



Hume's Warbler *Phylloscopus humei* (David Quinn)

HUME'S WARBLER IN SUSSEX: NEW TO BRITAIN AND IRELAND

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It was Horace Alexander (1955) who first drew the attention of British birdwatchers, principally observatory workers, to the fact that the (then) Hume's Yellow-browed Warbler *Phylloscopus inornatus humei* was a serious contender for addition to the British List. The 1970s, 1980s and 1990s saw Hume's Warbler *P. humei* travel a rather familiar road to full species status, with several articles on its field identification (e.g. Wallace 1973; Meek 1978; Madge 1985; van der Have 1985; Svensson 1987; Shirihai & Madge 1993; Willoughby 1994; Madge & Quinn 1997). The British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee (BOURC), in its twenty-third report (1997), formally announced that 'it seems appropriate to treat *P. inornatus* (monotypic) and *P. humei* (including *P. h. mandellii*) as separate species', and in its twenty-fourth report (1998) added the species to Category A of the British List, on the strength of a sight record at Beachy Head, East Sussex, during 14th–17th November 1966. Subsequent records have been reviewed by the British Birds Rarities Committee and a

total of 27 has now been accepted, up to the end of 1997 (Rogers *et al.* 1998).

The Beachy Head bird was found by PC on 13th November (Quinn & Clement 1979) – one day earlier than the date recorded by the BOURC (1998) – and subsequently seen that day by Roger Charlwood, Barry Cooper, Brian Metcalfe and Tony Quinn. The following morning, Roger Charlwood telephoned RES at Dungeness to inform him of the bird's presence and the two of them spent over an hour watching the individual on 14th November. Throughout its stay (the bird was last seen on 17th November), it frequented the Belle Tout wood at Beachy Head, apparently preferring the canopy, but at times coming almost to ground level, when it presented excellent views. An account of the observations, including a detailed description, has been published previously (Scott 1979), but salient features are repeated here.

The bird resembled a Yellow-browed Warbler *P. inornatus* in size, shape, movements and behaviour. The key initial

distinguishing features were the generally dull appearance and the presence of just a single wing-bar on each wing. The only yellow present in the plumage was a small mark on the underwing at the carpal joint, and the faintest of yellow suffusion on the breast. The remainder of the plumage lacked any yellow, this being particularly noticeable on the upperparts, which were mainly greyish-olive, the dirty-white supercilium and the buffish-white wing-bar at the tips of the greater coverts. The left wing showed no trace of a second wing-bar, but the right wing showed a barely perceptible bar formed by tips to the median coverts. The voice was described by Roger Charlwood (verbally) as a 'loud ringing note' and by Quinn & Clement (1971) as a 'loud, disyllabic "puit-chu" and "che-ee"'.

The only relevant literature available to us in 1966 was Williamson (1962) and Ticehurst (1938) and, after consulting those two publications, it was considered that the bird was *humei* because of the following features: (1) greyish-olive (not green) upperparts and lack of striking yellow in fringes of primaries; (2) lack of yellow on underparts; (3) lack of yellow in supercilium and wing-bar; (4) absent or indistinct median-covert wing-bar; (5) call-note. In addition, the late date is more typical of far-eastern *Phylloscopus* warblers than of Yellow-browed Warbler, which usually appears in September and early October, although November records, and even overwintering individuals in southern England, are not unknown.

More recently, it has been shown that separation from Greenish Warbler *P. trochiloides* needs to be taken into account, because of the similarity of their call-notes (Madge & Quinn 1997). In fresh plumage, the longer wing-bar and whitish fringes and tips to the tertials are all diagnostic of *humei*. Both Hume's and Yellow-browed generally show a flatter or less domed crown than that of Greenish. In addition, the bill of Hume's lacks the extensive pinkish lower mandible of Greenish. The Beachy Head bird was noted to have a dark bill, with only the base of the lower mandible orange-flesh-coloured.

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EDITORIAL COMMENT

Colin Bradshaw, Chairman of the BBRC, has commented: 'There was little doubt about the identification of this bird, although the record did require two circulations. In the original published

description, the call was ambiguously described. Copies of notes from Pete Clement cleared this up for us. It speaks for the quality of the observers that we are able to accept a record based on their notes taken in 1966, when observers were much less familiar with the species than they are now.

'The difficulty of identifying a Hume's Warbler varies at different times of the year. In fresh autumn plumage, there is less scope for confusion with either Yellow-browed Warbler *P. inornatus* or Greenish Warbler *P. trochiloides*. This potential for confusion, however, increases in worn spring plumages.

'At all times of year, the call is probably the easiest way of separating Hume's Warbler from Yellow-browed Warbler. The typical call of Hume's Warbler is a sparrow-like, disyllabic "chirr-oo", usually with a distinct downward inflection at the end (although sometimes it is at the same pitch as the first syllable). Other common calls were discussed by Steve Madge (*Brit. Birds* 90: 571-575). Yellow-browed Warbler has a loud, Coal Tit-like "tswee-ee", with a definite upward inflection to the second

syllable. The songs are equally distinctive, though less relevant for identification in Britain. Hume's Warbler has an explosive repetition of its "chirr-oo" call, followed by a loud rasping "sweeeee", very similar to Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*. The song of Yellow-browed Warbler is more like that of a Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*, with a thin high-pitched "tsee-tsee-tsee-tsee".

'Plumage differences between the two species depend on the degree of wear of the plumage. Compared with Yellow-browed Warbler in fresh autumn plumage, Hume's Warbler is dull and lacks yellow in its plumage. The upperpart colour is greyer and there is less contrast with the underparts, which often appear silvery on Yellow-browed Warbler. Although there are pale tertial edges and wing-bars, these are much less obvious than on Yellow-browed Warbler. The ground colour of the tertials, the base of the secondaries and the greater coverts is a dull grey-brown and the tertial edges and wing-bars are a pale buff. This provides a lack of contrast in the wing, especially with the median-covert bar, which can be so small as to be missed in the field. This is quite different from



18. Hume's Warbler *Phylloscopus humei*, Brighton, East Sussex, November 1997 (S. Knight)



19. Hume's Warbler *Phylloscopus humei*, Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, February 1995 (Dave Nye)

Yellow-browed Warbler, which has black tertials, base of secondaries and centres of greater coverts, contrasting sharply with the white or cream of the median- and greater-covert bars and tertial edges. By November, many Hume's Warblers can appear to lack both a median-covert wing-bar and pale tertial edges, which is unusual at that time of year for Yellow-browed Warbler. In addition, the supercilium of Hume's Warbler is more subdued, narrower behind the eye, slightly flared, but often less distinct in front of the eye. Yellow-browed tends to have a supercilium which is narrower, but clearly defined in front of the eye and often flares behind the eye. These plumage differences are much less obvious in spring, when Yellow-browed Warblers can look dowdy, lack green and yellow tones and can also have both tertial edges and upper wing-bar worn away.

'At all times of year, there are persistent differences in bare-part colour and call. The latter is the best way of separating the two species at all times of the year. Hume's Warbler has a bill which frequently looks all dark in the field. On close views, there is

often a small amount of pale pink at the base, whilst Yellow-browed Warbler will often show a lower mandible which is almost all pale pink or yellow with only a dark tip. The legs of Hume's Warbler are generally all dark (although the soles are often pink), while Yellow-browed Warbler usually shows at least some pink or orange on the rear of the legs.

'Problems in separating Hume's Warbler from Greenish are usually caused by the similarities of the call. The typical call of Greenish Warbler is a loud "chirree", somewhat like that of a Pied Wagtail *Motacilla alba*. The essential difference from Hume's Warbler is that the second syllable of the Greenish Warbler call is definitely at a higher pitch. Greenish Warbler is a larger bird, and is more brightly coloured in autumn, with silky white underparts and obviously green upperparts. The bill is larger and usually has extensive areas of pale on the lower mandible. There are never any pale edges to the tertials, is rarely any sign of a second wing-bar and the greater-covert wing-bar is a different shape, being shorter and thinner. In worn spring plumage, Greenish and Hume's



20. Hume's Warbler *Phylloscopus humei*, Flamborough Head, North Yorkshire, November 1993 (John Harriman)

Warblers can look very similar, but the size and bill shape and colour should be enough to separate the two.'

Tony Marr, Chairman of the BOURC, has commented: 'The announcement by the BOURC in 1997 that Hume's Warbler was a distinct species was immediately followed by an examination by the BBRC and the BOURC of a number of claimed potential British records. The BBRC confirmed the identification of the 1966 Sussex bird and passed it to the BOURC to consider for admission to the British List as the first for Britain and Ireland.

'Some members of the BOURC had seen the files relating to this and several of the subsequent claims during the taxonomic review which had resulted in the split of the species from Yellow-browed Warbler (*Ibis* 139: 197-201). They and the other members had no problems with the identification of the Sussex bird, and it was accepted on a single circulation into Category A as the first record for Britain and Ireland (*Ibis* 140: 182-184).

'The species has been recorded as a vagrant to most countries in northwest

Europe, including Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland and Sweden; and elsewhere in the Western Palearctic, to Italy and Israel. There are 27 British records accepted up to the end of 1997.

'Arrivals of Hume's Warbler are usually later in the autumn than those of Yellow-browed Warbler, between mid-October and mid-November. They often coincide with the appearance of Pallas's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus proregulus* rather than with the somewhat earlier arrival of most Yellow-browed Warblers.

'Formerly called by some authorities the South-central Asian Yellow-browed Warbler, as distinct from the nominate form being called the Siberian race, Hume's Warbler breeds in the higher wooded parts of the northwest Himalayas from northwest India to the Tien Shan mountains. It winters mainly in the western Himalayas, and over much of northern peninsular India, from Pakistan east to Sikkim and Bangladesh. It also winters in Afghanistan and Iran, with recent records from Iraq and eastern Arabia.'

