

Booted Warbler at Fair Isle : the problem of identification

By Peter Davis

A BOOTED WARBLER (*Hippolais caligata*) was caught by R. H. Dennis and J. Bazey in the gully trap at Fair Isle in the early morning of 29th August 1959. It was released at the observatory after examination and on the 31st was seen on a cliff near-by. The only other records in western Europe are from Heligoland on 28th September 1851 and from Fair Isle on 3rd September 1936.

The following description was taken from the bird in the hand:

Upper-parts, head, wing-coverts and upper tail-coverts: pale sandy grey-brown (without any olive tint), a little darker on the crown; a fairly distinct buffish-white superciliary, most obvious in front of the eye, and narrow orbital ring of the same colour. *Flight-feathers:* rather darker than upper-parts, with buff edgings to the outer webs; outermost tail-feathers with buff-white outer webs, and penultimate pair marked buff-white at the tips of the outer webs. *Under-parts and axillaries:* silvery-white, with a buff tinge on the flanks and across the breast. *Soft parts:* bill (slender for a *Hippolais*) with dark horn upper mandible, lower tipped same but very pale pinkish at base; inside of mouth daffodil yellow; legs pale brown with blue-grey overtone, as in the commoner *Hippolais* species; iris dark olive. *Measurements:* wing 62.5 mm., bill 15.5, tarsus 21, tail 53 (outer feathers 50); bill 3.5 mm. wide at base of nostrils. *Wing-formula:* 1st +8, 3rd and 4th longest, 2nd -6, 5th -1, 6th -3.5, 7th -5, 8th -8.5; 3rd to 5th emarginate, 6th slightly so; secondaries equal to 10th primary. *Weight:* 8.4 gm. at 06.30 G.M.T. The entire plumage (including body-feathers) appeared worn and faded; the tips of the longest primaries were slightly chipped, the tail more abraded.

The specimen presented a nice problem in identification, which would have been greater had we not recently received from Kenneth Williamson his "bird ringer's guide" to the rarer warblers (unpublished), which he had prepared after an examination of skins in the national collection at the British Museum (Natural History). One undated specimen of the closely similar eastern form of the Olivaceous Warbler (*H. pallida elaeica*) was available at Fair Isle for direct comparison; this had rather darker and greener upper-parts than our capture, no orbital ring and a broader bill. Only one person present, W. H. Tucker, had seen a live Olivaceous Warbler—the Portland bird of 1956—and he considered that that had been a good deal darker than the bird before us.

We had to consider not only the resemblance between the Booted Warbler and the various forms of the Olivaceous, but also apparent divergences of size and colour between our bird and the available

BRITISH BIRDS

descriptions of *H. caligata*. The most detailed of these descriptions were of the typical form, to which the original western European specimens were referred. Both *The Handbook* (2: 68) and Wardlaw Ramsay (1923) state or imply that *H. c. caligata* has darker upper-parts than *H. p. elaeica*; Williamson's "guide" describes the upper-parts as grey-brown in worn dress, greyish-olive (1st-winter) or warm brownish-olive (adult) in new plumage. Our bird, like the Heligoland specimen described by Gätke (1895), was worn and faded, and this could account for its paleness. There is, however, a larger and paler eastern form of *H. caligata*, Sykes's Warbler (*H. c. rama*), to be taken into account; and, though it would be unwise to be dogmatic about the taxonomic position of an isolated specimen, the measurements of our bird seem more normal for a bird of the eastern form.

The following table compares the important measurements of the recent Fair Isle bird with those of the two main forms of *H. caligata*, of *H. p. elaeica* (the eastern form of the Olivaceous Warbler, on the British List) and of *H. p. opaca* (the larger and longer-billed western Mediterranean race). The typical form of *H. pallida* (Egypt) is not included for lack of detailed measurements; it is of similar size and structure to *H. p. elaeica*, but is paler and according to Wardlaw Ramsay has a long second primary like the eastern form.

TABLE I—MEASUREMENTS OF BOOTED WARBLER (*Hippolais caligata*) AND OLIVACEOUS WARBLER (*H. pallida*)

The figures used are a combination of those given in *The Handbook* (H) and in Kenneth Williamson's unpublished "guide" to the rarer warblers (W).

	Fair Isle bird	<i>H. c.</i> <i>caligata</i>	<i>H. c.</i> <i>rama</i>	<i>H. p.</i> <i>elaeica</i>	<i>H. p.</i> <i>opaca</i>
Wing	62.5	55-63	59-64	63-71	64-72
Tail	53	45-54	50-58	50-57	52-62
Bill (to skull)	15.5	11.5-15	14-16	(H) 12.5-14 (W) 14.5-16.5	17-19
Breadth of bill (at base of nostril)	3.5	(W) finer than <i>H. pallida</i>		(W) 4-4.5	(W) 5-5.5
1st primary..	+8	(H) +3-7 (W) +3-10 ("usually longer in <i>rama</i> ")	(H) +5-9	+3-7.5	+6-8
2nd primary	=7-8th	=6-8th (usually 6-7th)	=7-9th (usually 7-8th)	=5-7th (occ. 7-8th)	=7-8th
Emargination	3rd-6th	3rd-5th (occ. 6th)	3rd-5th (often 6th)	3rd-5th	3rd-5th

It will be noted that, apart from wing-length, the dimensions of the bill and the slight emargination of the sixth primary in some *H. caligata* seem to be the only really diagnostic structural features, though the lengths of the first and second primaries will be corroborative in many specimens.

The typical Booted Warbler nests from the Moscow area eastward to West Siberia and south-eastward to the Caspian Sea and the southern Urals. Sykes's Warbler breeds from Transcaspia and Iran east to Sinkiang. There is a considerable area of intermediacy or hybridisation between the two forms, from the Kirghiz Steppes to western Mongolia. Both forms winter in India, mainly in the northern half of the sub-continent, but *H. c. rama* migrates to Southern Arabia also (Vaurie 1959).

On its release the Fair Isle bird flew to the cliff and settled beneath an overhanging tuft of grass. Even in the shadow it seemed a remarkably pale little warbler—the colour of weak milky tea—and when it moved into the light this was still the only feature that attracted the attention; the eye-stripe was inconspicuous and the colour seemed almost uniform from a distance of less than twenty yards. It disappeared from view, and was not rediscovered until two days later, in the cliffs of a neighbouring geo. Here it was watched for nearly an hour by R.H.D. and others. It spent the entire period restlessly hawking for flies—the prey included crane-flies (*Tipula* sp.)—or flitting about the rock-face and probing among the scattered clumps of vegetation. Though searched for later, it was not seen again.

REFERENCES

- GÄTKE, H. (1895): *Heligoland as an Ornithological Observatory*. Edinburgh.
RAMSAY, R. G. WARDLAW (1923): *The Birds of Europe and North Africa*. London and Edinburgh.
VAURIE, C. (1959): *The Birds of the Palaearctic Fauna*. London.
WITHERBY, H. F., *et al.* (1941): *The Handbook of British Birds*. Vol. 2. London.