

Iberian Chiffchaff in Greater London: new to Britain and Ireland

L. A. Batten



While carrying out a Common Birds Census at the Brent Reservoir, Greater London, on 3rd June 1972, J. H. Wood heard an unfamiliar, loud, clear song coming from the top of a group of willows *Salix*. It was somewhat reminiscent of the song of a Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*, but lacked the power of delivery of that species. After several minutes, the bird was seen by JHW, who was a little surprised to find that it was a *Phylloscopus* warbler. His first thought was that it was, perhaps, a Willow Warbler *P. trochilus* with an aberrant song; but the legs appeared blackish. After taking a brief description, JHW returned to his car to consult the 'Peterson' field guide.

This suggested that the bird might be a Greenish Warbler *P. trochiloides*, on account of its song. JHW had not noted any wing-bar, but he was aware that some Greenish Warblers could lack a wing-bar, as a result of wear. At this stage, JHW telephoned me and reported his observations. Unfortunately, although we tried to contact them, none of the other birdwatchers who regularly visited the reservoir was available at the time. We therefore arranged to meet at the Brent Reservoir, where, luckily, the bird was still singing when I arrived.

I made a long series of recordings with a cassette tape recorder, and noted the following description of the bird:

Head and upperparts olive-brown. Distinct creamy-white supercilium, which terminated well beyond the eye. Dark line through the eye, broader behind than in front. From certain angles, an indistinct yellow bar visible, produced by pale tips to primary coverts. (JHW could not detect any bar on the greater coverts, although I detected a slight indication of one and felt that it was possibly caused by wear to the tips of the greater coverts; in any case, it was no more distinct than the wing-bar shown by a small proportion of [Common] Chiffchaffs *P. collybita*.) Underparts washed greyish, with a light, ill-defined, yellow band across the breast, and, slightly, onto the lower sides of the neck. Undertail-coverts light yellow, contrasting with light creamy-grey lower belly. Legs appeared dark brown in good light. General appearance was dumper than that of either Willow Warbler or [Common] Chiffchaff.

The bird sang and called frequently. The call was quite unlike the 'hooeet' call of Willow Warbler or Common Chiffchaff, being more reminiscent of a young chicken's anxiety call. It was uttered several times in a disconnected sequence before the song, and sounded rather similar to the one repeated in the full song. It was also not unlike the 'chiff' in a Common Chiffchaff's song. A 'tic-tic-tic' call, heard on one occasion, may have been an alarm note.

The song consisted of about ten to 12 'chip' notes, the first five or six of which were delivered at a slower rate than the remaining ones, with the whole song lasting two to two-and-a-half seconds.

The habitat that the bird frequented was a narrow strip of land forming the reservoir bank between some factories and the reservoir itself. This area included many medium-sized willows, with some Elder *Sambucus nigra* and hawthorn *Crataegus*. There was a lush growth of Common Nettle *Urtica*

dioica and Bramble *Rubus fruticosus* in the clearings. The bird fed solely in the willows, and remained at a height of at least 6 m, coming lower only once, when flying across an open space.

Despite subsequent searches of the area on the following days, the bird was not heard or seen again.

Identification

At this stage, we were not able to identify the bird and were not even aware of the existence of a distinctively different Iberian form (*brebmii*) of what was then 'the Chiffchaff'. We were favouring the idea that the bird had been a Greenish Warbler, and this impression was reinforced later, on hearing recordings of the song of that species. Although the song of 'our' bird had lacked the high-frequency trill, the speed of delivery and the variety of the Greenish Warbler's song, that was the closest match that we could get to it, and this was the view of a number of other people to whom we played the recordings. We remained uneasy, however, and continued to look for more recordings. It was not until several weeks later, when I met I. J. Ferguson-Lees on the stairs of the BTO's headquarters at Beech Grove, Tring, Hertfordshire, where I worked at the time, that we were able finally to identify the bird. I played the tape to him and he immediately identified the song as that of Iberian Chiffchaff, a bird with which he was familiar in Spain.

Soon afterwards, I found a set of recordings by Jean-Claude Roché that included Iberian Chiffchaff. The song sounded identical

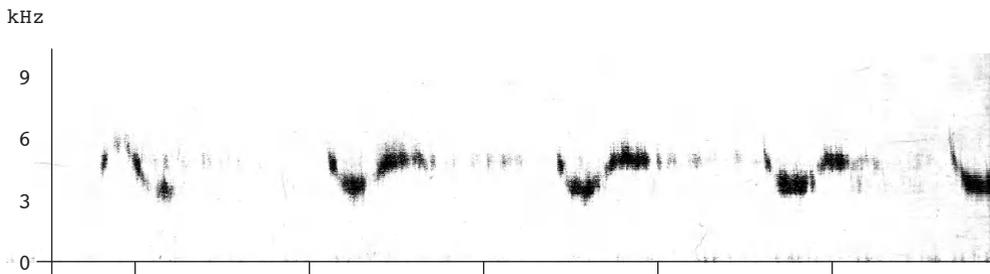


Fig. 1. Sonogram of warbler singing at Brent Reservoir, Greater London, 3rd June 1972, identified subsequently as Iberian Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus brebmii*, submitted to the British Birds Rarities Committee as part of the evidence in support of the record. L.A. Batten

to that of the Brent Reservoir bird, and left no doubt as to the latter's identity. Sonograms of the Brent Reservoir bird (fig. 1) and parts of the Roché tape showed very similar patterns.

Status

This Brent Reservoir observation seemed to represent the first occurrence of this form to be reported in the UK. The record was submitted to the London Natural History Society, which accepted it and published an account of the occurrence in the *London Bird Report* (Batten & Wood 1974). Since Iberian Chiffchaff was considered to be 'only a race' in those days, the record attracted little further interest, although it was mentioned in several books (Batten *et al.* 1973; Simms 1985; Clement 1995).

Interest was resurrected when phylogenetic analyses of mitochondrial DNA sequences indicated that the Iberian form was sufficiently distinct from Common Chiffchaff *P. collybita* to merit being considered a separate species, the Iberian Chiffchaff *P. brehmii* (Helbig *et al.* 1996). Other

accounts of the rationale behind the split can be found in Clement *et al.* (1998) and Richards (1999).

The record has now been accepted by both the British Birds Rarities Committee and the BOU Records Committee.

References

- Batten, L., Flegg, J., Sorensen, J., Wareing, M. J., Watson, D., & Wright, M. 1973. *Birdwatcher's Year*. Berkhamsted.
- & Wood, J. H. 1974. Iberian Chiffchaff at the Brent Reservoir. *London Bird Report* 37: 78.
- Clement, P. 1995. *The Chiffchaff*. London.
- , Helbig, A. J., & Small, B. 1998. Taxonomy and identification of chiffchaffs in the Western Palearctic. *Brit. Birds* 91: 361-376.
- Helbig, A. J., Martens, J., Seibold, I., Henning, F., Schottler, B., & Wink, M. 1996. Phylogeny and species limits in the Palearctic Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* complex: mitochondrial genetic differentiation and bioacoustic evidence. *Ibis* 138: 650-666.
- Richards, C. 1999. The Iberian Chiffchaff in Dorset. *Birding World* 12: 193-200.
- Salomon, M., Bried, J., Helbig, A. J., & Riofrio, J. 1997. Morphometric differentiation between male Common Chiffchaffs *Phylloscopus (c.) collybita* Vieillot 1817 and Iberian Chiffchaffs *P. (c.) brehmii* Homeyer 1871 in a secondary contact zone. *Zool. Anzeiger* 236: 25-36.
- Simms, E. 1985. *British Warblers*. London.

Dr L.A. Batten, 41 Turpins Chase, Oaklands, Welwyn, Hertfordshire AL6 0RP;
e-mail LeoBatten@aol.com

EDITORIAL COMMENT

Prof. Colin Bradshaw, Chairman of the BBRC, has commented as follows: 'The members of the BBRC all heard the tape of this individual at their 1999 AGM. We agreed unanimously that, from the tape recording, this "had to be" an Iberian Chiffchaff *P. brehmii*. Because there was little else to circulate, the record was accepted on the basis of the tape recording and sonograms studied at that meeting. Subsequent information on the species' identification came out of the more detailed notes that circulated to the Committee with 1999 records from Verne Common, Portland, Dorset, and Start Point, Devon (which will be discussed in a forthcoming paper in the series "From the Rarities Committee's files").

'On current knowledge, the characteristic song is essential for field identification and, because of the presence of mixed singers, a tape recording is necessary for record assessment. Many observers liken the song of

Iberian Chiffchaff to that of either Cetti's Warbler or Greenish Warbler, in that it is quite loud and abrupt. It starts with three to five slow notes ('chu-chu-chu' or 'jeet-jeet-jeet') before accelerating into a chatter at the end. The call - a thin reedy note with a downward inflection - is also different from that of Common Chiffchaff and is, perhaps, diagnostic of the species.

'From the two 1999 records, however, come a suite of subtle field characters which may be useful in separation from Common Chiffchaff. These include a stronger "face pattern", with more strongly marked supercilium, but a less-obvious eye-ring; greener-toned upperparts; a bright yellow flash (of the underwing-coverts) at the bend of the wing; suffusion on the supercilium and some of the underparts; longer primary projection; paler base to the lower mandible and cutting edge; and paler legs and feet. The general effect is to produce an appearance halfway between a Willow Warbler and a Common

Chiffchaff. Although these are useful confirmatory features, many overlap completely with those of Common Chiffchaff, so we are still a long way short of being in a position to consider assessing reports of non-singing individuals.

'In the hand, Iberian Chiffchaff and Common Chiffchaff can be separated by their biometrics. A complex formula, postulated by Salomon *et al.* (1997), uses a combination of wing length, position of wing point, tarsus length and wing formula to separate the two species.'

Tony Marr, Chairman of the BOURC, has commented as follows: 'This taxon breeds in the Iberian Peninsula and northwest Africa. There is an overlap with nominate *collybita* in the French western Pyrénées, with birds in this area giving mixed song. It apparently winters mainly within Iberia at lower levels, although there are winter records from as far south as Mali and Burkina Faso (Clement 1995). The taxon was split off as a separate species by the BOURC in January 1998, following research in Germany by Andreas Helbig, Jochen Martens and colleagues, which showed that "the Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*" should be split into at least four separate species. Evidence from acoustics, morphology and molecular biology (Helbig *et al.* 1996) revealed that chiffchaffs from Iberia *P. (c.) brebmii* are clearly distinct.

'In December 1997, at a BOU meeting in London, Professor Martens discussed some of these findings in a symposium devoted to the study of avian acoustics. Following the meeting, he was sent a tape recording of the Brent Reservoir bird of June 1972, and, after analysis, was able to confirm that this recording contains many elements of the song of Iberian Chiffchaff *P. brebmii*. The descriptions and Professor Martens' analysis were then examined by the BBRC, which

accepted the identification, and the papers and tape recording were then passed to the BOURC.

'There was no problem for the members of the BOURC in accepting the Brent Reservoir record as being an Iberian Chiffchaff, on the basis of the call and song. By then, several members of that committee had seen and heard the bird at Portland Bill, Dorset, in the spring and summer of 1999, and commented on the similarity in appearance and in song between these two birds.

'The species, although mostly sedentary, was considered to be a likely vagrant to Britain, which could have been under-reported in the past. With specific status and more published information about its song and appearance, it could well become more regularly reported in the future. Indeed, there were other reports in 1999 that are now being considered by the BBRC.

'This 1972 record provides a good example of the benefit of a good field description taken at the time, which, combined with the foresight of the observers in making a recording of the call and song, enabled both the BBRC and the BOURC to assess the claim without too much difficulty.

'There have been a number of reports well north of the normal range, in, for example, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany. Several of these birds have, however, given the songs of both *brebmii* and typical *collybita*. A bird in Belgium giving only the song of *brebmii* was trapped and, in the hand, appeared morphologically to be typical *collybita*. There have been other reports of chiffchaffs in Britain with a song matching that of *brebmii*, with or without typical *collybita* song. These records indicate that any future British claims will need to be accompanied by sound-recordings as well as field descriptions.'



Request:

Photographs of Corsican Nuthatch required

For a forthcoming feature, we seek good-quality colour prints or transparencies of Corsican Nuthatch *Sitta whiteheadi*. Please send these, together with the usual details of locality and date, to Frances Bucknell, Fountains, Park Lane, Blunham, Bedford MK44 3NJ.