‘Siberian Chiffchaff’ revisited

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ABSTRACT The systematics and morphology of Common Chiffchaff Phylloscopus collybita of the Siberian subspecies tristis are much debated. Many putative tristis in Britain are distinctly pale and frequently attributed to ‘fulvescens’, a form initially described by Severtzov in 1873 from a series collected in Central Asia. Treatment of the taxonomy and appearance of ‘fulvescens’ is inconsistent. It is frequently presented as an ‘intergrade’ population resulting from unrestricted gene-flow between tristis and the North Fennoscandian and Russian race abietinus but this may not be the most appropriate interpretation. This article reviews the variable treatment of ‘fulvescens’ in the literature, its differences from abietinus and east Siberian tristis and the conflicting results of research into its taxonomic status. Based on the information presented, the provenance and appearance of the pale, ‘grey-and-white’ tristis-like chiffchaffs reported in Britain are considered.

The Common Chiffchaff Phylloscopus collybita has a broad distribution across Europe and east to Siberia, with six subspecies currently recognised by most authorities. Broadly speaking, the nominate form collybita of western Europe is replaced by abietinus in eastern Europe and by tristis in Siberia. From further south in Europe, in Turkey and in Central Asia, brevirostris, caucasicus and menzbieri have been described. The ‘chiffchaff complex’ is completed by three further closely related species of southerly distribution: Iberian Chiffchaff Ph. ibericus, Canary Islands Chiffchaff Ph. canariensis and Mountain Chiffchaff Ph. sindianus. The taxonomy and identification of the ‘chiffchaff complex’ was discussed by Clement et al. (1998).

The form tristis is frequently referred to as ‘Siberian Chiffchaff’ but, even following mitochondrial-DNA studies, its taxonomic status and whether it warrants recognition as a separate species remain unclear (Helbig et al. 1996). The taxonomy and diagnosis of ‘Siberian Chiffchaff’ have long been beset by confusion and divided opinion, and controversy still surrounds both its systematic and its morphological limits. Few reports of tristis in Britain are incontrovertible and there is perennial discussion about whether particular plumage characters or vocalisations are compatible with tristis.

The following notes provide a review of the issues, including the historical context, the conflicting results of ongoing research, and the distinguishing characters of ‘Siberian Chiffchaffs’. It must be emphasised from the start that much more research is required in the breeding areas before there can be any prospect of resolving all the issues. The objectives of this review are to provide a clearer perspective and to dispel some commonly held misconceptions. A universal consensus remains some way off.

Plumage variation in Common Chiffchaff

The races of Common Chiffchaff display varying degrees of olive and yellow in their plumage but this variation is to a large extent clinal, while there is also considerable individual variation. Thus, the appearance of the forms overlaps to a significant extent and in practice it can be very difficult, sometimes
impossible, to assign a given individual to a particular race on the basis of plumage colour.

There is a cline of decreasing colour saturation running from northern Norway eastwards across north Eurasia. A reduction in lipochrome pigment from west to east (which also affects the southern subspecies *brevirostris*, *caucasicus* and *menzbieri* to some extent) results in decreasing olive and yellow in the plumage. Williamson (1962) described *abietinus* as:

Paler and greyer, less deep olive above than the typical race; buff and yellow on the breast is reduced so that the underparts, including undertail-coverts, appear whiter.

(see Appendix 1 for a more detailed diagnosis of *abietinus* compared with *collybita*) while *tristis* has:

Upperparts brownish to greyish-brown without olive except on the edges to wing and tail feathers, wing-coverts, and usually the rump… no yellow in the supercilium, eye-ring and cheeks, this being replaced by buff… sides of breast and flanks ‘macintosh’ buff, the only yellow being at the bend of the wing and under the wing.

Note that the features listed for diagnosing *tristis* involve the distribution of olive, yellow and buff. The basic colour of the upperparts (degree of ‘greyness’ or ‘brownness’) and the overall ‘paleness’ are not part of the diagnosis.

Distinctions between *tristis* and greyer examples of *abietinus* are sometimes masked by use of the terms ‘Northern Chiffchaff’ or ‘Eastern Chiffchaff’ to embrace any individual with significantly reduced olive and yellow in the plumage and, frequently, the semblance of a wing-bar produced by diffuse paler tips (and edges) to the greater-coverts (see Dean 1985). Variation in appearance among true *tristis* is discussed below, but the plumage of typical individuals is rather similar to that of Mountain Chiffchaff although, unlike that species, it has olive fringes to the flight feathers and an olive tinge on the lower back and rump.
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At its northerly boundary, the range of *tristis* extends from the Pechora basin and the Urals eastwards beyond the Lena River and discontinuously perhaps as far as the Anadyr River (Clement *et al.* 1998; fig. 1). ‘Siberian Chiffchaffs’ are reported in Britain every autumn and winter, sometimes in numbers which are surprising for a taxon originating east of the Pechora and largely wintering in India. These British birds have appeared, in the field, to lack yellow except at the bend of the wing, while the only obvious olive has been to the fringes of the wing feathers, the tail feathers and the rump. Thus, they have appeared to possess key characters of *tristis* as described in the literature.

Yet, many ‘Siberian Chiffchaffs’ reported in Britain are described as being ‘noticeably pale’, with limited brown and a strong grey component in the upperparts, and the underparts basically whitish with little evident buff. The olive fringes to the flight feathers are frequently quite well defined, generating a clear contrast with the otherwise rather ‘colourless’ appearance. Although possessing a much stronger face-pattern, their appearance draws comparisons with either Western *Ph. bonelli* or Eastern Bonelli’s Warbler *Ph. orientalis*, rather than with Mountain Chiffchaff. Rather few are noted as more drab, brown and buff, and thus closer to the common image of ‘classic’ *tristis*.

Much discussion and controversy surround the appearance and provenance of these ‘grey-and-white’ individuals. One school of thought is that they are ‘true’ *tristis* from the paler end of the range of variation. Others suggest that such birds are ‘intergrades’ between *abietinus* and *tristis*. The term ‘fulvescens’ is frequently applied to both of these interpretations. A third opinion is that such ‘grey-and-white’ individuals are merely pale examples of *abietinus*. Clearly, the morphology and provenance of ‘fulvescens’ is central to the discussion of plumage limits in ‘Siberian Chiffchaff’.

What is ‘fulvescens’?

Although mentioned in several recent publications (e.g. Baker 1997), discussion of ‘fulvescens’ in the British literature is often rudimentary. Somewhat more extensive treatment was provided by Vaurie (1959) in *The Birds of the Palearctic Fauna*, by Williamson (1962) in his *Identification for Ringers: The Genus Phylloscopus*, by LS in his *Identification Guide to European Passerines* (4th edition, 1992), and in the paragraphs on ‘Geographical variation’ in *BWP*.
Perceptions of ‘fulvescens’ among British observers are based largely on these sources. Vaurie described ‘fulvescens’ as:

Much greyer above than abietinus, olive pigments reduced to a greenish-yellow tinge on the lower back, rump, and uppertail-coverts and wings, underparts lighter, whitish or buff.

Williamson quoted Vaurie but went on to say that birds of this description could be found at the type locality of tristis (Calcutta) and among spring migrants through Iran and the Persian Gulf, while the ‘Northern Chiffchaffs’ which occur regularly in autumn in Britain were also similar. He noted a wide variation in the colour of the upperparts and that on some individuals the underparts were ‘entirely devoid of yellow streaking’. His conclusion was that:

There is no doubt that over the wide geographical ranges of ‘fulvescens’ the species [Common Chiffchaff] is unstable as regards the tone of the upperparts and the amount of buff suffusion and yellow streaking beneath, and the name [‘fulvescens’] is best synonymized with tristis, as recommended by Ticehurst (1938).

Thus, while Vaurie described ‘fulvescens’ as relatively ‘grey and white’, Williamson acknowledged variation in the tone of the upperparts of ‘fulvescens’ and noted that some individuals showed yellow streaking below while on others this was absent. He interpreted this variation as arising from secondary intergradation between tristis and abietinus. It is important to note that both Vaurie and Williamson included in ‘fulvescens’ birds from the region from northeast Iran to southwest Transcaspia. Chiffchaffs breeding in this area are now recognised as belonging to a separate race, menzbieri. Hence, the variation in upperparts colour and yellow streaking below commented upon by Williamson was at least partly influenced by individuals now considered to be from outside the distribution of ‘fulvescens’.

A somewhat different perspective on ‘fulvescens’ is apparent in the paragraphs on ‘Geographical variation’ in BWP. Here, the plumages of tristis are portrayed in two groups. A paler, ‘fulvescens’ type is described as having (inter alia):

Upperparts brown to greyish-brown, with distinct olive tinge on rump and uppertail-coverts and sometimes slightly on mantle; underparts whitish, washed buff; tail-feathers, flight-feathers and tertials brown, outer edges olive-green.
A second type, regarded as the ‘classic’ or ‘typical’ *tristis*, is described thus:

Rather darker brown with no or only very slight olive tinge on mantle, rump and uppertail-coverts; underparts with more distinct buff suffusion, appearing less white; edges to tail- and wing-feathers, tertials, and bastard wing more brownish, less greenish.

In this treatment, there is no mention of ‘extra- neous’ yellow (i.e. yellow away from the bend of the wing and the underwing). Rather, it suggests a darker and browner ‘classic’ form of *tristis*, more intensely buff on the breast and flanks, and a rather paler and greyer *fulvescens* form, with brighter olive fringes to feathers of the tail and wings and somewhat whiter on the underparts. While acknowledging that considerable taxonomic confusion exists (see below), both Williamson and BWP advocated that *fulvescens* be included within *tristis*.

**The original designation of *fulvescens***

The form *fulvescens* was first described by Severtzov in 1873, based on a ‘type series’ of over 100 migrants taken ‘in Turkestan’. Thus, it was not described from birds on the breeding grounds, which Severtzov supposed to be western Siberia (although, rather confusingly, he adds ‘possibly near Irkutsk’, a locality which is hardly in western Siberia). We have not had the opportunity to examine the type series and it is a matter of assumption that the ‘type series’ actually consists of a single subspecies (see later comments on a ‘variant’ portrayed within the ‘type description’). Birds breeding from the Urals to the Yenisey are now generally equated with *fulvescens*.

There appear to be few, if any, detailed accounts in English of Severtzov’s original description. Clearly, the original description based on the ‘type series’ is important in establishing the correct use of the name *fulvescens* and its implications in terms of appearance. Severtzov’s description (kindly provided and translated by Dr Vladimir Loskot, Curator of the Ornithological Department, Zoological Institute, Russian Academy of Sciences, St Petersburg) was as follows:

*Ficedula (Phyllopheuste) fulvescens*, nob. – (Ph. *tristis* Gould). Uppertours, from forehead to uppertail-coverts and small wing-coverts rusty-grey with olive tint, olive-brown in autumn; supercilium and underparts rather pale rufous-yellowish, brighter in autumn; checks not pure rusty; wings and tail feathers blackish, with olive fringes which, on coverts, cover blackish middle of feathers; small underwing-coverts sulphur yellow; first primary twice as long as its coverts; 3=4=5>6>7>2>8. Male and female do not differ from each other; in juvenile birds, differing in general only in looser texture of feathers, sometimes unclear longitudinal stripes of pale sulphur-yellow colour are present on the breast; in others, the breast stripes are similar but greyish (var. *naevia*), and then all the plumage is more greyish than usual. Bill and legs black; bill is relatively small even for a leaf warbler, and claws are large, especially on the hind and mid toes.

In comparing the basic description with modern interpretations of *tristis*, *fulvescens* would appear to have more extensive olive in the upperparts and wing feathers and the presence of yellow in the supercilium and on the underparts. These features would today be regarded by many as indicating ‘intergrade’ characters. Overall, there is little in the basic description to indicate a match with the ‘pale-and-grey’ individuals reported in Britain. A variant ‘*naevia*’ in Severtzov’s diagnosis is described as lacking yellow streaking on the breast, at least in juvenile plumage, and being greyer overall. This perhaps comes closer. However, the location of the type specimen of *naevia* is unknown (Vladimir Loskot in litt.), so its precise characters cannot be confirmed.

**Variation and plumage limits in abietinus and tristis**

Examination of skins confirms that birds from the Urals and the Ob basin are often slightly different from more easterly *tristis*, being slightly yellow beneath, with thin yellow streaks on the lower throat, and a faint yellow tinge on the fore-supercilium and/or eye-ring. Such yellow tinges are absent on other birds in this area, and on all birds breeding farther east in Siberia. Such individuals with limited yellow have been equated with the form *fulvescens*, notwithstanding the inconsistent descriptions in the literature (see above). Following this convention, the term *fulvescens* is used hereafter to signify the yellow-streaked birds breeding in the region from the Urals to the Yenisey.

From specimens, no consistent difference is evident between birds breeding in western and in eastern Siberia in the general hue of the upperparts (‘greyness’), though there is a slight degree of individual variation and also a sugges-
tion that birds in fresh plumage
and in winter are on average a little
paler and greyer than birds in
summer. Among the specimens
available at the Natural History
Museum (NHM), Tring, it is not
possible to detect a grouping of
individuals from one part of the
range of *tristis* (*sensu lato*) that is
conspicuously ‘greyer and whiter’
than the remainder, and similar
conclusions have been drawn
when visiting other large museum
collections.

It is perhaps insufficiently
appreciated in Britain how signifi-
cant may be the reduction in olive
and yellow in the least colourful
*abietinus*. At an intensive ringing
site in southern Sweden, all *abiet-
inus* trapped have displayed at least
some yellow streaking below,
yellow on the upper eye-ring, and
a tinge of olive in the upperparts
(Bo Petersson *in litt.*). On most
individuals these colours remain
evident in the field but extreme
eamples (probably restricted to
the east of the range of *abietinus*)
reportedly lack these hues almost
entirely, apart from olive fringes to
the wings, tail and rump. The col-
lection of specimens at Ams-
terdam includes examples of such
individuals from the lower Volga
region of European Russia (C. S.
Roselaar *in litt.*).

Extreme examples of *abietinus*
seemingly display no more yellow
– indeed, conceivably less – than
some examples of ‘fulvescens’. It
follows that differences between
*tristis* (including ‘fulvescens’) and
such examples of *abietinus* can be
rather subtle. In a working memo
for a planned fifth edition of his
Identification Guide to European
Passerines (Svensson in prep.), LS
refined the criteria for diagnosing
*tristis* thus:

1. whole supercilium (including eye-
ring) buff-white or pale ochrous-
buff, without any pure yellow;
2. underparts, including vent and

238. Two specimens of Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita tristis* (*‘Siberian Chiffchaff’*), both from Krasnoyarsk, Siberia; upper: May, lower: September. Apart from the effects of wear and bleaching, there is little seasonal variation in the plumage of ‘true’ *tristis*; some autumn and winter individuals are arguably a little brighter and paler but this is marginal and largely masked by individual variation.

239. Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita tristis* (*‘Siberian Chiffchaff’*), India, January. Some specimens collected in the winter quarters are slightly paler and greyer than *tristis* collected in the breeding season in Siberia. Note, however, that the ‘provenance’ of wintering birds is not certain.

240. Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita abietinus*, Stockholm, Sweden, September. Note the much greyer and ‘colourless’ appearance of this autumn individual compared with that of the fresh spring bird in plate 234. Olive and yellow streaking is still present but is very subdued.
The plumage limits of *Tristis* is mean, whereas the ear-coverts of buff-brown or even rufous-tinged (sometimes *Tristis* concerns the ear-coverts, which are frequently olive.

An additional but variably evident feature of classic *Tristis* concerns the ear-coverts, which are frequently buff-brown or even rufous-tinged (sometimes described as ‘rusty’), whereas the ear-coverts of *Abietinus* are generally paler and mottled with buff and olive.

These guidelines are sometimes misunderstood in terms of the presence or absence of yellow. The guidelines are intended to include only incontrovertible *Tristis* and to avoid the inclusion of *Abietinus* with particularly restricted yellow. They are not designed to define the full plumage limits of *Tristis*. Traces of yellow may be, in fact, a feature of a minority of genuine *Tristis* and such individuals will be excluded by the guidelines. However, until the discrimination between such birds and *Abietinus* with least yellow is better understood, this approach is considered preferable. It should be noted that the German handbook (Glutz von Blotzheim & Bauer 1991) misunderstood the similar guidelines in the third edition of Identification Guide to European Passerines (Svensson 1984a), and interpreted them to mean that the presence of traces of yellow below ruled out *Tristis* entirely, but this was never intended. It is only east of the Yenisey that apparently all Chiffchaffs lack any yellow below, away from the underwing.

The ‘yellow-tinged’ Chiffchaffs from the Urals and the Ob basin

The presence of extraneous yellow in Chiffchaffs from the Urals and Ob basin is popularly interpreted as ‘intergradation’, resulting from unrestricted gene-flow between *Abietinus* and *Tristis* (a so-called ‘hybrid swarm’). However, this interpretation is not universally accepted. Alternative explanations for traces of yellow include the hypothesis that they are a feature of a western population of *Tristis* (*‘Fulvescens’*), in which gene-flow with *Abietinus* is evident but already restricted by a degree of assortive mating (see below). Various studies have been made of *Tristis* and *‘Fulvescens’*, while others are still in progress, primarily using vocalisations as an indicator of ‘subspecies integrity’ and reproductive isolation.

**Vocalisations as taxonomic indicators**

Vocalisations are a key means of separating taxa and are important in establishing reproductive barriers. The songs of *Collybita* and *Abietinus* are similar, the familiar and eponymous ‘chiff-chaff chiff-chaff chaff-chaff chiff-chaff’; rather dry, rhythmic and repetitive in character and sometimes preceded by a low, slightly churred ‘tret’, especially on the breeding territory. The song of *Tristis* is quite different, being much more varied and rising and falling in pitch. There is a suggestion of the timbre of *Collybita* in some notes but each is enhanced with a terminal flourish and each series of notes has much greater fluidity. The notes tend to cascade into one another and the delivery (though not the timbre of the notes) can recall the ‘cadence’ of the song of Willow Warbler *Ph. trochilus*. There is also — rather surprisingly — a similarity to the slightly jerky lilt of the song of Greenish Warbler *Ph. trochiloides*, though the song of that species will be less familiar to many British observers.

Listening to recordings of the song (e.g. Svensson 1984b, Mild 1987) is far better than any transcription but, to British ears, the transcription proffered by Heard (1989) is as good as any: ‘chivy-chooee chivy-chooee djiff’. Generally, however, there are several more ‘chivy-chooee’ components in each series.

**Conflicting research findings**

A number of bio-acoustical studies have investigated the songs of *Abietinus*, *Tristis* and *‘Fulvescens’*. On the basis of detailed experiments, Martens & Meincke (1989) concluded that,
across the whole range occupied by tristis and ‘fulvescens’, song was consistent and lacked components characteristic of abietinus. They recorded songs from Jekaterinburg to Irkutsk and used these in ‘playback’ experiments. This demonstrated limited reaction by each form to the other’s song, supporting the view that assortive mating might be underway and that tristis (including similarly singing ‘fulvescens’) might already be best treated as a separate species in relation to neighbouring abietinus. They concluded that there was no evidence for a zone of extensive hybridisation nor for maintaining the distinction of ‘fulvescens’ from tristis.

Following research in the area of overlap between abietinus and tristis, Russian ornithologists have resurrected the idea that ‘fulvescens’ results from extensive intergradation (‘hybridisation’) between these two races (Marova & Leonovich 1993). Their research reported a wide area of overlap in the breeding areas of abietinus and tristis, from the Kanin Peninsula to the southern Urals and Bashkiriia. ‘Mixed’ songs were recorded in various parts of this zone of sympathy. Together with the existence of specimens deemed to show ‘hybrid’ characters, the conclusion of Marova & Leonovich was that extensive ‘hybridisation’ occurs across the whole area of sympatry.

The different conclusions of Martens & Meincke were considered invalid by Marova & Leonovich, as the former based their experiments on the whole range of tristis rather than on the zone of sympathy. Thus, ‘the recordings used for analysis were taken considerably to the east of the distribution of fulvescens’ (Irina Marova-Kleinbub in litt.). In fact, Martens & Meincke used the Yenisey as a dividing line between ‘fulvescens’ and tristis, and compared recordings from both sides of the divide, so this objection is probably unfounded.

More recently, Antero Lindholm has made a preliminary study of the vocalisations of birds from the region of Syktyvkar, Komi (c. 62°N 51°E; Fig. 1). This is research ‘in progress’ but appears to indicate that so-called intermediate song occurs in a region on the western fringes of the known range of ‘fulvescens’, and side by side with abietinus song. The appearance and song of most ‘intermediate singers’ are tristis-like but a variable amount of abietinus-like elements are present in the song (Antero Lindholm in litt.). At this stage, the results are deemed to support the idea that ‘fulvescens’ is a ‘hybrid’ population, as advocated by Marova & Leonovich. However, Lindholm does not as yet draw any firm conclusions, as these findings need to be confirmed on a larger sample, and a detailed comparison with eastern tristis is yet to be carried out. Furthermore, a certain amount of ‘mixed’ singing can result from one species adopting part of the song of another species which is present at high density in its natal area, and is not necessarily proof of hybridisation (Clement et al. 1998).

**An alternative scenario**

LS has suggested that the situation with tristis and abietinus may be similar to that with collybita and ibericus. It is now known that collybita and ibericus still hybridise in the contact zone in southwest France and northern Spain and that mixed singers are produced (see above for an outline of vocalisation studies). However, hybrids are less frequent than would be expected if the two interbred freely and unhindered, and they are not as successful as pure offspring (Salomon et al. 1997). A similar situation might exist in the contact zone between tristis and abietinus.

In a preliminary text for the forthcoming Geographical Variation and Distribution of Palearctic Birds (Roselaar & Shirihai in prep.), Kees Roselaar has independently suggested a similar hypothesis:

In the west of the range, from the Severnaya Dvina and the Pechora basins east to the Urals, [tristis] overlaps with Ph. collybita abietinus. In this overlap zone, the situation is apparently comparable with that of Ph. ibericus and Ph. c. collybita in N Spain and SW France: locally, both taxa overlap without apparent interbreeding (e.g. in the southern Urals, where both are common), but elsewhere birds with mixed song or mixed plumage characters occur (Marova & Leonovich 1993). These latter birds are found mainly at the extreme western end of the range of tristis, where mixing apparently occurs because favoured partners are scarce or unavailable (mixed song may also be due to the fact that pure tristis adopts part of the song of the more common abietinus). Thus, mating in the overlap area is likely to be assortive, as in the ibericus/collybita case, preventing extensive gene-flow between both, a reason to consider tristis to be a separate species, an action supported by the fair difference in mitochondrial DNA between both (see Helbig et al. 1996).

If vocalisations are already establishing barriers to interbreeding between abietinus and...
westerly tristis, then tristis might be better treated as a separate species. In the eventuality that tristis were accorded species status, then it might also be preferable to formally recognise the extreme end of its morphological variation, represented by fulvescens. It is interesting to note at this point that some Russian authors who have recognised fulvescens as a valid race have further considered that chaffchaffs occupying the Southern Urals result from ‘hybridisation’ between fulvescens and abietinus (Buturlin & Dementiev 1937, per Irina Marov-Kleinbub). Confirmation of the true taxonomic relationships throughout this region must await more extensive studies, using trapping, DNA and bioacoustic ‘play-back’ techniques. Much clarification would surely result from a programme to trap singing or calling birds and, from known vocalisation, build up a knowledge of morphology and DNA.

Calls

The typical call of collybita and western abietinus is a plaintive, soft, modulated and ascending ‘hoeeet’ or ‘hûit’. It has a discernibly disyllabic structure, though less distinctly so than the comparable call of Willow Warbler. In general, the emphasis lies on the second syllable in Common Chiffchaff, but more evenly on both in Willow Warbler.

The principal call associated with tristis is a nearly monosyllabic note, often rendered as ‘peet’ or similar in English texts but perhaps more accurately transcribed as ‘iiihp’ (Jännes 2002). It is clearly higher-pitched than the typical call of collybita, is rather shrill (‘squeaky’) and just perceptibly descending towards the end. It is often likened to the distress call of a young chicken, or to the call of Coal Tit Parus ater. The call of fulvescens-type birds is reported to be very similar to, if not identical with, the typical call of tristis.

From late summer in Britain, a rather shriller and clipped ‘sweeu’ is uttered by collybita (particularly, if not exclusively, by first-autumn birds). A variant call reported from autumn migrants in western Europe is similarly described, as ‘a slightly higher-pitched, faster, and more compressed version of the normal call (‘chreep’, ‘treeu’); but has been attributed to eastern populations of abietinus (Jännes 2002). There is some evidence that migrant and wintering populations, assumed to be from different parts of the breeding range, utter slightly different calls (Copete & Armada 2004). All these variants still lack the shrilly monosyllabic quality of the classic tristis call but can be confused when heard in isolation or by those not fully familiar with the ‘classic’ call.

The characteristic note is a good indicator of tristis and some observers believe that tristis never utters calls significantly different from this. Variant calls are sometimes ascribed to tristis, as in BWP (‘Voice’, section 4a) and in Clement et al. (1998), for example. However, a great deal of ambiguity is evident in the descriptions of ‘alternative’ calls, which no doubt arises as much from difficulties of transcription as from true variation in the calls. Furthermore, it is likely that some variant calls were reported from individuals whose racial identification was questionable.

Until an unequivocal exposition of variant calls is forthcoming, the identity of any tristis-like individual which is not heard to utter the ‘classic’ call should be regarded as suspect.

What are the ‘grey-and-white’ tristis-like chaffchaffs reported in Britain?

It is clear from the preceding account that much research remains to be done before a clear picture emerges of morphological, vocal and taxonomic limits in chaffchaffs east of the Pechora basin. On current information, it is not possible to equate a distinctively pale, ‘grey-and-white’ plumage with fulvescens. Both the type description and the specimens from the designated breeding area indicate that this form is distinguished from ‘classic’ tristis primarily by the presence of limited yellow streaking on the underparts, the eye-ring and the supercilium. Although some features of ‘grey-and-white’ chaffchaffs appear intermediate between those of abietinus and tristis, and may result from intergradation between these two subspecies, the appearance of these birds is not typical of fulvescens.

With regard to reports of ‘tristis-like’ chaffchaffs in Britain, the following three factors are all likely to be involved in the high incidence of distinctively ‘grey-and-white’ individuals:

1) ‘Paler and greyer’ individuals include ‘intergrades’ between abietinus and tristis.

2) Some ‘paler and greyer’ individuals are pale extremes of abietinus.

3) There is a range of variation in the colour of upperparts and underparts in all races of
chiffchaff, and some perceived ‘paler and greyer’ individuals fall within this range of variation and do not represent a ‘discontinuity’ in appearance (i.e. there is a certain amount of ‘wishful grouping’). Additionally, it is conceivable that:

(4) A paler and greyer type comes from a little-studied part of the tristis range, and is poorly documented in the literature and under-represented in collections. It is perhaps worth recalling here that Severtzov’s designation of ‘fulvescens’ included a variant ‘naevia’ which purportedly lacked yellow and was greyer overall.

The approach to identification must address the full suite of plumage and vocal characteristics, aided at a minimum by high-quality photographs and preferably by trapping (the latter also providing subsidiary if not conclusive biometric data). The criteria as prescribed in the forthcoming edition of Identification Guide to European Passerines (Svensson in prep.), and transcribed above, remain the most reliable guide to segregating certain tristis, though some genuine tristis may be excluded in the process. Unless and until clarification of variant calls is forthcoming, any tristis-like individual that does not utter the classic, shrill, almost monosyllabic ‘iiihp’ should be regarded as questionable. The identity of some individuals will remain speculative; knowledge of the morphology (and taxonomy) of chiffchaffs from European Russia east to the Yenisey is far from complete.

Case studies

Examples of ‘grey-and-white’ tristis-like chiffchaffs were recorded in England at Upton-on-Severn, Worcestershire, and at Coleshill, Warwickshire, during winter 2004/05. Both frequented the vicinity of sewage works, an increasingly common habitat for reports of ‘Siberian Chiffchaffs’. The Worcestershire bird was trapped and examined in the hand. Good photographs were obtained of both, and these provide useful illustration of some of the points made above. Although both were rather ‘grey and white’ the two individuals were somewhat different in appearance in important characters.

The Upton-on-Severn bird

This individual was trapped in December 2004 and found to possess a good suite of characters for tristis. Although quite ‘grey and white’, it was less pale than the Warwickshire bird and also displayed evident, if limited, buff on the breast and flanks (plates 241 & 242).

In plate 241, note the obvious deep buff on the ear-coverts, upper eye-ring and on the supercilium. There is no yellow away from the bend of the wing, while olive is absent or very limited on the crown and mantle. These are all good indicators of tristis. There is olive streaking in the scapulars, while the fringes to the flight feathers are prominent and rather yellowish-olive, more so than is typical in ‘classic’ tristis. In plate 242, note the buff wash to the sides of the throat and on the flanks; this is fairly restricted, however, and the centre of the throat is much whiter. It is unlikely, however, that abietinus would ever show no yellow at all away from the underwing in combination with a distinct buff suffusion to the supercilium and underparts.

The general hue of the upperparts is quite grey, enhancing the contrast of the olive fringes in the plumage. In these respects it differs quite significantly from classic tristis, which has much more saturated brown or grey-brown upper-parts, more prominent buff on the cheeks and throat, and less bright olive fringes, producing a much more subdued appearance overall. The bill of the Upton-on-Severn individual also appears rather more robust than is typical of ‘classic’ tristis, which has a relatively small, dark bill. Compare this individual with the tristis in plates 235 & 237 and the abietinus in plate 240.

The Upton-on-Severn individual may well have originated from the region of sympathy and ‘intergrading’ of tristis and abietinus. However,
it is greyer than is typical of ‘fulvescens’ and lacks the yellow streaking which characterises that form. It is tempting to speculate that its characters recall those which Severtzov ascribed to the variant ‘naevia’ but, unfortunately, precise data on the characters and provenance of ‘naevia’ are lacking. The call was described as ‘like that of tristis’. Supplied descriptions and transcriptions included ‘monosyllabic “seee”, not dissimilar to call of Bullfinch Pyrrhula pyrrhula, but higher-pitched and weaker in tone’ but also ‘almost disyllabic’ and ‘pseeoo’. The last at least suggests one of the supposed ‘variant’ calls of tristis or the call ascribed to eastern abietinus rather than the virtually monosyllabic and shrill ‘peet’ or ‘iiihp’ of classic tristis (see above). A rather similar-looking individual, judging from a published photograph, was observed in Lincolnshire during 11th–15th March 1989 (Catley 2000). That bird was heard singing and calling, and the description of its vocalisations shows clear affinities with tristis.

The Coleshill bird

The Coleshill bird was especially pale, with markedly grey-looking upperparts and ‘clean’ whitish underparts (plate 243). Several observers commented that its general hues recalled a Bonelli’s warbler while, at a distance when flycatching, the whiteness of the underparts even prompted comparisons with Spotted Flycatcher Muscicapa striata. This individual was a prime example of the divergence in opinion over tristis characteristics, with views strongly divided between those who regarded it as a ‘good tristis’ and those who deemed it to be an ‘intergrade’ or a pale abietinus.

Several early and more distant photographs suggested a tinge of yellow on the fore-supercilium and this encouraged speculation that the bird was an ‘intergrade’. It was clear, however, that many such photographs were not ‘colour neutral’. In some, although admirably sharp, the bird looked too brown above and the olive fringes to the flight feathers, quite clear in the field, were suppressed.

Thanks to the persistence of one or two photographers, photographs of high fidelity were eventually obtained. The colour balance of these pictures (reproduced here) is clearly accurate, matching impressions in the field and also spanning the full range of hues through white, buff, yellow and olive. These photographs demonstrate that the supercilium was in fact light buff above the lores (and not yellow). It is clear from this experience that ‘buff’ may be translated into a ‘tinge of yellow’ in digital photographs, particularly if the image size is rather small.

At face value, there are several characters visible in the photograph of the Coleshill bird which suggest tristis. Olive is confined to the scapulars, back, rump and edges to the flight feathers. There is no olive on the crown or upper part of the mantle. The only yellow is at the bend of the wing and a limited amount on the underwing coverts (plate 244). All these features are good tristis characters. Although buff is present in the
supercilium, it is confined to the front of the eye. To the rear of the eye the supercilium is white and, together with the ear-coverts, is less extensively buff than in ‘classic’ *tristis*. The fringes of the flight feathers are again a little more yellowish-olive than is typical in *tristis*. The bare parts are also an area of concern. The cutting edges to the bill are arguably rather extensively pale for *tristis*. More importantly, the legs and especially the upper surface of the feet are less intensely black than on the majority of ‘classic’ *tristis*.

The most pronounced features of this individual were its paleness and generally grey-and-white appearance. Above all else, its paleness and white underparts led many observers to conclude that ‘it must be something different’. This was certainly an extremely pale chiffchaff but such a degree of paleness is not characteristic of *tristis*, certainly not ‘classic’ individuals from east of the Yenisey. There is none of the saturated colour of the upperparts which characterises ‘classic’ *tristis*, nor the buff wash on the breast and flanks. Various descriptions of its call were forthcoming but, again, these did not include the almost monosyllabic ‘peet’ or ‘iiihp’ of classic *tristis* and at least some observers reported a clearly disyllabic call which they regarded as ‘not that different from *collybita*’.

While the absence of yellow (apart from on the underwing) and the lack of olive in the crown and upper mantle suggest *tristis* introgression, the appearance of this individual does not correspond with ‘fulvescens’ as defined and discussed above. Even among the experts consulted there was no unanimity of opinion on the identity of this individual. It remains a possibility that individuals like this are *abietinus* from the easternmost part of the range. The bird’s appearance cannot be matched by specimens in the collection at NHM, Tring (pers. obs.), but the specimen collection at Amsterdam apparently includes examples of *abietinus* from European Russia (south Volga) which are not dissimilar to the Warwickshire individual (C. S. Roselaar *in litt.*).

One final item of interest is that a number of *tristis* and *tristis*-like individuals in Britain have been reported as calling relatively infrequently compared with *collybita* and *abietinus* associating with them. This infrequent calling was noted for both the Worcestershire bird and the Warwickshire individual.

**Summary**

- Considerable confusion surrounds the systematic and morphological limits of Common Chiffchaff of the Siberian subspecies *tristis*.
- The plumage of typical *tristis* from east of the Yenisey is predominantly brown or greyish-brown on the upperparts; the underparts are suffused with buff, particularly across the breast and lower throat; and yellow is lacking

[244. Purported ‘Siberian Chiffchaff’ *Phylloscopus collybita tristis*, Warwickshire, February 2005.]

in the plumage, apart from at the bend of the wing and on the underwing-coverts. It is rather similar to Mountain Chiffchaff although, unlike that species, it has olive fringes to the flight feathers and an olive tinge on the lower back and rump.

- In contrast, many tristis-like individuals reported in Britain are decidedly pale and grey, often with conspicuously white underparts. Such individuals are frequently attributed to the form ‘fulvescens’, which is generally regarded as a westerly component of tristis, breeding between the Pechora basin and the Yenisey.

- The form ‘fulvescens’ was originally described by Severtzov in 1873, from a series of migrants taken in Central Asia. Both the basic description from the ‘type series’ and the more recent examinations of specimens from western Siberia indicate that ‘fulvescens’ is not, however, noticeably greyer or whiter than more easterly tristis. Rather, it differs primarily in the presence of limited yellow streaking at the sides of the breast, in the supercilium and on the upper part of the eye-ring. This additional yellow has been interpreted by some researchers as indicative of intergradation between tristis and abietinus.

- Research within the breeding range has produced conflicting conclusions about the status of ‘fulvescens’. Opinion remains divided as to whether ‘fulvescens’ results from widespread and unhindered interbreeding between tristis and abietinus in a zone of sympathy (a ‘hybrid swarm’) or whether it is simply a westerly component of tristis.

- An alternative scenario is that limited interbreeding occurs between tristis and abietinus but that reproductive barriers are already developing, based primarily on vocal differences, and that breeding is to some extent assortive. Under this scenario, tristis may be better treated as a separate species and ‘fulvescens’ perhaps should be regarded as a subspecies of tristis.

- From specimens, it is not possible to detect a grouping of individuals from one part of the range of tristis (including ‘fulvescens’) which is conspicuously ‘greyer and whiter’ than the remainder.

- Although some ‘grey-and-white’ chiffchaffs may involve intergrades, their appearance does not match typical ‘fulvescens’. A variant ‘naevia’ included by Severtzov in the ‘type description’ was noted as lacking yellow, at least in juvenile plumage, and being greyer overall. However, the location of the type specimen of ‘naevia’ is currently unknown, so its precise characters are uncertain.

- Other reports of ‘grey-and-white’ chiffchaffs almost certainly include pale extremes of abietinus from European Russia, which may be surprisingly deficient in both olive and yellow. It is also conceivable that a paler and greyer type exists in a little-studied part of the tristis range, and is poorly documented in the literature and little represented in collections. Finally, the extent of individual variation among the westerly races of chiffchaff must not be underestimated.

- The full plumage limits of tristis and abietinus, and the extent of their overlap, remain to be determined. The most reliable criteria for segregating certain tristis are presented above (and will be published in the forthcoming edition of Identification Guide to European Passerines), although they may exclude some genuine tristis. Plumage and biometric criteria should be supported by precise interpretation of vocalisations.

Acknowledgments

For clarification of research findings within the breeding range of ‘fulvescens’ we are indebted to Dr Irina Marovakleinbub. Comments on ‘fulvescens’ and a translation of Severtzov’s type description were kindly provided by Dr Vladimir Loskot. Further comments on the type description were offered by Dr Pavel Tomkovich, Antero Lindholm supplied details of his vocalisation studies from the region of Komi, while Kees Roselaar provided information on both tristis and abietinus, and kindly consented to the inclusion of an extract from his forthcoming book, written with Hadoram Shirihai. For useful discussion of tristis and tristis-like chiffchaffs in general, or the Warwickshire and Worcestershire individuals in particular, we are grateful to Lee Evans, Martin Garner, P. A. Lassey, Killian Mullarney, Andrew Warr and S. M. Whitehouse. Bo Petersson kindly commented upon the plumage variation of abietinus trapped in southern Sweden. Excellent photographs of the Warwickshire and Worcestershire chiffchaffs featured here were provided by John Harris, Brian McGeeough, Jim Milne, Steve Seal and Andrew Warr: Although only a few of the images could be published, all the photographs provided invaluable reference material. Mark Adams kindly arranged access to the skin collection at NHM, Tring, and provided valuable assistance on site. Help with contacts and references was provided by Per Alström, Martin Collinson and George Sangster. Finally, for assistance in a variety of ways, we thank Steve Cawthray, Dave Clifton and John Galletly.

References


Appendix 1: Identification of Phylloscopus collybita abietinus (Nilsson 1819)

Taken from Svensson (in prep.). Ssp. collybita and abietinus are extremely similar. When long and comparable series (same season, similar wear, etc.) are examined, the following characteristics emerge (all measurements in mm unless stated, primaries numbered ascendantly):

(1) Ssp. abietinus is slightly larger; wing-length on skins up to 68 mm, whereas collybita has a maximum of 63 mm. In more detail:

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<table>
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<tr>
<td>abietinus</td>
<td>59.5–68</td>
<td>53.77, n 35; 57–64, m 60.08, n 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collybita</td>
<td>55.5–63</td>
<td>56.08, n 77; 52.5–60, m 55.87, n 43</td>
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</table>

For live birds, an additional 1 mm to all measurements should be allowed.

(2) Ssp. abietinus has, on average, subtly paler upperparts, which are a little purer greyish-green; whereas collybita is a trifle darker and slightly tinged brown, primarily on mantle and crown. With increasing wear in late May, some collybita attain a darker, more brown-grey crown than the more greenish mantle, producing a contrast which is rarely as pronounced on abietinus (usually no more than a slight suggestion). The darker crown in (some) collybita is partly due to darker feather-bases being exposed (perhaps due to somewhat earlier and heavier wear), but also to a slightly darker ground colour.

(3) The tarsi in abietinus are, on average, slightly darker than in collybita, blackish-brown (sometimes described as ‘dark flesh’) rather than medium to dark brown.

(4) The distance between first and second primaries (P1 < P2), is on average slightly shorter in collybita than in abietinus: in collybita 19–26, m 23.13, n 118, in abietinus 22.5–29.5, m 25.88, n 51.

(5) The distances between tip of wing (P4) and outermost secondary (S1), tenth primary (P10), and tip of primary-coverts (PC) differ as follows: P4 > S1 in abietinus 11.5–15, in collybita 9–12.5; P4 > P10 in abietinus 10–13, in collybita 8.5–11; P4 > PC in abietinus 35–41, in collybita 31–39.
(6) Ssp. *collybita* has marginally longer bill (to skull) but shorter wing. The ratios between these (Bs/W x 100) are as follows: *abietinus* 16.4-19.1 (n 45), although some females with wing shorter than 60 mm maybe up to 19.7 (n 3); *collybita* 17.9-22.4 (n 111).

(7) By using a more elaborate formula, more birds can be separated:
\[
(P4 > P10) + (P4 > SI) + (P2 > PI) - \text{tarsus} - (\text{Bs/W} \times 100) = \text{MCV}
\]

If MCV (Multiple Character Value) is greater than 10.0, the bird is most likely an *abietinus*, if less than 10.0 it is probably a *collybita*. The variation in the two taxa is 8.0-19.9 in *abietinus*, and 10.7 or less in *collybita* (including negative values). Only 12 out of 125 (9.6%) fell in the overlap zone 8.0-10.7. Furthermore, 85% of all *abietinus* (n 40) had a value greater than 10.0, 93% of all *collybita* (n 85) had a value lower than 10.0. The MCV is partly a function of an average slight difference in wing formula, *abietinus* having a slightly more pointed wing than *collybita* (for instance, male *abietinus* much more often having P2 = 6/7 than male *collybita*). There is, however, much overlap and little guidance from the position of P2 alone.

The above guidelines are aimed primarily at ringers and museum researchers, but should be of some use in the field. Apart from those listed, subtle and average differences exist in structure and proportions, e.g. *collybita* often appears larger-headed and/or shorter-necked, and *abietinus* somewhat more elongated and long-winged. However, these characters are more variable and ‘personal’ and should be applied with caution; they also depend significantly on the general size of each bird.

Descriptions often mention that *abietinus* has, on average, whiter underparts than those of *collybita*. It is true that an average difference exists, but the underparts coloration is more variable than often perceived, with near-total overlap between the two taxa when the very pale birds in the extreme northeast of the range are excluded. For these pale birds, though, the near-total lack of yellow beneath (except on the underwing) becomes an additional character for *abietinus* as opposed to *collybita*.