

From the Rarities Committee's files:

The Macqueen's Bustard in Suffolk in 1962

Gerald J. Jobson and Brian J. Small

ABSTRACT The record of a 'Houbara Bustard *Chlamydotis undulata*' in Suffolk, in November/December 1962 (the only record in Britain in modern times), is discussed, and the reasons for its subsequent identification as a Macqueen's Bustard *C. macqueenii* are explained. Following a study of museum specimens, a detailed comparison of the key morphological differences among the three taxa of the 'Houbara complex' is presented.



In 1964, the late H. E. Axell wrote an account of the occurrence of the 'Houbara Bustard *Chlamydotis undulata*' in Suffolk, present from 21st November to 29th December 1962, and concluded that some of the features of the bird's appearance were contradictory and precluded identification to subspecies level (Axell 1964). In the early 1960s, subspecific identification of 'Houbara Bustard' was, not unreasonably, regarded as less critical than it is today. Not long after the 'Suffolk Houbara', however, Stead (1965) discussed the identification of the European bustards and concluded that the Suffolk bird belonged to the Asian form *macqueenii*.

Until recently, there the record stood, with no formal submission (as *macqueenii*) to BBRC and, therefore, no declaration by BOURC on its (sub-)specific identity. But, spurred on by the decision to separate the three forms of Houbara Bustard into two species, Houbara Bustard *C. undulata* and Macqueen's Bustard *C. macqueenii* (*Ibis* 144: 707-710; Sangster *et al.* 2004), BBRC re-examined the record and has now accepted it as Macqueen's Bustard *C. macqueenii*. Macqueen's Bustard has recently been

admitted onto the British List after the acceptance of an individual collected at Kirton in Lindsey, Lincolnshire, on 7th October 1847 (BOURC 2004).

The paper from the BOURC's Taxonomic Sub-committee (Sangster *et al.* 2004) concentrates on display, behavioural and genetic features of Houbara and Macqueen's Bustards, but this paper outlines those features used to assess this particular record, and which enabled its identification as Macqueen's Bustard. We also describe the circumstances of the Suffolk record, from an era in British birding which now seems so distant from the manic birding scene of today. Some additional features of Macqueen's Bustard, in relation to Houbara of both subspecies, *undulata* and *fuertaventurae*, are also reported.

The Suffolk Houbara

Bert Axell's note in *British Birds* (Axell 1964) described some of the circumstances of how this bird was discovered. The following account is compiled from GJJ's own notebook.

On 25th November 1962, GJJ had been

ringing with A. D. Rowe at Dingle Hills near Walberswick, when they were joined by Mr and Mrs F. K. Cobb, who informed them that a local gamekeeper, P. Muttitt, had reported a bustard feeding in a mustard field at Hinton, north of Westleton. They arrived to find an empty mustard crop, but on the opposite side of the road a stubble field looked hopeful, and, with the permission of the gamekeeper, they spread out to search it. From the centre of the stubble, a large bustard sprang from the feet of F. K. Cobb and flew off with strong, measured and deliberate wing-beats, the striking black-and-white wing pattern being the most conspicuous feature. Further observation showed it to be basically sandy in colour with dark spots on the mantle, dark bars across the tail and, in flight, white across the wing-coverts and a large white patch on the primaries. After a short discussion, the assembled group, including GJJ, identified it as a Houbara Bustard.

For the next five weeks, it fed in the mustard crop, sometimes crossing the road to and from the stubble field. At times, its reluctance to take flight caused it to crouch until any danger had passed, or to walk from the field rather than fly. It was also quite shy, and on one occasion it reacted to a cyclist by crouching low and withdrawing its head and neck into its shoulders, becoming remarkably inconspicuous for such a large bird. GJJ observed it eat an earthworm on one occasion and once, when mobbed by a Carrion Crow *Corvus corone*, it was seen to extend its head and neck upwards in a fashion resembling a Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*

and snapped its bill repeatedly.

Many other people saw the bustard during its stay, including H. E. Axell of course, and it became a popular attraction, with as many as a dozen cars parked along the road at one time. By the end of December, a great Arctic freeze had begun, which was to last for ten weeks: the beginning of the dreadful winter of 1962/63, which almost wiped out the British population of Dartford Warblers *Sylvia undata*. Heavy snow fell, covering the mustard crop and surrounding area completely, and the last sighting of the bustard was on 29th December 1962.

Description

Axell (1964) described the 'Suffolk Houbara' as follows:

'Head and neck: forehead sandy; crown nearly white in centre and bordered with black feathers which only just protruded beyond the curve of the head, also a few black feathers at rear of crown; above and below eye, lores, chin and throat all pale grey; back of neck pale grey, becoming almost white near base, and front of neck sandy-grey; black ruff down side of neck, beginning at rear lower edge of ear-coverts, with thin line of white in front of the middle half. The crest of black feathers was not seen raised. The black ruff down the side of the neck was more apparent from behind, except when the bird erected it in display; the long loose feathers at the base lay partly behind a Bittern-like 'sporrán' of pale brown feathers just above the upper breast. The thin white line in front of



Eric Hosking

35. Macqueen's Bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii*, Hinton, Suffolk, November/December 1962.

the black was visible only at close quarters; I did not see, nor did any other observer record, any prominent area of white in the tuft when it was displayed.

'Rest of body: mantle and scapulars pale sandy with regularly spaced slaty blotches; lower back and rump not well seen but appeared as paler area between mantle and upper tail-coverts; breast off-white; flanks and under tail-coverts whitish. The breast and part of the belly were stained with mud and frequently wet.

'Wings: coverts and inner secondaries as mantle and scapulars but less boldly marked with dark blotches; primaries and secondaries largely hidden when wings closed. In flight, the distal thirds of the outer primaries were black, while the middle parts of these feathers produced a large and prominent white patch, [which was] separated by a thin area of black from a smaller whitish patch near the bend of the wing; the inner primaries were black and the outer secondaries rather less dark, and these formed a band of blackish narrowing inwards across the outer two-thirds of the wing; whitish tips to the inner primaries and secondaries made a thin pale line along the trailing edge of the wing. The startlingly black-and-white wings opening from the sandy body as the bird took flight was reminis-

cent of a Stone Curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus*.

'Tail: pale chestnut above (darker than mantle) with widely spaced bars of dark grey and white feather-tips. The tail was very stained. The white tips were usually visible only when it was fanned during preening. At such times it could be seen that there were three full bars of dark grey widely spaced from near the tip and an apparent half-bar in the middle of the tail; this half-bar was otherwise generally hidden by the folded primaries.

'Soft parts: bill dark horn, shorter than head and not deep; iris large, bright and pale yellow; legs pale straw.'

Axell concluded that subspecific identification of the Suffolk bird was not possible. The following year, however, Stead (1965) observed that 'Having examined the large series of skins of all three subspecies of the Houbara in the British Museum (Natural History) only a week after seeing the Suffolk bird, I must beg to differ with Axell's view, as I am quite certain that this individual belonged to the Asiatic form, *macqueenii*?' Stead provided three good reasons for his diagnosis: the 'broader and coarser bands of black on the mantle of *undulata* give it an altogether darker appearance'; 'the long feathers on the fore-neck, which are grey in *macqueenii* and white in *undulata*'; and 'the black feathers on the crown of *macqueenii*, which are absent on *undulata*'.

Museum diagnosis

Following a study of specimens at the British Museum (Natural History), Tring, we discovered features of interest which had not been noted by Stead (1965) or mentioned in the original description (Axell 1964). Clear and obvious morphological differences between all three forms were found (see table 1).

Identification

Finally, and to summarise, the identification of the bustard in Suffolk as Macqueen's can be confirmed by a number of key features visible in the photographs and apparent from the description. The file has recently been



Eric Hosking

36. Macqueen's Bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii*, Hinton, Suffolk, November/December 1962.

Table 1. Morphological differences among the three forms of 'Houbara' found in the Western Palearctic: Houbara Bustard *Chlamydotis undulata* of the nominate form *undulata* and the Canary Islands' form *fuertaventurae*; and Macqueen's Bustard *C. macqueenii*. Based on a study of specimens at the British Museum (Natural History) by the authors.

	<i>macqueenii</i>	<i>undulata</i>	<i>fuertaventurae</i>
Crown	White in the centre, longer black feathers at rear	All-white central feathers	Obvious dark crown-sides bordering white central crown feathers
Neck-side tufts	Long, fine feathers on the sides of the foreneck (from just below the ear-coverts) have black bases and tips and a white band in the middle; lower neck feathers are also fine, but all-white; rear neck feathers are white – as is extension of crest	Upper foreneck feathers are denser, wider ('fuller' or 'more bushy'); lower feathers are narrower and white, some with black at the tip; thin black feathers on the rear neck	Pattern as <i>undulata</i> , but feathers slightly wider (even 'fuller' than on <i>undulata</i>) – lower feathers all-white and slightly longer than on <i>undulata</i> ; coarser vermiculations on neck-sides
Upperparts (mantle/scapulars)	Pinkish-sandy in colour – strongest on rump, uppertail-coverts and tail; very fine dark vermiculations (probably not visible in field) between obvious, contrasting dark bands across feathers – the band at each feather tip is like a forward-pointing arrowhead	Colour more creamy-sand or buff than on <i>macqueenii</i> ; cross-bands composed of heavy vermiculations and pale areas show sparse dark marks – overall effect being more even and mid-toned	Base colour less buff than on <i>undulata</i> , but overall much darker than on <i>macqueenii</i> and <i>undulata</i> , with strong, broad dark bands on individual feathers forming heavily barred upperparts
Upperwing-coverts*	On closed wing, coverts appear pale, almost silvery-white, with black arrowheads forming spotted effect; greater primary-coverts have a white base and broad black tip; median secondary-coverts have creamy white base, narrow black sub-terminal bar, and white spot at tip; greater secondary-coverts are basically black but have white bases to inner and outer webs	Plainer – no spotting – but fairly heavy vermiculations; greater primary-coverts and median secondary-coverts have rich, warm-buff bases; greater secondary-coverts are basically all black, but a pale base on inner web may be visible	Darker, with strong dark vermiculations forming more concolorous effect with mantle and scapulars; greater primary-coverts and median secondary-coverts also have richly coloured base, but with on average more black; greater secondary-coverts basically all-black
Uppertail	Tail bands are narrow, grey-black – appearing silvery at some angles	Broader, but more diffuse bands, interspersed with slightly heavier vermiculations	Obvious broad dark barring
Breast	Grey	White, but with some breast-side vermiculations	White, but with quite strong, dark, breast-side barring
Rear flanks	Barred with black	Diffuse brownish marks, probably not visible in field	Sparse, narrow barring
Undertail-coverts and vent	Appear finely peppered with dark marks and some bars	Basically white, with some very sparse bars on lateral undertail-coverts	Well-marked, with heavy barring

* It is hard to gauge from specimens what effect the pattern and colour of the upperwing-coverts have in the field, but one might suspect that *macqueenii* shows a paler upperwing panel, with *undulata* and *fuertaventurae* showing darker upperwing-coverts. All three have extensive white bases to the primaries, quite broadly tipped black (with about 200 mm of black on the outermost primary); but not as broadly as shown by Stead (1965). We suspect that the white at the base of the greater primary-coverts on *macqueenii* is visible in flight.

Eric Hosking



Eric Hosking



Eric Hosking



37-39. Macqueen's Bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii*, Hinton, Suffolk, November/December 1962.

recirculated around the BBRC and the record has been accepted, for the reasons below:

1. The bird had white central crown feathers, but an obvious black tuft at the rear of the crown. This differs significantly from the central crown of *undulata*, which is entirely white.
2. The mantle colour was sandy, a colour which is more characteristic of *macqueenii* and compares with the richer, buffer upperparts of *undulata*.

3. The mantle and scapular feathers were marked with neat and small 'V'-shaped slaty bars or (forward-pointing) chevrons, lacking any other patterning, i.e. no fine vermiculations were visible. The tertials and innermost greater coverts had several neat dark chevrons. The upperwing-coverts were even more minimally 'spotted', with patterning virtually absent on the outer coverts. On *undulata* the markings show as darker bars across the mantle and scapulars, with strong vermiculations between the bars, making it look more evenly coloured above, while *fuertaventurae* is very much more heavily barred and appears darker overall.

4. The tail pattern was typical of *macqueenii* in having only very narrow bars across it; indeed in some of the descriptions the tail is noted as unbarred. On *undulata* the bars are broader with stronger vermiculations between them and *fuertaventurae* has even broader dark bars. At least one of the black-and-white photographs by Eric Hosking shows the narrow tail barring very well.

Another difference, not noted but just visible on at least one of the black-and-white Hosking images, is that the rear flanks and undertail-coverts of *macqueenii* can show neat wavy black lines; on *undulata* these are fine vermiculations.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank David Hosking for allowing us to use several of the late Eric Hosking's black-and-white photographs.

References

- Axell, H. E., 1964. Houbara Bustard in Suffolk. *Brit. Birds* 57: 247-249.
- BOURC 2004. British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee: 30th Report. *Ibis* 146: 192-195.
- Sangster, G., 1996. Taxonomy of Houbara and Macqueen's Bustards and neglect of intraspecific diversity. *Dutch Birding* 18: 248-256.
- , Collinson, M., Helbig, A. J., Knox, A. G., & Parkin, D. T. 2004. The taxonomic status of Macqueen's Bustard. *Brit. Birds* 97: 60-67.
- Stead, P. J. 1965. Flight patterns of the European Bustards. *Brit. Birds* 58: 43-47.

Gerald J. Jobson, 51 Haugh Lane, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 1LA
 Brian J. Small, 78 Wangford Road, Reydon, Southwold, Suffolk IP18 6NX

