

Time to get rid of the Moustache:

a review of British records of Moustached Warbler

Tim Melling



The Cambridgeshire warblers

Alan Harris

ABSTRACT This paper presents a recent review of one of the most extraordinary 'firsts' for Britain, that of Moustached Warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon*. Once an old specimen record from 1915 was dismissed as being part of the 'Hastings Rarities' affair, the record of a breeding pair in Cambridgeshire in 1946 became the first for Britain, and this record has stood as such for over 30 years. The Cambridgeshire birds were seen by many of the leading British ornithologists of the day, yet the publication of original field sketches (in *British Birds* in 2000) prompted fresh doubts about the identification. All material relating to the record was reviewed thoroughly in 2005, and BOURC members agreed unanimously that it was no longer acceptable as a first for Britain. Subsequently, a review of the one remaining British record, a bird trapped at Wendover, Buckinghamshire, in July 1965, showed that the evidence in support of this record was also not sufficient for it to stand as a first for Britain. Consequently, Moustached Warbler has now been removed from the British List.

I can vividly remember buying a copy of *Birds New to Britain and Ireland* (Sharrock & Grant 1982), in the year it was published. The very first account in this mouthwatering book was that of the breeding Moustached Warblers *Acrocephalus melanopogon* in Cambridgeshire, in 1946. Although this seemed an unlikely record, the list of observers read like a 'Who's Who' of British ornithology of the time, and the write-up seemed thorough and plausible. The final editorial comment gave a ringing endorsement by stating 'Despite the eminence of the observers involved, this extraordinary record of breeding seems doomed to be disbelieved by those who have not examined the evidence, but is completely accepted by those who have' (Sharrock & Grant 1982). Despite this, I still had a few personal doubts about the record, based largely on the sheer improbability of these short-distance migrants breeding in Britain.

Seventeen years after reading the account for

the first time, I became Secretary of the BOURC and custodian of all the files. The Cambridgeshire Moustached Warbler file was one of the first I delved into, expecting to have my scepticism overturned just like those who had gone before me. However, instead of my scepticism evaporating, I found myself puzzled by conflicting descriptions and unanswered questions. Another thing that struck me when I studied the whole file was that the original account published in *British Birds* (Hinde & Thom 1947, repeated subsequently in Sharrock & Grant 1982) had rather cherry-picked the pro-Moustached features. A number of the field descriptions contained features that were definitely suggestive of Sedge Warbler *A. schoenobaenus*, but these were omitted from the *BB* write-up. Moreover, I discovered that there had been doubters among those who had previously reviewed the record but they had been swayed by the eminence of the observers involved.

It is worth recording that there were also doubters who had not been swayed. Col. Richard Meinertzhagen recorded his scepticism at the time at a meeting of the British Ornithologists' Club in November 1950 (Meinertzhagen 1950). Meinertzhagen said: 'There is no character in this exhaustive field record which does not equally apply to the Sedge Warbler.' He said that Moustached Warbler could be identified with certainty only by the length of the first primary and that the record should not even be accepted as a sight record. He exhibited five specimens of each species showing that the 'dark crown and more prominent eye-stripe is not an invariable specific character'. David Bannerman (1954) endorsed Meinertzhagen's view, and included the species in his multi-volume work on British birds only because it was accepted by the BOU.



246. Plate showing Moustached *Acrocephalus melanopogon* (top) and Sedge Warbler *A. schoenobaenus* from *A History of the Birds of Europe* (Dresser 1871–1896).

The Cambridgeshire Moustached Warblers

Two birds were discovered on 3rd August 1946, near Cambridge. They were in an area of scrub on the edge of a large reedbed in a flooded railway ballast pit, and they were watched daily from then until 20th August, the date on which the last sighting was made. The birds were breeding and raised three chicks during this period. The birds were seen by many eminent and respected ornithologists of the time, most of whom submitted a description. Some of the submitted descriptions were more detailed than others, in particular those by Dr R. W. Butler, A. Darlington, R. A. Hinde and A. S. Thom, all of whom watched the birds on several occasions (Thom watched the birds on 12 of the 18 days that they were seen). All observers were familiar with Sedge Warbler and were convinced that the Cambridgeshire birds were not that species, noting particularly the darker crown, whiter and square-ended supercilium, well-marked eye-stripe, chestnut upperparts and reddish-buff flanks. On the face of it, these were all classic field characters for separating Moustached from Sedge Warbler. Moreover, Sedge Warblers were a common breeding bird at this site, and were seen alongside for comparison. It is clear that these birds certainly did not look like typical Sedge Warblers.

Skins of Sedge and Moustached Warblers were taken into the field, as was the appropriate volume of H. E. Dresser's *A History of the Birds of Europe*. This is surprising in itself as this nineteenth-century book is not only extremely valuable, but is even larger than a volume of *BWP!* The illustration it contains cannot have been particularly helpful as it shows the species as if viewed from below (plate 246). For a fuller background to the record, see Hinde & Thom (1947) or Sharrock & Grant (1982).

Previous assessments of the Cambridgeshire record, and other Moustached Warbler records

Bernard Tucker was the first person to assess this record, in his capacity as editor of *British Birds* (in the days prior to the establishment of the British Birds Rarities Committee). Tucker was on holiday in Scotland at the time the birds were found, and did not see them in the field, but analysed the record in detail shortly afterwards. Tucker's view was that 'although Dr Butler's account stood somewhat apart in being distinctly more suggestive of Sedge Warblers

than any of the others "the evidence as a whole, and even the two or three fullest and most careful descriptions taken individually, seems to make the conclusion almost inescapable that the birds were Moustached Warblers"' (Hinde & Thom 1947).

The record was assessed by the BOU List Committee and was added to the British List as a breeding record (*Ibis* 1950) with a caveat that this was a sight-only record. The record was not fully assessed by BOURC until 1962, 16 years after the event. This was because, at the time of the occurrence, Moustached Warbler was already on the British List, by virtue of a male said to have been obtained at St Leonards-on-Sea, East Sussex, on 12th April 1915. This record was rejected as one of the 'Hastings Rarities' in 1962; consequently, the 1946 Cambridgeshire record became the next potential first, and was then assessed fully by BOURC for the first time. The record was accepted in 1962, but was one of a number of records referred back by BOU Council to the Records Committee for further consideration (BOU 1968). In 1970, the record was assessed by BOURC for a second time, and was then accepted unanimously and the details were published in *Ibis* (BOU 1971). By 1970, the Records Committee contained just one of the original members of the 1962 Committee.

Colin Bibby borrowed the file from BOURC in 1982 to help him to compile an article for *British Birds* on this species (Bibby 1982). He too studied all of the accounts and endorsed the record.

Keith Vinicombe wrote an article in *Bird-watch* in April 2002 that cast doubt on this record (Vinicombe 2002). He pointed out that the wording in the original *BB* article describing the birds (Hinde & Thom 1947) seemed less than totally confident, the then editor of *British Birds* having written there that 'the evidence as a whole... seems to make the conclusion *almost* [KV's italics] inescapable that the birds were Moustached Warblers'. The word 'almost' implies that it is less than 100% certain. Furthermore, Ian Wallace wrote to BOURC in August 2003, reluctantly suggesting the record should be reviewed as he felt that there were too many pro-Sedge Warbler features in the published illustrations. He also helpfully provided a critique of all the illustrations that had been reproduced in the *BB* review. Interestingly, Bernard Tucker was also not convinced by the illustrations, and stated: 'The coloured drawings

by Ennion and Butler are unfortunately disappointing as evidence. Thom's of the male bird is more convincing' (quoted from Bernard Tucker's unpublished assessment of the record, held in BOURC files).

There have been four subsequent claims of Moustached Warbler in Britain: a sight record of two birds at Eling Great Marsh, Hampshire, on 13th August 1951; a sight record at Cliffe, Kent, on 14th April 1952; an adult trapped at Wendover, Buckinghamshire, on 31st July 1965; and a sight record at Angmering, West Sussex, on 18th August 1979. The Hampshire and Kent records were reviewed by a subcommittee of BBRC, set up in 1997 to review records of British rarities during 1950–57 (see pp. 460–464). Both records were described insufficiently to establish the identification conclusively, both described features that were inconsistent with Moustached Warbler, and both records were rejected. Subsequently, BBRC reviewed the remaining post-1950 British records (Bradshaw 2000). The West Sussex record was rejected because the description did not rule out completely a worn adult Sedge Warbler. The one remaining record, the adult trapped at Wendover, was upheld. Although the Cambridgeshire breeding record was before the BBRC period, they included it in their review for completeness, and endorsed that record too.

The 2005 BOURC review

Original field sketches of the Cambridgeshire birds (by R. W. Butler, Eric Ennion and A. S. Thom) were published for the first time in Bradshaw (2000). [It is worth noting here that some of the artwork published in the BBRC review was attributed wrongly. Figs. 1–4 were

attributed to A. S. Thom but were actually by R. W. Butler.] The ensuing doubts that were raised by their publication, together with the advances in our knowledge of Moustached Warbler identification since 1946, formed a substantial body of new evidence relating to the Cambridgeshire birds and, as a consequence, BOURC undertook to review the record once more.

The file contained 13 original descriptions, including accounts from such outstanding ornithologists as Edward Armstrong, Eric Ennion and James Fisher. W. B. Alexander was also among those who saw the birds, but he didn't see them well enough to be able to submit a description. In addition to the written descriptions, three observers (Butler, Ennion and Thom) also submitted illustrations. The file also contained a thorough analysis of the evidence by Bernard Tucker, prior to the publication of the record in *British Birds*. Tucker was fully aware of the unlikelihood of this record.

The following review concentrates on the written descriptions and accounts rather than the illustrations. Bernard Tucker thought that the illustrations were disappointing as evidence (see above) and BOURC felt that the accuracy of the illustrations, particularly those by non-artists, could not be relied upon. Eric Ennion was an artist, but submitted only pencil sketches. His coloured painting was submitted later to accompany the write-up in *BB* (and published as a frontispiece to Vol. 41 of *British Birds*; see also *Brit. Birds* 41: 387).

Back in 1946, observers were unaware of the significance of the primary projection, so we would not expect the descriptions to make mention of it. However, given the detailed scrutiny these birds were subjected to, we would



247. Skin of dark Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*, collected in Sussex in May 1995, an individual which was extremely similar to series of Moustached Warbler *A. melanopogon* specimens in showing chestnut upperparts, blackish crown and white supercilia.

expect most plumage and bare-part features to be recorded. The key features that were used to identify these birds (colour of crown and upperparts, shape and colour of supercilium, flank colour) are all 'continuous' rather than absolute or discrete characters, which are within the range of variation of Sedge Warbler. There cannot be many birdwatchers who have not given a Sedge Warbler a second glance because it showed a blackish crown, white supercilium and chestnut upperparts. As part of the 2005 review, BOURC member Bob McGowan studied a series of skins in the collections of the National Museums of Scotland and the Natural History Museum (Tring), and he noted that, on visual inspection, about one in 20 Sedge Warbler skins were virtually indistinguishable from Moustached Warbler in showing chestnut upperparts, blackish crown and white supercilia. One Sedge Warbler specimen also had a rufous wash along the flanks identical to that of Moustached Warbler (plate 247). There was also one skin that had had its label name altered, then altered back again, showing that even in the hand this pair can be confused (plate 248). Indeed, a number of published photographs of Moustached Warblers have actually been of Sedge Warblers (e.g. Hammond & Everett 1980, Keith & Gooders 1980, Bibby 1982).

Analysis of the descriptions

It is perhaps a little surprising that none of the observers remarked on the characteristic shape of Moustached Warbler – the dumpy body, and

shorter wings and tail (compared with Sedge). Size and shape features apart, there are two field characters that appear to be unambiguous for separating Moustached from Sedge Warbler. These are (i) dark legs and (ii) the presence of a moustachial stripe.

Leg colour

The leg colour of Moustached Warbler at all ages is dark and this is an important field character to separate Moustached from Sedge, which has pale legs. However, of the seven observers who mentioned leg colour in their description, all were unanimous that both the adults and young birds had pale legs. Adult leg colour was described variously as 'ochre to mid hair brown' (Ennion), 'pale buff' (Thom), 'light grey-brown' (Butler, Hinde), 'light/pale fawn' (Rose, Thorpe) and 'buffish/dirty straw-coloured' (Darlington). Thom even described the juvenile leg-colour as 'off-white', while Darlington described it as 'nearly white'. No observers described the leg colour of any of the five birds as dark.

Moustache

The dark moustache of Moustached Warbler extends for a short distance from the bill along the lower edge of the ear-coverts. It is a diagnostic feature of this species, but is often difficult to observe. However, given the close scrutiny that these birds were under (they were watched for many hours, at close range), some observers would surely have noted the mous-



248. Skins of Moustached *Acrocephalus melanopogon* (top) and Sedge Warbler *A. schoenobaenus*. As is apparent in the photograph, the Moustached, collected in Cyprus in March 1911, has had its label changed twice, evidence of the problems of identification; this bird is less rufous below than a typical Sedge Warbler (below).

tache had it been present. Comments on the presence or otherwise of a moustache are a little confused, but observers were aware that one should be present, and so looked for it. Prof. Raven, who was present at the site for only 40 minutes, mentioned a blackish moustache, although he commented on its contrast with the white eye-stripe [sic] and white throat, so he was almost certainly referring to the dark ear-coverts. Ennion and Butler both thought that they might have seen some indication of a moustache, although Butler watched the birds on three subsequent occasions and became convinced that there was definitely no moustache. J. A. Gibb was adamant that the birds did not show a moustachial streak and suggested that, on the basis of his experience in Malta and Cambridgeshire, the illustration in Bannerman (1939) should be amended to eliminate all suggestion of a moustache.

Bill

The bill of Moustached Warbler is long, slender and dark, with some pale at the base of the lower mandible. Only Raven suggested that the bill appeared more slender than that of Sedge Warbler. All other observers commented merely on the colour, which ranged in the adults from 'dark brown' (Thom) to dark ochreous horn, with pale ochre base and a darker tip (Ennion). The bill colour of the juveniles was clearly paler and descriptions varied from 'pale buff' (Darlington), or 'yellow' (Hinde) to 'off-white' (Thom).

Crown

All observers were unanimous that the birds had blacker crowns than Sedge Warbler. The nominate race of Moustached Warbler usually shows a uniformly black crown under field conditions but some intermixed brown feathering is apparent in the hand (this pattern applies to both juveniles and adults). Some of the descriptions, however, suggest a more Sedge Warbler-like crown pattern. Descriptions of the crown colour include: 'nearly/almost black' (Darlington, Butler, Ennion), 'very dark black/brown' (Hinde), 'very dark' (Raven, Fisher, Thom), 'dark' (Mills), 'dark blackish-brown' (Rose), and 'much darker than Sedge Warbler' (Armstrong/Cott). Thorpe is the only observer who uses unqualified black in the crown colour when he says 'edges black with faint brown marks'. Most observers also

describe paler brown streaks in the crown, a feature that is also shown in the paintings. Darlington referred to two deep-buff lines either side of the crown centre. Hinde also referred to dark brown lines on either side of the crown. Butler counted three narrow chestnut bands separated by three slightly wider, darker brown (not black) bands. Ennion also referred to a paler central crown-stripe with 'much confused and finer laterals'.

The juvenile crowns appeared rather more Sedge Warbler-like. Darlington described the juveniles as having rich brown crowns, with two deep-buff lines, much broken up from the base of the bill, through the crown. Both Thom and Hinde also described the juveniles as being brown-crowned (Thom: 'warm brown', Hinde: 'very dark brown'). No observers used the word 'black' to describe any part of the juvenile crown colour.

Moustached Warblers should have black crown feathers throughout, with some paler feather edging creating slight streaks in fresh plumage. Moreover, the crown should appear more uniformly black by late summer as these edges wear off. According to BWP, juveniles should have even blacker crowns than adults. This is completely at odds with the descriptions of the Cambridgeshire juveniles. It is worth noting, however, that the eastern race of Moustached Warbler *A. m. mimica* typically has more brown streaking in the crown than nominate *melanopogon*.

Supercilium

All observers commented on the whiter and more prominent supercilium than Sedge Warbler's. All concurred that the (presumed) male had a supercilium that was off-white in front of the eye and pure white behind the eye. The (presumed) female had a supercilium that was less white than the male's. Darlington described the female's supercilium colour as 'pale buff throughout' in dull light, but said that it appeared whiter in bright light. Thom concurred that it was very pale buff. The juveniles clearly had less obviously white supercilia. Darlington described them as 'more yellowish in tone and narrower', whereas Thom described them as 'yellowish-buff'. Moustached Warbler can certainly show off-white supercilia but yellow is a colour that should not appear anywhere in the plumage, particularly on the supercilium.

Upperparts

Moustached Warbler typically has chestnut upperparts with a rump that is usually concolourous but can be fractionally brighter than the mantle. Sedge Warbler usually shows an obvious contrast between the browner mantle and brighter, rufous rump. The detailed descriptions of Darlington, Hinde, Thom, Butler and Ennion all describe the rump as being brighter or more rufous than the comparatively colder upperparts. The colour illustrations by Butler and Thom also show this contrastingly rufous rump. Thom also described the adult flight feathers as having yellow-buff margins, and those of the juveniles as having yellow margins – as noted above, yellow should not appear in the plumage of Moustached Warbler.

Underparts

The rufous wash along the flanks shown by the Cambridgeshire birds is a pro-Moustached feature. However, a specimen of Sedge Warbler at the NHM, Tring, shows rufous flank coloration that is indistinguishable from that of Moustached (see plate 247) so it is not a diagnostic feature. In Moustached Warbler, the rufous usually, but not always, extends from the nape across the breast-sides then down the flanks, which accentuates the white throat. For the Cambridgeshire birds, the rufous flanks were also unequivocally described only in the male. Darlington, Thom and Fisher referred to a rosy tinge on the flanks, but only in the male. According to Darlington, the female showed no hint of this rosy tinge, but was suffused light brown. Butler described the flanks as tawny (i.e. yellowish-brown) implying that the adult birds were the same. Thorpe also described the flanks as yellowish-brown, without specifying which bird he was referring to. Yet again, there is reference to yellow in the plumage, which is undeniably a strongly pro-Sedge feature.

Juvenile gorgets

In the 1970 BOURC assessment, one member made the point that if they had been Sedge Warblers, the characteristic gorget of spots on the juveniles would have been seen. In fact, only three observers saw the juveniles well enough to provide a description. Furthermore, *BWP* states that breast spotting was almost, or completely absent in 20% of 40 juvenile Sedge Warblers examined. It would therefore appear that the absence of juvenile

breast spotting is not a reliable feature.

Size

Descriptions of size were many and varied; Darlington and Fisher described the birds as smaller than Sedge Warbler, Raven described them as slimmer than Sedge Warbler, Hinde was adamant that they were identical in size to Sedge Warbler in direct comparison, yet Ennion thought that they were a trifle larger. To confuse the picture further, Thom said that they were the size of Reed Warbler *A. scirpaceus*. There is overlap and racial variation in size between Sedge and Moustached Warblers. Sedge Warblers are comparatively longer-winged and longer-tailed than Moustached Warblers but there is overlap in overall size. However, the shorter wings can make the tail *appear* longer in Moustached. In western populations (nominate race), Moustached Warblers are usually 10–15% lighter than Sedge, although eastern *mimica* tend to be slightly larger than Sedge.

Calls

There was general agreement that the calls did not sound like those of Sedge Warbler, although C. C. Rose described the call as a churr like that of a Sedge Warbler. Song was not heard, but the two described calls were a churr (variously described as ‘trrrt’ or ‘t-rrk’), with an alarm call ‘tchit’ or ‘t-chik’. These calls were sometimes repeated in rapid succession. Ennion suggested that the churr notes were softer than those given by Sedge Warbler, but that the scold note was deeper, more like that of Reed Warbler. Sedge Warblers give a soft churr note (e.g. Jonsson 1992, Baker 1997) and a short alarm call ‘chek’ (Jonsson) or ‘tuc’ (Baker) so the calls are not that different from published descriptions of Sedge Warbler calls. There is certainly nothing in the written descriptions of calls that would conclusively rule out Sedge Warbler. This is also the conclusion that Tucker drew in his analysis.

Previous experience

Gibb was the only observer with previous experience of Moustached Warbler. He had found a vagrant on Malta two years previously (in 1944), the second record for that island (Gibb 1946, 1951). He had identified this bird by its song, describing it thus: ‘sweeter and not so loud as Sedge Warbler, it was delivered jerkily with a slight pause between each phrase.’ He noted that the bird was singing in a low fig *Ficus*

tree at the edge of a field of *sulla* (a fodder crop that grows to about 1.3 m) on 24th March 1944. In *BWP*, Gibb's is the only referenced example of a bird singing away from its wetland habitat. Furthermore, Gibb used the term 'identified' to report the Moustached Warbler, whereas he used 'positively identified' in the same article to report a vagrant Melodious Warbler *Hippolais polyglotta* on Malta (Gibb 1951). He also used the term 'bird seen' to report other unusual species. The differences in terminology might imply that he was less positive about the Moustached Warbler, and the unusual habitat also makes this record questionable. The description of the song is also not particularly convincing, omitting any mention of the characteristic Common Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*-like notes at the start. In his written description, Gibb claimed that he identified the Cambridgeshire warblers on three salient features that he had noted on the bird on Malta, namely the black crown, white supercilium and white throat; however, he made no mention of these features in the original publications (Gibb 1946, 1951). These anomalies must surely call into question Gibb's record of Moustached Warbler on Malta, and certainly suggest that his 'experience' with the species was of limited value with respect to the Cambridgeshire record.

Tucker's analysis

Bernard Tucker, the author of the Moustached Warbler section in *The Handbook*, made an extremely thorough critique of the descriptions and illustrations and was certainly aware of discrepancies within them. He was clearly worried that observers did not seem to be struck by the darker appearance that would be expected in Moustached Warbler. He was also worried by Butler's description, which he conceded 'would definitely tell against it if there were not so much other evidence that seems to contradict it in some respects.' The things that worried Tucker most were that Butler didn't make so much of the dark crown, and described the mantle as brown and the rump and tail-coverts as tawny (i.e. yellowish-brown), which is wrong for Moustached. (An important aside here is the use of the adjective 'tawny'. To many bird-watchers, the word is most often associated with the Tawny Owl *Strix aluco*, yet this species is not tawny, i.e. yellowish-brown. Butler may have used 'tawny' thinking that it described the rufous colour of Tawny Owl. See also discussion

of underparts, above.) It is worth remembering that Butler visited the birds on four occasions and submitted one of the more detailed descriptions. The thing that seemed to swing Tucker's opinion towards Moustached was the fact that both Hinde and Butler had observed the birds tail-cocking. At this time, Tucker was not aware that tail-cocking had ever been recorded in Sedge Warbler, yet he knew that it was a characteristic habit of Moustached Warbler. Hinde stated that: 'on several occasions they cocked their tail to an almost vertical position, especially when excited.' Butler said: 'the presumed hen, when much agitated because I was near her young, darted into the brambles [*Rubus fruticosus* agg.] near my feet and in flitting from twig to twig flicked up her tail at each landing almost vertically.' So it appears that the birds only tail-cocked when they were agitated, which is exactly what Sedge Warblers do (e.g. Shirihai *et al.* 1996, Beaman & Madge 1998, Vinicombe 2002).

The greatest misgiving that Tucker had about the record, however, concerned the habitat. Tucker said: 'The weakest point in the evidence is Thom's opinion, also expressed to me personally, that the young when he first saw them were so recently fledged that the nest must have been in the brambles which they were frequenting. This is quite contrary to the recorded nesting habits of the Moustached Warbler, all of the rather small number of observers who have studied its breeding habits having found nests only in reeds *Phragmites* or other vegetation over water. Such sites are, however, available very close at hand and Thom's opinion may be mistaken. The breeding of this Mediterranean bird in the British Isles is so intrinsically improbable that if it is to be fully accepted the evidence ought to be as complete and irrefutable as it can possibly be made, with no flaws in it, and this point about the nest is certainly one on which critics might not unreasonably fasten. In the nature of the case the nest *cannot* be very far from where the young were seen, and since we know it is there it ought to be findable. I therefore feel strongly that as soon as the vegetation has died down a little no pains should be spared to find the nest. Every bit of the reeds and other aquatic vegetation within a reasonable distance should be combed out, even if it means some deep wading, and a similar determined effort should be made to find what nests exist in the brambles, etc. I realize that some search has been made already, but it cannot

have been exhaustive, since, as I have said, we know positively that the nest must be there. The breeding of Moustached Warblers in England, and on a ballast pit instead of, say, on the Broads or some such place, is so fantastic that pending the result of the proposed search I feel it would be proper to suspend judgement as to whether the occurrence can be accepted as conclusively proved or not.'

Nesting habitat

A. S. Thom described the territory as 'a well-defined area, roughly 30 yards square; lying between a grass cart road and the water edge of a railway ballast pit, bounded at North and South ends by tall Willow and Sallow [*Salix* spp.] bushes and trees. The wire fence along the grass road was overgrown with bramble bushes (thickly intergrown with nettles [*Urtica*] and thistles [Cardueae]) which extended 10–12 feet into the territory. In this the nest was believed to be situated; at least the young, in early stages roosted and were fed here. From bramble bushes to water's edge was thickly carpeted with Coltsfoot [*Tussilago farfara*] leaves. Along the water edge, and extending out for some distance grew Reed Mace [*Typha*].'

The first sightings of the birds were on 3rd August, adjacent to and over the Reed Mace (the 'reedbed'). The following morning both adult birds were seen carrying food repeatedly from the reedbed into a thick bramble hedge, making feeding visits every two or three minutes. Each adult entered the hedge by a favoured route, several yards apart and it was therefore assumed that they were feeding young which had already left the nest. The first juvenile was seen near the top of the bramble hedge on the afternoon of 4th August. On 7th August, a second juvenile was seen, which appeared to be so recently fledged that it had very limited powers of flight. On 8th August, three juveniles were seen together, one of which could fly only short distances. The last sighting was on 20th August.

Bernard Tucker recommended a thorough search for the nest because he realised that a nest in brambles was a fundamental weakness in the case for Moustached Warbler. An exhaustive search for the nest was made inside the territory. All the bushes which were too thick to be searched properly were cut down and examined. Thom said: 'Five old nests were found, none of which, I feel confident, belonged to the

birds under discussion. The reeds were also searched to a water depth of three feet (five yards from shore), with no success. Since our search of the bramble bushes, it seems almost certain that the birds could not have nested there, despite the fact that the two birds, obviously newly fledged, flushed on the 6th and 7th respectively, could only flutter a few yards.'

In the published account (Hinde & Thom 1947), Thom changed his story slightly to remove all reference to the five nests that were found. The published article states that 'It is quite certain that there was no nest in the bramble or anywhere in the vicinity that could possibly have been that of a Sedge Warbler.' No information is given about the five nests that were found, or to what species they might have belonged.

Thom used the fact that he couldn't find a suitable nest in the brambles or in the nearby reed mace as evidence that the birds must have nested 'in some inaccessible part of the reedbed'. The reeds were searched up to 5 m from the shore, and the brambles were 10 m from the water, so the implication is that the young birds must have flown more than 15 m prior to 4th August. However, juveniles were first seen in the brambles on 4th August, one of which could barely fly on 7th August, and must surely have originated from a nest in the brambles. The adult birds were watched carrying food to the brambles every 2–3 minutes during 4th–7th August. If one juvenile could barely fly on 7th, it could not have moved the 15 m from the reeds to the brambles prior to 4th August. A previously unpublished detail is that Thom actually caught one of the recently fledged juveniles with his hands on the late evening of 7th August, but the bird escaped. Surely only a recently fledged chick would allow capture by hand? The period from fledging to maturity given in *BWP* is c. 12 days, young presumably hatching synchronously, so the four days from 4th to 7th would be about one-third of this period. Moustached Warbler invariably nests over water, usually among reeds or reed mace. Reed mace (also called *Typha* or bulrush) was present in the nearby water, yet the birds did not choose this as their nesting habitat.

In his original analysis, Tucker said that judgement on the identification should be suspended until a thorough search for the nest had been made. However, Tucker presumably accepted Thom's suggestion that the birds must

have nested in some inaccessible part of the reedbed, because he published the account in *BB* the following year (Hinde & Thom 1947).

The presumed female did most of its foraging under the Colts-foot leaves, i.e. among dry vegetation. Later, the juveniles moved from the brambles into the Colts-foot, where they too did most of their feeding. According to *BWP*, Moustached Warblers feed 'by picking and probing vegetation at or near [the] water surface', so it appears that the foraging habitat as well as the nesting habitat does not accord well with Moustached Warbler.

Colin Bibby's excellent study of Moustached Warblers (Bibby 1982) confirms that the Cambridgeshire nesting habitat was extremely atypical. Bibby stated that: 'Moustached Warblers breed in wetlands, favouring places where Reed Warblers are more likely than Sedge Warblers to be their neighbours. Comparative morphological studies (Leisler 1975) show that Moustached Warblers have relatively large feet, with a thick hind toe and long claws. The spread angle of the front toes is comparatively small. These are adaptations of the foot for vertical climbing, and the Moustached Warbler occurs in vegetation with a strong vertical structure, such as reeds *Phragmites* rich in fen-sedge *Cladium*, or beds of club-rush *Scirpus* or bulrush *Typha* (Leisler 1973). It is absent from pure *Cladium* beds where a walking species such as Savi's Warbler *Locustella luscinioides* is more at home. It is also absent in the drier areas with a tangle of soft-stemmed vegetation, where Sedge Warblers might occur. The Moustached Warbler's climbing skills are best seen in *Typha*: it is the only European *Acrocephalus* warbler which easily can, and does, walk up the sides of the flattened leaf blades.'

The original published account

Earlier, I suggested that the original published account (Hinde & Thom 1947) had cherry-picked from the descriptions. The most glaring example of this is in the description of the juveniles. Only three observers saw the juveniles well enough to give a description. Darlington described the juvenile supercilia as 'more yellowish in tone'; Thom described them as 'yellow-buff in colour', whereas Hinde said that they were 'indistinguishable from adult'. Hinde & Thom (1947) stated: 'Superciliary stripe the same as in adults, but slightly cream in tone.' Similarly, the juvenile flanks were described as

'faint reddish-brown on posterior region of flanks' in Hinde & Thom, yet only Thom described them as such. The remaining two observers described the flanks as buff. The juvenile crown colour was also described in Hinde & Thom as very dark brown, yet this was only Hinde's description, the other two described the crown as warm brown (Thom) and rich brown (Darlington). Here are three examples where the minority view was selected because it best fitted the identification as Moustached Warbler.

The outcome of the 2005 assessment

When assessing a potential 'first' for Britain, BOURC tries to establish whether the case is absolutely watertight. We would certainly expect most, if not all of the salient field characters to have been described, but we would also expect the descriptions not to contain any features that are inexplicably wrong for that species. With the breeding Moustached Warblers, the first part of those criteria were arguably fulfilled (chestnut upperparts, blackish crown and white supercilium). The problem lies with the features that are unquestionably wrong, most notably the pale legs of all five birds, the definite lack of a moustachial streak in all five birds, the brown crowns of the juveniles, the rather extensive brown streaking in the crowns of all birds, the lack of rufous on the flanks of the female and juveniles, the buff/yellowish tinge to the juvenile supercilia and the contrastingly rufous rumps. The fact that the nesting habitat was completely wrong for Moustached Warbler simply compounded the doubts that had already been raised over the plumage and bare-part characters. The conclusion of BOURC members, in June 2005, was that this record should be rejected.

The Wendover record

Following the rejection of a record previously accepted as a 'first', BOURC's next task is to establish whether any subsequent records are acceptable as a first for Britain. This process was simplified by the review published by BBRC (Bradshaw 2000), which concluded that the 1965 Wendover record was the only remaining record that was acceptable.

This bird was caught in a mist-net next to a small reservoir at Weston Turville, near Wendover, at about 16.30 hrs on 31st July 1965. It was first assumed to be a worn adult Sedge

Warbler. However, when it was taken from the bag to be ringed, its overall paleness, coupled with the strikingly white throat and supercilium, prompted closer examination. The wing formula ruled out Sedge Warbler, but an adult of that species was nevertheless brought in for direct comparison. The mystery warbler had a whiter throat and supercilium than the Sedge, and lacked any rufous on the rump. A detailed description was taken and, after *The Handbook and Identification for Ringers* (Williamson 1963) had been consulted, the bird was eventually identified as an adult Moustached Warbler. The bird was then taken to Kenneth Williamson's home, where he confirmed the identification and checked the wing formula on both wings. He did not take a description of the bird because he had been reassured that a full in-hand description had already been taken.

This record was not expected to cause any problems because (i) the bird had been trapped and (ii) Kenneth Williamson, one of the great authorities on Palearctic warblers and author of

the landmark BTO ringers' guides, had checked the wing formula. Williamson was also, incidentally, on BOURC in 1970 when the Cambridgeshire breeding record was assessed and accepted. The wing formula seemed to confirm the identification, but the Wendover bird also showed a number of features that were apparently wrong for Moustached Warbler, in particular pale legs and the lack of a black crown. These were features that had figured prominently in the 2005 BOURC rejection of the Cambridgeshire record. In addition, there was no specific mention of black streaking on the mantle ('mantle and scapulars sandy brown with black bases'), although this transcription may perhaps not be incompatible with an in-hand description of streaked upperparts. The bird was in extremely worn plumage, which we initially assumed might have explained the pale crown colour, and we also assumed that there might be variation in bare-part coloration. Other features that caused concern were the overall paleness of the plumage, with no chestnut coloration; the

Table 1. Comparison of biometrics taken from the 'Wendover warbler' with those for Moustached Warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon* of the nominate race and eastern race *mimica*, Paddyfield Warbler *A. agricola* and Sedge Warbler *A. schoenobaenus*. Data from Williamson (1968) (BWP figures in parentheses). All measurements in mm. SS = secondaries. 'Tail rounded' = difference between shortest and longest tail feather.

	Wendover warbler	Moustached (<i>melanopogon</i>)	Moustached (<i>mimica</i>)	Paddyfield	Sedge
Wing length	55	52–58 (55–62)	59–67 (57–64)	53–61 (55–61)	59–72 (62–71)
Tail length	50	44–52 (44–53)	49–60 (49–60)	47–60 (48–56)	39–56 (42–51)
Bill (skull)	11.5	13–15 (14–16.4)	14–16 (14.9–16.3)	13.5–16 (14–15.5)	13.5–16 (13.6–15.5)
Tarsus	19.5	18–22 (19.9–21.9)	21–23 (21.1–22.9)	21–23.5 (20–23)	20–23 (20–22.5)
Emargination	P3/4/5	P3/4/5 (P3/4/5/(6))	P3/4/5 (P3/4/5/(6))	P3/4/5 (P3/4/5)	P3 (P3)
P1 (mm > primary coverts)	4.5	5.5–8 (5–9)	(5–9)	1–4 (0–6)	About half length of pc (-1–-7)
P2 (mm < wing point)	4	5.5–7 (5–9)	(5–9)	3–5 (3–6)	0.5–1 (0–2)
Wing point	P3/4/5	P3/4/5 (P(3)/4/5)	(P(3)/4/5)	P3/4/5 (P3/4/(5))	P3 (P3)
P6 (mm < wing point)	2	0.5–2.5 (1–3)	(1–3)	1.5–4 (1.5–3.5)	7–8.5 (6.5–8.5)
P7 (mm < wing point)	4	2.5–4 (3–4)	(3–4)	3–6 (3–6)	10–11
P10 (mm < wing point)	6	7–10 (7–10)	(9–11)	7.5–11 (7–10.5)	14–17 (14–19)
Notch P2	well down SS	well down SS (12–16 mm < wing point)	–	well down SS (11–16 mm < wing point)	P7–P9 (8–13 mm < wing point)
Notch P3	4 mm below SS tips	below SS tips	–	opposite SS tips (up to 4 mm below SS tips)	–
Tail rounded	8	9–12 (7–10)	9–12 (7–10)	8–12 (6–9)	4–8 (3–8)

paleness of the ear-coverts, with no mention of a moustache; and the lack of rufous on the flanks. Furthermore, the tongue was described as 'canary yellow' (adult Moustached Warblers have bright orange tongues). All of these features are wrong for Moustached Warbler, yet the wing formula and biometrics ruled out Sedge Warbler and were right for Moustached Warbler.

While compiling the file on this bird, I asked BOURC member Andrew Lassey if he could provide a ringer's interpretation, to explain to non-ringers on the Records Committee why the in-hand data ruled out Sedge Warbler. He pointed out four key features, including the wing length of 55 mm that was too short for Sedge Warbler, and even ruled out the longer-winged eastern race of Moustached Warbler. However, I had asked the wrong question, and *should* have asked if any other species had a similar wing formula and biometrics. When Andrew Lassey came to comment on the file, he noticed that Paddyfield Warbler *A. agricola* has remarkably similar biometrics and wing formula (table 1).

Andrew Lassey highlighted the following points from this table. The bill length of 11.5 mm is slightly short for either species but this may be a simple recording error (and is not significant in terms of species identification). The tail length of 50 mm is noteworthy because the Wendover bird was in moult, with the two central pairs of tail feathers only one-third grown. If allowance were made for tail growth, it would place the tail length at the upper limit for the western race of Moustached. Two of the key measures of wing structure, the first and second primary measurements, are better for Paddyfield than for Moustached (they fall outwith the range for Moustached given by both Williamson (1968) and *BWP*). The only measurement which is arguably better for Moustached is the notch on the third primary, which fell 4 mm beyond the tips of the secondaries, although this is within the range given for Paddyfield in *BWP*.

In addition, the in-hand description said that the supercilium extended c. 5 mm beyond the eye, which is consistent with Paddyfield Warbler but too short for Moustached. The pale crown and cheeks, pinkish-yellow legs and yellow tongue would also be consistent with Paddyfield Warbler (and wrong for Moustached Warbler); while the description of the mantle/scapulars is at best ambiguous and at worst wrong for Moustached.

However, there are also features that appear to be more supportive of Moustached than Paddyfield Warbler. The growing brown crown feathers had blackish bases where they were emerging from the sheaths. The sandy-brown mantle and scapular feathers also had blackish bases. The tail was also faded blackish-brown, as were the flight feathers.

Most people would not think that a streaked *Acrocephalus* could be confused with an unstreaked one, but Shirihai *et al.* (1996) included a section in the Moustached Warbler chapter entitled 'Separation from Paddyfield'. Shirihai *et al.* stated that: 'where Moustached (*mimica*) and Paddyfield Warbler breed together in the same habitat, worn adults can cause problems. In June–July, both are very heavily worn and look so similar (faded sandy-grey with almost no pattern in plumage) that they are best identified by size, shape and voice; Moustached usually also shows remnants of blackish centres to (mainly smallest) tertials and slightly darker crown, and its bill (unlike Paddyfield's) is all dark.' Furthermore, the problems involved in distinguishing Paddyfield from pale/leucistic Sedge Warbler have also been documented (Flumm & Lord 1978).

Kenneth Williamson made very few comments on the bird, but it is difficult to reconcile some of his comments with elements in the description. For example, he said: 'the plumage was all right and suggested the typical race', yet there was no mention of chestnut upperparts or a black crown. He also stated that he had 'seen no specimen resembling this in head plumage', implying that the plumage was, in fact, not 'all right'. He also failed to mention that the rest of the plumage was atypical too.

We assumed that there must be variation to explain the unusual bare-part coloration, so we contacted Joan Castany in Spain, who has a great deal of ringing experience of Moustached Warbler and is a leading researcher of Moustached Warblers in Spain. He studied variation in Moustached Warblers for his PhD thesis at the University of Valencia and has continued this research since then. We asked him whether Moustached Warblers could ever show pale legs and if adults ever showed canary-yellow tongues. The answer was an unequivocal no to both questions. Furthermore, he said that the legs of all ages of Moustached Warbler are consistently dark, but contrasted this with Reed Warbler, which displays a great range of varia-

tion in leg colour. He also said that juvenile Moustached Warblers had yellow tongues but that the colour changes to bright orange at the age when they lose their tongue spots. *BWP* states that tongue spots gradually fade from the age of 2–4 months and are always absent by the spring of the second calendar-year. In other words, a non-juvenile Moustached Warbler in late July should have had an orange, not yellow tongue. In conclusion then, the description of the plumage and part-colours of the Wendover bird does not fit Moustached Warbler, and the biometrics and wing formula do not rule out Paddyfield.

It is almost certain that Ken Williamson had never seen a live Moustached Warbler, although he was familiar with museum specimens. In addition, he had seen only one Paddyfield Warbler previously, that being a first-winter on Fair Isle, Shetland, on 16th September 1953 (i.e. almost 12 years earlier). In contrast to the Fair Isle bird, the second for Britain, the Wendover bird was in extremely worn plumage, and was in tail moult too. He was also presented with a bird which had been identified as a Moustached Warbler, and was effectively asked simply to check the biometrics and wing formula. It must have been extremely difficult for him to think laterally in this situation, and to come up with a radically different conclusion. He did not take a description but remarked that the head plumage did not resemble that of any specimen of Moustached Warbler he had seen at the Natural History Museum while researching his ringers' guide to the genus *Acrocephalus*. He also commented that he had not seen a skin of Moustached Warbler in such an advanced state of moult. Williamson's concluding comment was that 'the small size and the characteristic wing formula (which I checked on both wings) ruled out anything but *melanopogon*.' So it would seem that Williamson had not considered the unstreaked Paddyfield Warbler, which was not ruled out by the small size and characteristic wing formula.

The Wendover record was circulated around BOURC and, after much debate, it was decided unanimously that the bird was not acceptable as a Moustached Warbler. BOURC are not saying that the Wendover warbler was definitely a Paddyfield, merely that on the available evidence Paddyfield Warbler cannot be excluded, and so the identification as Moustached Warbler is not 100% certain.

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Tim Melling, RSPB, Westleigh Mews, Wakefield Road, Denby Dale, West Yorkshire HD8 8QD



EDITORIAL COMMENT Colin Bradshaw, Chairman of the British Birds Rarities Committee, said: ‘BBRC was in agreement with the findings of BOURC that Moustached Warbler should no longer be on the British List. This set of records shows the strength of the two-committee system when considering first and particularly historical records for Britain. BBRC members have to fit such reviews of past records into a busy schedule of contemporary record assessment; this makes the arrival of 30+ pages of historical documents something of a mixed blessing, while such events are the *raison d’être* of BOURC.

‘In our initial assessment of the Wendover bird we had concentrated on whether Sedge Warbler could be excluded confidently and we reached the conclusion that it could. We are indebted to Andrew Lassey and BOURC for showing that there were other alternatives to be considered and, while no other species is proven, this situation makes the record unsafe as a first for Britain.

‘The situation with the Cambridgeshire birds is easier to explain. Although the system of having ten independent voices in BBRC is designed to minimise errors, in this case, partly because we did not have access to all the archives at the time of our assessment, we made a mistake in our judgement.’