



Identification of Hume's Warbler

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Illustrated by David Quinn

ABSTRACT The field features of Hume's Warbler *Phylloscopus humei* are compared with those of Yellow-browed Warbler *P. inornatus*: the drabber plumage, blacker lower mandible, inconspicuous median-covert bar and, most importantly, calls and song are the crucial features on which to concentrate when faced with 'an unusual Yellow-browed Warbler'.

It has long been suspected that a minority of Yellow-browed Warblers *Phylloscopus inornatus* turning up in Britain belong to the Central Asian form *humei*, rather than the more familiar nominate race of the Siberian taiga (Alexander 1979; Meek 1979; Quinn & Clement 1979; Scott 1979; Baker & Catley 1987; Chapman 1987; McLoughlin & Butler 1990; Stoddart 1990; White 1991; Willoughby 1994).

After considerable deliberation, the BOU Records Committee has now officially added this taxon to the British List (*Ibis* in press), the first record accepted by the British Birds Rarities Committee and the BOURC being that of the bird at Beachy Head, East Sussex, during 13th-17th November 1966 (*Brit. Birds* 72: 124-125). This form has now been promoted to species rank as Hume's Warbler *P. humei* (*Ibis* 139: 198; *Brit. Birds* 90: 70).

In general, Hume's differs both in plumage and in vocalisations from Yellow-browed and there is little evidence of interbreeding (although breeding ranges might not actually overlap). The preference of *humei* for montane forests, suggested by Svensson (1992) as one of the criteria for splitting the two forms, is, however, hardly valid, as there is no suitable lowland forest habitat in the parts of Asia inhabited by *humei* in the breeding season. The importance of song in the taxonomy of the genus *Phylloscopus* was emphasised by Madge (1985).

This paper reviews the characters of this 'new' species and highlights the pitfalls which need to be considered when assessing 'a dull Yellow-browed Warbler'.



Fig. 1. Yellow-browed *Phylloscopus inornatus* (top two), Hume's *P. humei* (centre two) and Greenish Warbler *P. trochiloides* (bottom) (David Quinn). Three left-hand birds all in fresh first-winter plumage; two right-hand birds both in worn spring plumage.

Distribution

Hume's basically replaces Yellow-browed in montane forests of Central Asia, breeding from northern Afghanistan north through the Altai and associated ranges towards Lake Baikal. There, at the beginnings of the taiga, it is replaced by the now monotypic Yellow-browed, which breeds west to the western foothills of the Urals and eastwards to the Pacific coast of Siberia, wintering in southeast Asia. Hume's, in contrast, migrates the relatively shorter distance to the Indian subcontinent. A third form, *mandellii*, is somewhat isolated in western China and winters in Burma; it shows plumage and vocal features more akin to Hume's than to Yellow-browed, and is treated as a subspecies of Hume's Warbler (Svensson 1987, 1992; Alström & Olsson 1988).

Separating Hume's from Yellow-browed Warbler

Although the two species differ quite strongly in plumage, there is little difference in wing formulae between them, although (as might be expected from a shorter-distance migrant) there is a tendency for Hume's to have a more-rounded wing-shape, with the second primary a fraction shorter. Hume's, compared with Yellow-browed, is duller, with less contrast between the upperparts and underparts. In reasonably fresh plumage, the upper (median-covert) wing-bar is obscure (fewer pale tips, which are tinged olive, but which may become whitish when worn), but the whitish greater-covert bar is prominent. The dusky shade at the base of the secondaries and the 'ground colour' of the greater coverts, which highlights the greater-covert bar on Yellow-browed, are more subdued and greyish on Hume's. Often, there is a pale buff, rather than creamy-yellow, wash to the wing-bars and the supercilium. The upperparts are more greyish-olive, contrasting with brighter wings and tail, and the underparts are duller and greyer, offering weak contrast. The legs are darker grey-brown with pinkish insides to the toes (at least rear tarsus is also pinkish-brown on Yellow-browed) and the lower mandible has more extensive blackish, only the base being pinkish (pinkish with dark tip on Yellow-browed). The head pattern is also often more subdued, with the supercilium narrower behind the eye and diffuse in front of the eye (virtually meeting on the forehead and wide well behind the eye on Yellow-browed), but some apparent Hume's have supercilia well-defined to the bill base, like Yellow-browed. In worn plumage in late winter, features may be lost, although Hume's then becomes even drabber: the lack of sharp contrast between upperparts and underparts, colour of lower mandible and darkness of leg colour, as well as call, remain useful identification clues (Shirihai & Madge 1993). Some birds reaching western Europe show somewhat mixed features; could they be from the northern part of the range of *humei*, where Yellow-browed might have an influence?

Vocal differences from Yellow-browed Warbler

Songs and calls differ markedly between the two taxa. Bursts of song may often be uttered by wintering individuals towards spring. The long, rasping song phrase of Hume's is a distinctive and familiar sound in northern India in February and March and is potentially a good way of locating overwintering individuals in Europe (several have been found overwintering in recent years).

Calls

The voice of Hume's Warbler is possibly more varied than that of Yellow-browed, and nearly all calls are either flat in tone or have a distinct downward inflection (rising in the case of Yellow-browed). Typical calls include a short, sweet, loose 'wesoo', and a sparrow-like flat 'ch'wee' or 'ch'leep' (latter similar to, but slightly weaker than, the call of Greenish Warbler *P. trochiloides*); another call, often given in winter, is a weak, rather off-key 'sweeoo', similar to some calls of Common Chiffchaff *P. collybita*. A slightly rising, but very short 'pwis' has also been noted, lower in pitch and insignificant in comparison with calls of Yellow-browed (Shirihai & Madge 1993).

The typical call of Yellow-browed Warbler is a penetrating, almost strident but high-pitched 'swe-eeet' or 'tsweeest', with a distinct rising (not falling) inflection, very similar to the call of a Coal Tit *Parus ater*.

Song

The song of Hume's Warbler is an excited repetition of the 'wesoo' call, often followed by a thin, fading, nasal, rasping 'zweeeeeeeee'—recalling a distant Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris* or the flight call of a Redwing *Turdus iliacus*.

The song of Yellow-browed Warbler is a very thin, high-pitched 'tsew-tsee-o-wee...tsee' or 'tsitsitsui itsui-it see tsi tsri-uee', somewhat recalling Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* in pitch. Occasionally, the final note may be prolonged into a rising 'tseeeee', but it lacks the dry, rasping quality of Hume's.

Problems with Greenish Warbler

The most frequent call (or calls) of Hume's is very similar to that of Greenish Warbler and confusion is possible; indeed, even as recently as December 1996, Italy's first Hume's Warbler was initially misidentified as Greenish (*Dutch Birding* 19: 35 & 36). In fresh plumage, a good view of the bird should present little problem, as Hume's has conspicuous whitish fringes and tips to the tertials, a longer greater-covert bar and a darker shade at the base of the secondaries, all lacking on Greenish. Perhaps more importantly, the bill of Hume's is considerably finer and darker, lacking the extensively pinkish lower mandible of Greenish. Birds in heavily abraded plumage in late winter can lose all trace of wing markings and are then more difficult to distinguish, but the sturdier, pinkish bill of Greenish should be looked for.

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