

Pallas's Reed Bunting: new to Britain and Ireland



Roger A. Broad and W. E. Oddie

At about midday on 29th September 1976, near Skerryholm on Fair Isle, Shetland, RAB glimpsed a small, dull-coloured passerine as it flew low, from the weedy margin of a narrow potato crop, some 15-20m before diving back in again. It was followed and the whole performance was repeated several times without any satisfactory views being obtained of the skulking bird. Eventually, it was seen at the junction of the crop and the adjacent bare ground, at approximately 15m range, as it crept mouse-like through the vegetation. It was striking for its total lack of noteworthy features. During the next 15 to 20 minutes, it was observed briefly in flight and occasionally on the ground, where it invariably kept well concealed in the vegetation. Once, it was seen side by side with a Twite *Carduelis flavirostris*, which appeared to be almost identical in size. The initial impression was of a small, nondescript, totally unfamiliar bunting (Emberizidae). At close range, it appeared to have a bill typical of that group and it occasionally flicked its tail in a bunting-like fashion, showing a little white in the outer feathers. It lacked, however, any obvious head pattern, and the upperparts seemed to be relatively uniform dark brown, although it showed some streaking on the mantle. Owing to the bird's skulking nature, its underparts were poorly seen, but the impression was of greyish uniformity. Twice, two small, dark triangular smudges were seen on the sides of the lower throat or upper breast. No wing bars or panels showed on the closed wing or in flight. The bird was once heard to give a single unfamiliar call, which at the time was not written down.

This combination of characters was puzzling; the bird was apparently a bunting, but RAB was unaware of any Palearctic bunting as small as a Twite, with the exception of Little Bunting *Emberiza pusilla*, which it clearly did not fit. At this stage, the possibility of its belonging to the New World sparrows was also considered, but lack of experience of this group prevented any further thoughts on its identity without a literature search.

Fortunately, while RAB still had the bird under surveillance, J. Watt arrived and, during the next 15 to 20 minutes, he was independently able to confirm all the points previously noted, although the bird continued to give only frustrating, fleeting glimpses. Having resigned themselves to the fact that, in the circumstances, they were unlikely to add anything further to their observations, they decided to enlist the help of other observers on the island and then return as soon as possible to attempt to catch the bird. It seemed particularly loathe to leave the area or even to come out into the

open, and they were satisfied that there was little likelihood of its moving to a different area. RAB returned to the Observatory, where he described what he had seen, and the bird became the topic of discussion over lunch. A brief search of the literature quickly eliminated the possibility of its being an American sparrow, since none was sufficiently small and drab. The possibility of its being an escaped cage bird was also considered, but again, in the light of the nondescript plumage, this too seemed unlikely.

After lunch, RAB and JW returned to Skerryholm with A. R. Lowe and several others and thoroughly searched the area, but without success. During the next few days, there were no further sightings and hope of satisfactorily identifying the bird faded: the views and notes obtained had been brief and frustrating and, so it seemed, inadequate. Despite many observers searching the area daily, the bird remained undetected until 5th October, when S. D. Cook, ARL and WEO had fleeting glimpses of a small bunting in a large and dense crop of rape at Taing. Their observations confirmed all the characters previously noted and they were able on one occasion to make direct comparison with a nearby Reed Bunting *E. schoeniclus*, which was noticeably larger. That evening, ARL and WEO applied themselves afresh to considering the possible identity of the bird. Nearctic sparrows were again considered. WEO was familiar with the only member of this group to show white in the outer tail feathers, Vesper Sparrow *Poocetes gramineus*, but this was quickly eliminated on size and plumage. They decided to work on the theory that the bunting was of Siberian origin and consequently sifted their way through Dementiev & Gladkov (1954). The illustrations are poorly reproduced in the translation available and they were forced to examine painstakingly the rather verbose descriptions. Most species were eliminated on size alone and the comment 'lacks moustachial stripes' drew attention to Pallas's Reed Bunting *E. pallasi*. By the end of the evening, ARL and WEO felt confident enough to suggest tentatively that the bird was indeed a female of this species.

During the next few days, the bird was seen in the same place by several people, but observations continued to be hampered by its skulking habits. It was difficult to flush and, when it did appear, it tended to dip and dive into cover in the manner of a Dunnock *Prunella modularis*, in contrast to the behaviour of nearby Reed Buntings. Everyone agreed that it was extraordinarily featureless, but, little by little, the following description was pieced together in the field:

SIZE AND JIZZ Smaller than Reed Bunting and about same length as Twite; rather scrawny, like Reed Bunting, and not stocky like Little Bunting. **PLUMAGE** Duller and darker than Reed Bunting, completely lacking any warm brown or chestnut tones. Upperparts generally dull brown, likened to colour of Redwing *Turdus iliacus*; mantle quite strongly streaked with blackish-brown and showing paler braces similar to many buntings, but these not very bright; faintly greyish tinge on nape gave slightly collared effect; rump appeared a little greyer than rest of upperparts, but not

easily seen. Facial pattern very indistinct, with faint darker streaks on crown; no clear supercilium, but greyish-white half-supercilium behind eye; orbital ring dull, off-white; ear-coverts dull brown, with dark smudge on cheeks, which lacked any dark edgings; moustachial pattern totally lacking. Wings: primaries dull brown, a little paler than secondaries; coverts with no obvious paler or warmer edgings and all looked heavily worn. Tail dark brownish-grey, with white in outer feathers. Underparts: from throat down, generally dull, greyish-white,

becoming cleaner white on belly and undertail-coverts; a little streaking on sides of upper breast formed into two small triangles on either side, otherwise only a few very faint streaks across pectoral area and only very faint greyish striations along flanks. **BARE PARTS** Bill small, conical and mid greyish-

horn. Legs pale greyish-brown. **CALL** Heard on several occasions, a soft 'chi-weep', recalling House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, but not as thick or low-pitched; once or twice, this call was more explosive and recalled Richard's Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae*.

In an effort to establish its identity beyond doubt and rule out the unlikely possibility of its being a runt or aberrant Reed Bunting, several attempts were made to trap the bird before it was finally mist-netted at Taing late on 10th October. It was examined in the hand at the Observatory, where it was seen by several observers, most of whom had also seen it in the field. These included RAB, SDC, H. Gilston, R. J. Johns, ARL, WEO, the late R. A. Richardson, Dr A. G. G. Thomson and JW. It was ringed, measured, photographed in poor light and a detailed plumage description taken before it was roosted overnight. During the evening, RAR completed a water-colour sketch of the bird. The following morning, it was released back at Taing, but was not seen subsequently.

The following details were taken in the hand:

UPPERPARTS Forehead and crown, feathers with dark brown centres and paler, fawny-brown fringes, a few feathers, especially on forehead, appeared a little warmer; nape a little greyer than crown and feathers without dark centres, but some of the longest, lowest feathers with dark central streak; mantle feathers with broad dark brown centres and whitish-buff fringes (where not too heavily abraded) giving impression of dark bird with paler streaks; rump very pale grey, especially at base of tail, considerably greyer than mantle, feathers greyish-white with narrow darker, slightly gingery central streaks, many feathers heavily abraded and with exposed grey bases. **HEAD** Eye-ring indistinct and incomplete, off-white, paler than rest of head;

ear-coverts gingery-fawn, a little darker posteriorly and generally a little browner and paler than nape; lores mottled, similar to ear-coverts, although perhaps marginally greyer; no moustachial stripe. **TAIL** Extremely abraded, very dark brown; central feathers browner; outer feathers with diagonal line of demarcation between white and dark brown crossing shaft 28mm from tip and giving mainly white outer web and white wedge distally on inner web; penultimate feather with narrow white wedge on inner web extending 9mm along shaft from tip. **WINGS** Primaries and secondaries much abraded, dull medium brown, with very narrow gingery-brown fringes a little broader on secondaries and innermost two primaries;



210 & 211. Adult female Pallas's Reed Bunting *Emberiza pallasi*, Shetland, October 1976 (R. A. Broad)



Fig. 1. Adult female Pallas's Reed Bunting *Emberiza pallasi*, Shetland, October 1976 (from colour painting by the late R. A. Richardson, loaned by Fair Isle Bird Observatory)

tertiaries heavily abraded, a little darker than secondaries, fringes with suggestion of warmer tinge, innermost heavily abraded, but showing buff-white outer web where protected by coverts; primary coverts and alula similar to primaries; greater coverts with darker centres than secondaries and narrow buff-white only at tip; lesser coverts grey, centres a little darker than fringes; undersides of primaries and secondaries greyish-brown, with silvery tone; underwing-coverts dusky off-white, and axillaries a little darker. UNDERPARTS Chin off-white, surrounded by feathers with brown centres, paler, warmer fringes and rusty-brown tips, these extending upwards nearly to bill on each side, rather more strongly marked in lower throat region, forming partial gorget at sides of neck, and, when viewed head-on, these gave impression

of two distinct patches, recalling Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*, darker towards bill; belly, vent and undertail-coverts off-white, with greyish wash; flanks greyer than belly, probably partly due to severe abrasion and exposure of feather bases; thighs a little warmer and browner. BARE PARTS Bill: upper mandible dark greyish-black, lower mandible a little paler, with greyish-pink tinge at sides and towards gape. Eye dark brown-black. Legs dull fleshy-brown; claws grey. MEASUREMENTS Wing 67 mm (abraded); bill 11 mm; tarsus 17 mm; tail 56 mm (abraded); weight 14.2 g. WING FORMULA 1st primary 7 mm shorter than primary coverts; 3rd and 4th longest; 2nd -2 mm; 5th -2.5 mm; 6th -3 mm; 7th -6.5 mm; 8th -9 mm; 9th -9.5 mm; 10th -12 mm; emarginations on 3rd, 4th, 5th and slightly on 6th.

While in captivity, it often uttered a single anxiety note which was rendered as a cross between the calls of House Sparrow and Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*.

In the hand, all the plumage was found to be exceedingly heavily worn, which suggested that the bird was an adult that had delayed its moult. The feather wear was normal except for the degree, and there were no obvious signs that the bird had recently been in captivity. Comparison of the details with Dementiev & Gladkov (1954) indicated that the wing formula was theoretically correct for both Pallas's Reed and Reed Bunting; all the measurements, however, were consistent with the former, and the plumage details compared favourably with the only details at our disposal of a female Pallas's Reed Bunting. Confirmation of its identity was found in Svensson (1975): the Reed Bunting appears to be the only species from which it needs separation; together with size, the lack of chestnut brown in the lesser wing-coverts, the practically unstreaked dusky or buffish-white rump and

the unstreaked or very nearly unstreaked underparts are given as diagnostic.

Shortly after their return to the mainland, WEO and RJJ visited the British Museum, Tring, where they were able to examine skins of Pallas's Reed Buntings. Among the skins, there were a number which—when allowance had been made for the abrasion—closely resembled the Fair Isle bird. Clearly, the original identification had been correct: it was an adult female Pallas's Reed Bunting which had delayed its moult. This record constitutes the first for Britain and Ireland.

Distribution of the species

Vaurie (1959) gave the breeding range of Pallas's Reed Bunting as central and eastern Siberia, probably northwest Manchuria and also Tian Shian in Chinese Turkestan (fig. 2). Within these boundaries, the question of geographical races is somewhat unclear. Vaurie (1959) gave three forms: the northern *E. p. polaris*, the southern *E. p. pallasi*, and *E. p. lydiae* from the lacustrine depression of Outer Mongolia, which carries a caveat suggesting that it may be sufficiently distinct to warrant specific status. Dementiev & Gladkov (1954) considered that only the southern and northern forms were sufficiently substantiated.



Fig. 2. Breeding distribution of Pallas's Reed Bunting *Emberiza pallasi* (after Dementiev & Gladkov 1954). Dotted lines indicate incompletely clarified boundaries

E. p. polaris (the northern Polar Bunting of Dementiev & Gladkov) nests throughout the greater part of the species' breeding range, predominantly on lowland tundra and river valleys with shrub thickets. *E. p. pallasi* (the southern Polar Bunting of Dementiev & Gladkov) also nests in the subalpine zone, mainly between 2,200 and 2,400m, but the boundary between the two forms is incompletely known. The species is migratory and in winter is found in Outer and Inner Mongolia, Korea and northern China south to the inner Yangtze (Vaurie 1959), where it is found mainly in the plains, preferring irrigated areas with shrub and reed thickets. Stragglers have been recorded well to the west of the breeding range within the Soviet Union (Dementiev & Gladkov 1954). Although Heinzel *et al.* (1974) and

Bruun & Singer (1975) referred to a vagrant very much farther west, in Denmark, this record (of an adult male on 3rd May 1954: *Dansk Ornitologisk Forenings Tidsskrift* 48: 219-220) was not accepted in recent official Danish check-lists (Salomonsen 1963, Dybbro 1978).

Plumage variation within the species

In general, the southern form, *E. p. pallasi*, averages a little larger and is generally lighter in colour than *E. p. polaris*, with the longitudinal dark streaking less well developed (Dementiev & Gladkov 1954). The Fair Isle individual was judged most closely to resemble skins labelled *E. p. montanus* collected in Turkestan. The taxonomic position of this form is unclear; it is mentioned neither by Vaurie (1959) nor by Dementiev & Gladkov (1954), although there is reference in the latter work to *Cynchramus p. montana*, which is given as a synonym of *E. p. pallasi*. The fact that skins labelled *E. p. pallasi* were quite distinct, being clearly paler and buffer than those labelled *E. p. montanus*, does little to clarify this confusing situation. It is, however, quite clear that, within the species, there is considerable variation in plumage, both seasonal and individual, and this should be kept in mind in case this species should reappear here. This variation is further emphasised by Kitson (1979), who described birds in—or approaching—breeding plumage in Mongolia. The plumage of the Fair Isle bird differed in a number of ways from Kitson's adult female Pallas's Reeds. In essence, it was a considerably toned-down version, washed over in dull browns and off-whites, which obscured the salient features, especially the supercilium and the malar stripes shown in Kitson's drawings. Mention by Kitson of the lesser wing-coverts being chestnut and apparently identical to those of Reed Buntings is also at variance with the Fair Isle bird, as it is with Svensson (1975), who gave the grey lesser wing-coverts of Pallas's Reed as a diagnostic feature of the species.

Other Siberian species at Fair Isle in September 1976

D. I. M. Wallace, in O'Sullivan *et al.* (1977), drew attention to the complex fall of Siberian and Asiatic species at Fair Isle and on the British east coast between 25th and 27th September 1976. On Fair Isle, however, vagrants with such easterly origins arrived throughout the second half of the month (Broad 1976). The first was a Lanceolated Warbler *Locustella lanceolata* on 14th, followed by another on 17th and a Pechora Pipit *Anthus gustavi*. Then came a Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler *L. certhiola* on 20th, a Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola* on 22nd, the first of several Richard's Pipits on 23rd and a Stonechat *Saxicola torquata* showing the characteristics of one of the eastern races *maura* or *stepnegeri* on 27th, when there was also a Pallas's Warbler *Phylloscopus proregulus* at the southern tip of mainland Shetland. Owing to its extremely skulking behaviour, it is a matter for conjecture how long the Pallas's Reed Bunting had gone undetected before the first sighting on 27th September and where exactly its arrival fits in a calendar so full of eastern rarities.

Acknowledgments

We were very glad to have the benefit of the late R. A. Richardson's artistic talent, particularly

in the form of his water-colour painting of the bird. Sadly, the original went astray in the post, but a copy commissioned by H. Gilston has since kindly been donated to the Fair Isle Bird Observatory. The help of the staff of the British Museum is fully acknowledged for allowing WEO to examine skins in their collection at Tring; and we were both very grateful for the help of R. J. Johns during the final deliberations and during the examination of the skins.

Summary

An adult female Pallas's Reed Bunting *Emberiza pallasii* was discovered on Fair Isle, Shetland, on 29th September 1976, and was last seen on 11th October; it was trapped on 10th October. This is the first record of this Asiatic species in Britain and Ireland.

References

- BROAD, R. A. 1976. Fair Isle Bird Observatory Report.
- BRUN, B., & SINGER, A. 1975. *The Hamlyn Guide to Birds of Britain and Europe*. 2nd edn. London.
- DEMENTIEV, G. P., & GLADKOV, N. A. (eds.) 1954, translated 1970. *The Birds of the Soviet Union*. vol. 5. Israel Program for Scientific Translations, Jerusalem.
- DYBBRO, T. 1978. *Oversigt over Danmarks Fugle 1978*. Copenhagen.
- HEINZEL, H., FITTER, R., & PARSLow, J. 1974. *The Birds of Britain and Europe with North Africa and the Middle East*. 3rd edn. London.
- KITSON, A. R. 1979. Identification of Olive-backed Pipit, Blyth's Pipit and Pallas's Reed Bunting. *Brit. Birds* 72: 94-100.
- O'SULLIVAN, J., & THE RARITIES COMMITTEE. 1977. Report on rare birds in Great Britain in 1976. *Brit. Birds* 70: 405-453.
- SALOMONSEN, F. 1963. *Oversigt over Danmarks Fugle*. Copenhagen.
- SVENSSON, L. 1975. *Identification Guide to European Passerines*. 2nd edn. Stockholm.
- VAURIE, C. 1959. *The Birds of the Palearctic Fauna: Passeriformes*. London.

Roger A. Broad, 5 Birch Place, Culloden, Inverness IV1 2LB
W. E. Oddie, 74 South Hill Park, London NW3