similarity should be dispelled by Paddyfield’s general warm ground colour on upperparts and body sides and the different shape of its short wings but long and prominently graduated tail (as well as its undertail-coverts being of typical length for an *Acrocephalus*). Also confusable with *Phylloscopus* warblers, notably Chiffchaff *P. collybita* and Bonelli’s *P. bonelli*: size and bulk, combined with longer and heavier bill and paler (non-black) legs, should separate
Plate 45. First-winter Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata* of nominate race, Spurn, Humberside, September 1991 (Steve Young)

Plate 46. Left, first-winter Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata* of nominate race, Bloemendaal, Netherlands, September 1988 (Arnoud B. van den Berg). Note small *Phylloscopus*-like appearance with typical long supercilium, dark lateral crown-stripe, short *Phylloscopus*-like bill, short primary projection and relatively long tail; also rather well-defined tertial fringes.

Plate 47. First-winter Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata* of nominate race, Portland, Dorset, September 1987 (Phil Atkinson). Typical appearance in the field.
it from former, and lack of green or yellow from latter; Willow Warbler of race yakutensis approaches Booted in coloration, but former shows long primary projection, much longer and sharper supercilium, Phylloscopus-type bill, yellowish (not greyish-brown) legs and notched tail; Dusky Warbler P. fuscatus can be greyish, but always has rufous-buff suffusion to ear-coverts, flanks and undertail-coverts. Booted’s call differs from that of any Phylloscopus.

Within the genus Hippolais, Booted is confusable only with Olivaceous (mainly elaeica or small North and Central African races), but is smaller, more delicate, with rather shorter and finer bill, and in general shape and behaviour it somewhat approaches Phylloscopus; bill is pale orangey-flesh or horn with dark culmen and tip (Olivaceous has all-pale lower mandible, rarely with indistinct blackish tip); also has more complex facial pattern, with at least prominent supercilium behind eye (where faint or absent on Olivaceous), and often a hint of an eye-stripe and quite obvious lateral crown-stripe, but very rarely Olivaceous may have slightly stronger supercilium behind eye and less rarely a slightly darker border above supercilium (conversely, some Booted have weaker facial pattern). Booted’s upperparts are normally browner, and breast to flanks smudged with cream-buff (unlike most Olivaceous); it also has more prominent dark centres and pale fringes to wing-coverts and tertials, more flesh-brown or greyish-horn legs and more contrasting darker feet (but legs and feet can vary from bright pale pink to steely blue-grey, and many first-winters occurring in Britain have distinctly flesh-coloured legs), slightly shorter primary projection and more square-cut tail. More active when feeding, without downflicking of tail shown by Olivaceous (though can give slight upward flicks). Some larger Booted with slightly bigger bill or weak facial pattern and paler or greyer upperparts, and some smaller Olivaceous with smaller bill or faint supercilium and brownish tinge above, can be impossible to separate in the field (some even in the hand), but calls differ: Booted has single or repeated hard and rather harsh ‘tick’, ‘skee’ or ‘chet’ (never Olivaceous’s repeated ‘tak’ with downward tail flicks).
Plates 49-51. Olive-tree Warbler *Hippolais olivetorum*, Eilat, Israel, August 1993 (H. Shirihai). Note large size, with long wings (with large whitish panel when fresh) and long primary projection, long and full tail obviously darker than upperparts and with prominent white tips/edges to outer feathers, large bill typically bicoloured (lower mandible orangey). Dark grey above with hint of bluish; note patternless head. In the field, call very loud, actions very slow, and typically waves tail repeatedly.
Plates 54-56. Olivaceous Warbler *Hippolais pallida* of race *elaeica*, Eilat, Israel, March 1990 (above, René Pop; below, David M. Cottridge). Notably pale, predominantly greyish, with typical *Acrocephalus*-like facial expression (supercilium almost confined to in front of and above eye); wings and tail only slightly darker than upperparts. Note also length and shape of bill, moderately long tail and shortish primary projection (last two features may appear, respectively, rather shorter and longer, depending on individual bird or population). In the field, looks rather elongated, and typically flicks tail downwards, generally in combination with ‘tak’ calls.
Fig. 2. Booted *Hippolais caligata*, Olivaceous *H. pallida*, Melodious *H. polyglotta* and Icterine Warblers *H. icterina* (Alan Harris)

Top two, Booted Warblers: left, first-winter of race *caligata*; right, race *rama* in worn plumage—long-tailed and thick-billed.
Centre two: first-winter Olivaceous Warblers: left, small individual resembling Booted Warbler; right, large individual.
Bottom left, first-winter Melodious Warbler. Bottom right, first-winter Icterine Warbler.

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Fig. 1. Olive-tree *Hippolais olivetorum*, Upcher's *H. languida* and Olivaceous Warblers *H. pallida* (Alan Harris)
Top two, Olive-tree Warblers: left, spring; right, worn plumage.
Centre two, Upcher's Warblers: left, spring; right, worn plumage.
Bottom four, Olivaceous Warblers: two left, fresh plumage, eastern race *elaeica* above, western race *opaca* below; two right, worn plumage, *elaeica* above, *opaca* below.
On worn Olivaceous Warbler of western race *opaca* (bottom right), note exceptionally broad-based bill even for a *Hippolais*. 
Plates 57-59. Fresh-plumaged adults of Olive-tree Warbler *Hippolais olivetorum* (top), Upcher's Warbler *H. languida* (centre) and Olivaceous Warbler *H. pallida* of race *elaica* (bottom), Eilat, Israel, May 1993 (H. Shirihai)
Plate 60. Adult Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata* of nominate race, Spurn, Humberside, June 1992 (*P. Doherty*). Note small size (with notably finer bill) and buffish sandy-brown plumage, obvious extension of supercilium behind eye, dark lateral crown-stripe and whiter throat; also relatively short wings and long tail, and short primary projection.

Plate 61. Adult Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata* of race *rama*, Ashkhabad, Turkmenia, May 1992 (*Tim Loseby*). Appearance more like Olivaceous *H. pallida*, including general greyish suffusion (less brownish) and longer and stronger bill compared with nominate Booted.
Plates 62 & 63. Above, first-winter Melodious Warbler *Hippolais polyglotta*, Portland, Dorset, September 1994 (Peter Coe); below, first-winter Icterine Warbler *H. icterina*, Scilly, September 1992 (C. J. Timmins). These two 'yellowish *Hippolais*’ (though often greyish when immature and possibly confusable with Olivaceous Warbler *H. pallida*) are best separated from each other by differences in primary projection and spacing (Icterine has longer projection and tips more widely spaced towards wing-point); Icterine’s wings cover uppertail-coverts, which on Melodious are slightly exposed behind its shorter wings. Icterine also tends to have more solid pale wing-panel (absent or almost so on Melodious), duller and more uniform underparts (more obvious contrast between yellowish breast and whitish belly on Melodious), and purer lead-grey (less brownish-grey) legs.
MELODIOS AND ICTERINE WARBLERS *Hippolais polyglotta* and *H. icterina*

Although both are typical *Hippolais* warblers (but with plumage olive-brown, green-grey and yellow to just whitish and buff), these two are often confused with some other warblers. Garden Warbler *S. borin* has short, comparatively deep, greyish bill (never long and broad-based or with orangey lower mandible), is plain greyish-brown or olive-brown above and dingy below, and has rather plain face with large eye. Willow Warbler is smaller, restless, flitting, with typical *Phylloscopus* appearance, very thin bill, stronger facial pattern (always very long supercilium) and different call. In autumn, both, though mainly Melodious, are not infrequently confused with Marsh or Reed Warblers: see characters identifying the genus (under Identification, above).

Icterine and Melodious in spring (fresh plumage) differ from all other *Hippolais* in being rather pale olive greenish-grey (Icterine) or greenish olive-brown (Melodious) above and rather uniform (variable) yellow below; summer and autumn adults wear to pale greyish-green or olive above (though Melodious is generally more brownish-tinged) and whitish-yellow below, with worn browner remiges, at a time when first-winters are distinctly paler grey-green (some very pale greyish-buff) above and off-white with variable yellowish wash below (some lack yellow, resembling Olivaceous: see below).

The following features separate Melodious from Icterine in any plumage.

1. **Wings** Melodious has short primary projection, roughly half length of exposed tertials, and wing-panel is usually absent or less solid (Icterine has long primary projection roughly equal to tertials and always has conspicuous wing-panel). Note that wing fringes are whitish (Icterine) or whitish-buff (Melodious) on autumn immatures, but mainly yellowish on spring birds in fresh plumage, while on worn autumn adults of both species wing-panel can appear whitish, or as series of white lines, or be non-existent (as on many Melodious). Both can, rarely, show primary projection to about two-thirds ter-
tial length, so it is important to note primary spacing (on Melodious tends to be even, on Icterine more widely spaced towards wing-point) or, perhaps more so, wing-to-tail ratio (on Melodious, primary projection half as long as wingtip to tail tip and never covers tail-coverts; on Icterine, about same as wingtip to tail tip and covers tail-coverts).

2. Subsidiary features On Melodious, head is more rounded, with steeper forehead and with peak around or just before eye (rather domed crown); Icterine has flatter forehead, with crown peak well behind eye. Both have short, ill-defined supercilium mostly before eye, but this often extends slightly more behind eye (though more diffuse) on Icterine. Melodious usually has brownish-grey legs.
Fresh-plumaged adult Melodious Warbler *Hippolais polyglotta*, Portugal, May 1989 (Kevin Carlson)

(bluish-grey or lead-grey on Icterine), but this is hard to determine and many individuals of both species can have greyish legs. Both species lack clean white on outer tail, but edges tend towards light brown on Melodious (slightly whiter on Icterine), this more obvious in flight. Most Melodious tend to show stronger yellow on throat and upper breast (on Icterine, often more uniform and duller yellow), this being more useful with first-winter individuals.

3. **Behaviour, character and voice** Melodious is slightly more rounded-looking (less elongated and slim), tends to skulk or remain long in same clump, although may sing from exposed perch, and feeds more slowly and methodically (Icterine often perches in full view, is more lively and impetuous, and often shoots off with dash- ing or flycatcher-like flight). Song of Melodious is a persistent, rapid *Sylvia*-like chatter with less mimicry, starting hesitantly and then going into softer, smoother but faster and more sustained musical rambling, lacking Icterine’s ‘rough bits’; Icterine’s is a more varied and pleasing, high-pitched *Acrocephalus*-like refrain, perhaps recalling Marsh Warbler or Blyth’s Reed Warbler *A. dumetorum*, but with discordant whistling, and is unstructured, rather hoarse and strained, but with long-drawn notes and including much mimicry (and Icterine usually sings from higher perch). Call of Melodious is variable, mainly a short sparrow-like chatter, less often a sharp ‘tic’; Icterine (rarely calls in autumn) gives mainly a short, hard ‘teck’ or ‘tec-tec-tec’, in alarm tongue-clicks, and also has (mainly in spring) a musical ‘tey-te-dwee’.

Occasional first-winter Olivaceous Warblers suffused more buff-and-olive resemble ‘colourless’ Icterine or Melodious (first-winter or heavily worn adults), but have primary projection between the two. Icterine and Melodious occasionally flick tail down, but never so conspicuously as does Olivaceous, and not in
combination with call. Olivaceous always has outer tail feathers edged off-white, this normally being indistinct or lacking on the other two (but largely reduced or absent on heavily worn individuals of all three). Olivaceous normally has a long, low forehead and crown (flattish head), unlike more rounded or domed crown of Icterine and Melodious, which also have more prominent orangey lower mandible and very pale ear-coverts (on extreme individuals almost concolorous with throat or crown, quite unlike warmer, well-defined ear-coverts of Olivaceous). Icterine has a much more obvious wing-panel (of little use with heavily worn birds). Folded wing of Melodious usually shows five primary tips; most Olivaceous show six, but quite often seven (as do most Icterine Warblers).

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References


Hadoram Shirihai, PO Box 4168, Eilat 88102, Israel

David A. Christie, 4 Steventon Road, Harefield, Southampton SO18 5HA

Alan Harris, 60 East Park, Harlow, Essex CM17 0SE

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