Every time you arrive on the Isles of Scilly in October, you hope your fortnight will be part of a classic autumn. Looking back over the past three or four decades, certain rarity-packed years stand out. The autumns of 1975, 1983, 1985 and 1987 were all not to be missed, and that of 1999 certainly bears comparison with these. For aficionados of St Agnes in particular, things had started well, with a fine first-winter male Siberian Thrush *Zoothera sibirica* found on 5th October on the Gugh (a small island linked to St Agnes by a sandbar) by the Bradshaw family (minus Colin). Next day, Ren Hathway saw one of his superb illustrations come to life, when he chanced upon a White’s Thrush *Z. dauma* at Troytown. Continuing the eastern theme, while the rest of us were glued to the spot waiting for a glimpse of the White’s Thrush, KDS found a Radde’s Warbler *Phylloscopus schwarzi*. Many people wait a lifetime to see a vagrant *Zoothera* in Britain; two in two days was simply breathtaking. As a result, it was not surprising that most thoughts were of birds from the east, and what might appear next. Would it be a Yellow-browed Bunting *Emberiza chrysophrys*? Could another Bimaculated Lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata* make an appearance?

On 7th October, TRC, MH, KDS, Ann Cleeves and Sarah Money were chatting near the lighthouse on St Agnes just before 13.00 hrs. Turning to look back towards the Coastguards, TRC noticed a large raptor flying towards us.
from the southwest. The bird had pale underparts and he instinctively yelled ‘Osprey!’ KDS and MH locked onto the raptor, and took a couple of seconds longer to take in the bird’s appearance. At that point, we all suffered momentary deafness as KDS screamed, like a banshee, ‘Short-toed Eagle!’ *Circaetus gallicus.*

The sound could probably have been heard on St Mary’s! As the bird flew overhead, we were able to focus on its brown head; buff breast-band; pale lower breast and flanks spotted and marked with warm brown; barred tail; and pale, grey-brown upperwing-coverts, contrasting with very dark primaries, primary coverts, greater coverts and secondaries.

After clearing St Agnes’s airspace, the bird flew across to St Mary’s, travelled on to St Martin’s and White Island and then settled down on the Eastern Isles, where it favoured Great Ganilly. On 11th October, in clearing skies, the eagle left the Eastern Isles, circled up to a height of around 350 m over Tresco, crossed to the skies above St Mary’s and headed off towards the south or southeast.

**Description**

During that initial sighting, our total observation time was less than 60 seconds, the bird coming as close as c. 80 m. From these views, the three of us compiled the following description:

The bird looked large, although there were no other birds around for comparison. It looked much longer- and thicker-winged than a Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*; it also seemed a stronger, more powerful bird than Common Buzzard. The flight was powerful but relaxed, consisting of two or three flaps then a glide with the wings held flat and the wing-tips depressed, giving it an appearance somewhat recalling a giant Honey-buzzard *Pernis apivorus.* The head looked broad and thickset, and was beige in colour; as were the chin and throat. There was a brighter breast-band, composed of an orange-buff background with darker; smudgy spots. Below this, the breast and belly were white, with obvious orange/brown spots and smudges. The underwing-coverts were white, with rows of brown/grey spots and blotches, and the carpal joints were pale. From below, the secondaries had grey tips and paler bases, while the primaries were darker than the ‘wing-linings’, and six ‘fingered’ primaries were visible at the wing-tip. The upperparts showed much contrast between the pale grey/brown upperwing-coverts and the darker; blackish-brown primaries and secondaries. The wings showed no missing flight feathers or any obvious signs of feather wear or damage. The mantle was brown, darker than the upperwing-coverts. The tail was broad when spread, pale beige in colour and with four evenly spaced, darker brown bars across its width.

**Age**

Later, after examining photographs and video footage of the bird, we were able to age it as a juvenile, based on the following points: the uniformly beige head; pale upperwing-coverts; the
presence of pale tips to the greater upperwing-coverts, forming a thin pale band along the middle of the upperwing; the fact that it was not in moult, with no worn or missing flight feathers; and the warm, orange-buff breast-band and scattered orange/brown spotting on the underparts.

**Population distribution and status**
Short-toed Eagles breed from Morocco, Spain and France in the west, across southern and eastern Europe and into Russia and the Ukraine, eastwards towards Lake Baikal in Siberia. The Western Palearctic breeding population is estimated to be between 8,000 and 14,000 pairs (Snow & Perrins 1998). Following a long-term decline in numbers, the species is now thought to be stable in most countries, but is still decreasing in at least six European countries, owing to agricultural intensification and other land-use changes or direct persecution. Only by implementing large-scale habitat management – including maintenance of low-intensity farming practices, which can restore habitat for some populations – will the species begin to recover. Better conservation management of woodlands, fire prevention, the limitation of road construction, and education programmes targeted at hunters are all needed. Preserving and enhancing the Cork Oak *Quercus suber* woodlands of the Iberian Peninsula would be a valuable contribution to the conservation of eagle nest-sites – wine drinkers/importers please note. Migrant Short-toed Eagles are still shot and nests destroyed in some areas, despite legal protection in almost all European countries (Tucker & Heath 1994).

**Migration**
Short-toed Eagles are almost entirely migratory. Western populations winter in the northern tropics of Africa, in acacia and more humid savannah south of the Sahel, from Sénégambia and northern parts of Ghana, Togo and Nigeria eastwards through Chad to Sudan and Ethiopia (Snow & Perrins 1998). Each autumn, south-bound birds move through three major migration bottlenecks: the Caucasus, the Bosphorus and Gibraltar. For example, Finlayson (1992) refers to counts of 8,700 in autumn 1972 and 3,200 in autumn 1977 crossing the Strait of Gibraltar. Farther east, larger numbers of migrants are recorded, with autumn passage over Suez reaching 12,000 birds (Bijlsma 1987).

**Recent European records to the north and west of the breeding range**
We contacted the *British Birds* European Correspondents in France (Philippe J. Dubois), The Netherlands (Arnoud B. van den Berg) and Germany (Jochen Dierschke) and asked each of them whether, in their country, there was any evidence for:

1. An increase in the breeding range of Short-toed Eagle;
2. An increase in the number of passage birds outside the breeding season; and/or

---

![Image of Short-toed Eagle](image-url)
3. An increase in birds summering outside the current known breeding range.

Their responses were interesting:

**France**

In northern France, there has been no detectable increase in sightings of Short-toed Eagles, although there are regular records from Nord/Pas-de-Calais to Brittany (where there is a regular summer staging area in Monts d’Arrée). Within its breeding range in France, the species seems to be maintaining its range and numbers and it is increasing in some parts, e.g. Vaucluse, Haute-Loire. Furthermore, there has been an increase in wintering records from southern France.

**The Netherlands**

There has been an obvious increase in records of Short-toed Eagles in recent years in The Netherlands, including two instances of pairs summering. Pairs at Hoge Veluwe in 1996 and 1997, and Fochteloerveen in 2001 stayed so long, and in apparently suitable localities (with plenty of reptiles), that there were queries about possible nesting, but so far no nests have been found. Arnoud van den Berg kindly provided a list of the 12 Dutch records between 1907 and 2001, involving 14 individuals; all but three of these after 1980. In addition, one was seen at Fochteloerveen in August 2002, perhaps a returning individual of the pair seen there in 2001. Even given the rising number of observers, the increase in The Netherlands in the past two decades is clearly genuine.

**Germany**

As in The Netherlands, it is important to bear in mind the growing number of observers in recent decades; even so, numbers seen in Germany are clearly on the increase too. In the 1980s, Short-toed Eagles were less than annual in appearance, but, on average, 3-4 per year were seen during 1991-98. The majority of records are from southern Germany: Bayern (11 records during 1991-98) and Baden-Württemberg (four). From 1996 to 2002, a pair summered in the Osterholz/Niedersachsen area, and the species may breed there. In the east of the country, five records in the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern area may refer to birds wandering over from the small Polish breeding population.

In addition, in Sweden, there had been over 60 records of vagrant Short-toed Eagles up to 1999 (Brit. Birds 93: 526).

**Possible origins of the Scilly Short-toed Eagle**

It appears that those Short-toed Eagles breeding closest to Scilly may not be increasing as breeding birds, but there is a regular summer staging area in Brittany, which may have been the source of the British record. If not, the bird might have wandered west from The Netherlands or Germany, or it may have come from farther east. With Siberian and White’s Thrushes, the first of nine Radde’s Warblers to appear in 11 days on Scilly, a ‘Siberian Stonechat’ Saxicola torquatus maura on St Agnes on 7th-12th October and a Blue Rock Thrush Monticola solitarius appearing on St Mary’s on 14th October, the ‘supporting cast’ for the eagle certainly had a markedly eastern feel to it rather than being one of displaced birds from southern Europe, such as Hoopoes Upupa epops, Alpine Swifts Apus melba and Red-rumped Swallows Hirundo daurica.

The discovery of the Blue Rock Thrush is also of interest when trying to look at the possible origins of the Short-toed Eagle. The Blue Rock Thrush could not be ascribed to any particular race, but the bird occurred during an arrival of eastern rarities on the island. The first accepted British record of Blue Rock Thrush – a first-summer male at Skerryvore Lighthouse, Strathclyde, on 4th-7th June 1985 – was found dead on 8th June (Hume 1995). This bird also could not be ascribed to a particular race with certainty, but the biometrics (wing length and bill length) of the specimen appeared closest to those of birds from the Middle East, and was unlikely to have come from western Europe.

There are no hard facts which allow us to attribute the source of the Short-toed Eagle to the eastern part of the species’ range rather than the closer, more obvious origins of southern France or Spain, and, indeed, the weather data (see below) appear to suggest that an origin in western France is most likely. Nonetheless, the assemblage of eastern vagrants (i.e. east of the Mediterranean basin) on Scilly during the first two weeks of October 1999, together with the paucity of migrants from an obvious southwest European origin, does give us food for thought.

**Weather conditions**

Norman Elkins has kindly provided the following synopsis of the weather situation pre-
ceeding the Short-toed Eagle’s arrival on Scilly.

An anticyclone moved steadily southeast between 4th and 6th October 1999 to lie over southern England on 6th. Over the western English Channel, the fresh northwest airflow on 4th steadily abated to become a light southeast-erly by midday on 5th, to the west of the anticyclone. The weather was cool but sunny, with Guernsey experiencing 10.7 hours of sunshine on 6th. The anticyclone had drifted slowly south into northern France by the night of 6th-7th, maintaining the light southeasterly drift over the western Channel. Winds then veered northwest behind an eastward-moving occluding frontal system which cleared Scilly by midday on 7th. Winds then remained fresh WNW, weakening on 10th and becoming light on 11th as another anticyclone moved east towards southern England, bringing more cool, sunny weather.

Assuming that the bird arrived from the southeast, and with the limited data at my disposal, I would suggest that the nature of the air mass over the region on 6th October would have allowed some shallow convection over the sea, perhaps assisting the eagle on its crossing; it would also have been helped by the fine weather and light southeasterly wind. This is not, however, well supported by satellite pictures, which show more or less clear skies over the western Channel in the afternoon and evening of 6th, although convection is evident over northern France in the afternoon. A more detailed appraisal cannot be established without a deeper analysis. The bird’s departure appeared to have been linked to the next anticyclone and its light winds, with clear skies over the Channel on the afternoon of 11th behind a cold front.

The nature of the synoptic situation during the period does not support the arrival of birds from further east (including the Asian rarities), illustrating the difficulty in associating arrivals of single birds with the weather. I suggest that the eagle originated in western France, but why the bird flew on this unusual reversed heading so late in the season is unclear.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank everyone who helped us research this article, particularly Norman Elkins and Dave Wheeler who interpreted the weather data, and Arnoud B. van den Berg, Jochen Dierschke and Philippe J. Dubois who provided information on the status of Short-toed Eagle in Europe. Special thanks also to Ann Cleeves, Steve Holliday, Sarah Money and Kathy Shaw, and our friends on St Agnes too numerous to mention.

References


EDITORIAL COMMENT Colin Bradshaw, Chairman of the British Birds Rarities Committee commented: ‘There can have been few “firsts” for Britain that were as quick to assess from a BBRC perspective. Given the level of detail in the descriptions, together with the quality of the photographs, the decision was simple; indeed, the bird hung around long enough for several of the Committee to get it on their list! There are no obvious confusion species, although if you got the size and shape wrong initially, it might have been confused with some of the North American *Buteos*. Prolonged examination, however, as was possible with the Scilly bird, would easily rule out such a transatlantic vagrant.’

Eric Meek, Chairman of the British Ornithologists’ Union Records Committee, commented: ‘The acceptance of the Scilly Short-toed Eagle onto the British List proved to be a relatively straightforward affair. There was never any doubt about the identification, given the wealth of birding (and photographic) talent on the islands at the time, although the bravery and confidence of making that “first call” should never be underestimated!’

‘As with the recent record of Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus*, however, the issue of accepting the Scilly bird as the first for Britain revolved around its provenance. This individual could be aged as a juvenile on a variety of plumage characteristics and thus belonged to the age class most prone to vagrancy. The short duration of its stay was also characteristic of a bird temporarily lost during the course of its migration but eventually re-orientating in improving weather a few days later.

‘So far so good; but what of the possibilities of escape from captivity? Investigations revealed just 27 Short-toed Eagles in zoo collections across Europe in 1997, with none in zoos or private collections in Britain. No young birds had been bred in any of these collections in the five years prior to 1997. Although not necessarily comprehensive, these data do indicate the scarcity of this species in captivity. In addition, the Scilly bird appeared to be in pristine plumage condition and showed no abnormal feather wear which might have been indicative of recent incarceration. Furthermore, the increasing number of records in recent years from The Netherlands and from Germany, detailed above, suggest that it was just a matter of time before one strayed across the English Channel.

‘Bringing all these factors together, the BOURC members were left in no doubt that everything pointed to this being a wild bird, and Short-toed Eagle was accepted onto Category A of the British List with a unanimous decision on the first circulation of the file.’