

## FIELD-NOTES ON SOME ASIAN LEAF-WARBLED— I

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ONLY three species of leaf-warblers or willow-warblers\* (*Phylloscopus*) are common and regular visitors to Britain, but twelve forms, belonging to nine different species, have been recorded at one time or another. These, however, represent less than half the genus. In his *A Systematic Review of the Genus Phylloscopus*, published in 1938, C. B. Ticehurst recognized thirty species, and sixty-seven forms. Some of the races are as easy as (or no less difficult than) some of the species to identify in the field. It is not suggested that any large proportion of those not now on the British list are ever likely to occur. But Pallas's Leaf Warbler\* (*Ph. proregulus*) has reached Britain twice and Heligoland at least three times from Central Asia, whilst the Crowned Warbler (*Ph. coronatus*) from north-east China, and the south-western race of the Greenish Warbler (*Ph. trochiloides nitidus*)—often known as the Green Warbler—from Transcaspia or further east, seem to have reached Heligoland once each; so that almost anything is possible. There may accordingly be value in drawing attention to some of the closely related species and races not known in Europe; and in particular in suggesting points of plumage, structure, behaviour or call-note, which should be specially looked out for.

Every coastal trapping-station should no doubt, and I hope does, possess a copy of C. B. Ticehurst's monograph. Much of what follows can be found there. But Ticehurst himself indicated that what was most needed to supplement his treatise was further field-work. A too little-known ornithologist, W. E. Brooks, who worked on the group in India in the 1870's, convinced himself that each species or race had a distinct call-note. My own experience in recent years leads me to doubt this. Call-notes are undoubtedly important, but as we know with our two commonest English leaf-warblers, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish even distinct species by the call-note alone; yet, on the other hand, there is variety between the call-notes of some of the several races, at any rate in the case of the Chiffchaff (*Ph. collybita*).

Since Brooks's day, little field-work seems to have been undertaken by Indian ornithologists on this group of warblers, but they have always attracted me; and in the past ten years I have spent many hours watching individuals in the field, both in summer-quarters in the Himalayas and in winter-quarters in the Indian plains. Naturally, there are still a number of species that I do not know: and as it happens, one of these is a bird on the British list, namely Radde's Warbler (*Ph. schwarzi*). It normally winters further east than India. I hope, however, that what I may say will be a useful supplement to the information already available.

Ticehurst, in his key to the genus, separates in the first place

\* See appendix on English names, p. 298.

the species which have a wing-bar from those which have not. This is a convenient (but as I shall shortly show somewhat dangerous) way of splitting the genus in two, and I am following him in it. This paper will be concerned solely with those species that have a wing-bar. A second paper will discuss the species that have no wing-bar, together with some small brown warblers of other genera, *Hippolais* and *Acrocephalus*, which in some species approximate very closely to the browner *Phylloscopi*.

The species on the British list which normally have wing-bars are four:— *Ph. borealis* (Arctic), *Ph. trochiloides* (Greenish), *Ph. inornatus* (Yellow-browed) and *Ph. proregulus* (Pallas's). In field-work I have found that a second broad division of the genus, and especially of those with wing-bars, is as between the larger birds with longer tails and the smaller with shorter tails. It happens that the first two of the above are larger, the other two smaller. It will be convenient to discuss them in these two sections (A and B).

#### A—LARGER LEAF-WARBLERS WITH WING-BARS

The Greenish Warbler (*Ph. trochiloides*) has, as a species, a vast breeding-range, having been found nesting from the Baltic coast in the north to the Caucasus in the south, right across Russia and Asia to the Pacific coast on the Sea of Okhotsk. But it seems to be as variable a species as the Chiffchaff. Ticehurst gives six subspecies. I have seen birds in winter in India which do not fit readily into any of these. Those that have occurred in Britain have all been identified as *Ph. t. viridanus*. It is possible, however, that *Ph. t. nitidus* (which may be a distinct species), and *Ph. t. plumbeitarsus*, the latter a wide-ranging form, might occur. *Viridanus* is the common form in India in winter; but several other forms are also recorded. *Nitidus*, which winters in south India and Ceylon, is well-called the Green Warbler, for it is a richer and yellower green than any of the rest; moreover, it has a very clearly marked wing-bar. *Plumbeitarsus* is a bird I have never seen; it is darker and greener on the mantle than *viridanus* and should show two narrow pale wing-bars. It must look a good deal like the Arctic Warbler in the field. In the whole species there seems, however, to be a good deal of individual variation, not all of it due to abrasion. Some individuals do not fit the English name (Greenish). In *viridanus* as often as not the wing-bar is scarcely visible or totally invisible in the field. Moreover, often, even in bright sunlight, individuals look quite brown, without a trace of green.

Here is a quotation from my notes: "Between 11th and 17th April 1953 I was staying at Ootacamund (Nilgiri Hills, S. India) and I was surprised to discover a number of *Phylloscopi* still in their winter-quarters. I not infrequently heard the double call-note of *Ph. trochiloides*. With perhaps one exception, those I saw seemed to be totally lacking in green. The first I saw, in a bush below me, I at first mistook for an *Acrocephalus*. The underside

was nearly white (very slightly grey, or buffy-grey), upper-parts pale brown, edges of secondaries tinged with yellow. Superciliary dirty white, fairly distinct. One short, whitish wing-bar. Bill brown, lower mandible with little or no orange, perhaps variable; legs brown." These would probably all be referable to *viridanus*. In other parts of India I have seen individuals of this same race with olive-brown or even almost olive-green mantle, the wing-bar (as already noted) invisible, and the lower mandible a rather bright orange at the base.

I have thought it important to draw the attention of British observers (especially those who may have opportunities of handling the species at trapping-stations) to the great variety of this species. Let me add that in my experience, one of the most reliable field-characters is the bright coloured lower mandible. The note already quoted from the Nilgiris provides the only exception, in my experience, to the reliability of this character. It applies, I believe, to all the three races that might occur in Britain.

The song of the Greenish Warbler, excellently described by R. Thearle (*antea*, vol. xlvii, p. 408) as "a loud, hurried, high-pitched warble", is often to be heard in India in early autumn when the birds arrive from the north; I personally have not heard it in the spring before the birds depart for their breeding-grounds.

The Arctic (or Eversmann's) Warbler (*Ph. borealis*), which I have only seen once in the field (on Fair Isle, September 1954) struck me as being a deeper, more intense green on the mantle than any other species known to me. The long, pale superciliary stripe is a striking feature; the pale wing-bar (or bars) is also visible as soon as a fairly good view is obtained, especially if the bird is seen from behind. It could easily be confused with *Ph. t. nitidus*, but the bill is dark, and if this feature is carefully noted, together with the other points already mentioned, identification is sure. The bird seen on Fair Isle was in company with a Willow Warbler (*Ph. trochilus*). When both were together on a wire fence there was little if any visible difference in size. The Arctic is, on measurement, the largest of the genus, but it is doubtful if this is a useful field-character. It should be added that the bird referred to was identified by K. Williamson as a juvenile; the adult, he tells me, is not such an intense green. The mantle can look almost the colour of that of a Wood Warbler (*Ph. sibilatrix*). But the under-parts lack the contrasting yellow and white of the under-parts of that species.

Reference may also be made to *Ph. magnirostris*, the Large-billed Leaf Warbler, a species which breeds plentifully in the hill-ranges to the north and north-east of India. It migrates to the extreme south of India and to Ceylon. Ticehurst says: "With *borealis* (the Arctic Warbler), the largest of the *Phylloscopi*. On size and colouration probably could not be differentiated in the field from *borealis* and *trochiloides*, but the best guide is the very distinct

call-note well expressed by 'dir-tee', the second syllable half an octave higher than the first."

To this, I would add a few qualifications. Here again the bill is an important feature; not only is it in fact a rather broad and long bill for a *Phylloscopus*, as its scientific name indicates, but it also looks much darker than the bill of *Ph. trochiloides*, though it is very similar to the bill of *Ph. borealis*. The wing-bar (in the field I have never detected a second wing-bar) appears to be a somewhat variable quality. It is typically an arboreal bird, feeding and singing rather high up in pine or other ever-green trees, so that exact field-observation is difficult. From notes made in the field I should say that the upper plumage appears olive-brown with a tinge of green, the under-parts uniform dirty-white, with a tinge of yellow; there is a long pale supercilium. As already noted, *borealis* is normally a greener bird than *magnirostris*. In the case of the only bird I have been able to watch close to the ground for a couple of minutes (it was a passing migrant), I observed that the plumage, especially the wings, appeared to be brown-grey, lacking the olive tinge which is usual in *trochiloides*: the under-parts were dirty-white, lacking the yellow tinge of *trochiloides*: it showed a long pale yellow supercilium, perhaps longer than *trochiloides*, and had a much darker bill, as just noted. Occasionally, *magnirostris* shows a little white in the inner web of the outer tail-feathers and this I once noticed (without knowing at the time that it could be so) in a bird breeding in Kashmir. This feature is much more obvious in some of the small *Phylloscopi*.

Another common Indian species, the Kashmir Warbler (*Ph. occipitalis*), similar in size and general character, has a strikingly orange mandible; this bird is readily distinguished by a pale yellowish occipital streak along the crown between broad and dusky coronal bands. As it is a bird of comparatively restricted range, not known to breed west or north of Bokhara, it is unlikely to occur in western Europe.

The Crowned Warbler (*Ph. coronatus*) a much more easterly species which breeds in north China and adjacent countries, has once occurred on Heligoland. It is similar in general plumage to *Ph. occipitalis*, or it might be called the Far Eastern representative of the Wood Warbler; the mantle is green, the under-parts white; but instead of the yellow throat of the Wood Warbler, it has yellow under tail-coverts; and it has a single pale wing-bar and a pale occipital stripe. In the field it appears to be less volatile than most *Phylloscopi*.

#### B—SMALLER LEAF-WARBLERS WITH WING-BARS.

No less than eleven of Ticehurst's thirty species belong to this category. The majority are birds of the mountain massif which ranges from Afghanistan across northern India to west China; so it seems unlikely that they will straggle right across to western Europe. But then, who would have dreamed that Pallas's Leaf Warbler (*Ph. proregulus*), the smallest of the genus, would twice

reach the British Isles, and three times Heligoland, since the nearest known breeding-ground is in the Altai mountains nearly four thousand miles due east (or even slightly south of east) from Britain? It is remarkable enough that small numbers of Yellow-browed Warblers (*Ph. i. inornatus*) apparently travel some 1500 miles westwards almost every year to Britain; for its only known European breeding territory is by the lower Pechora River. For each of these tiny birds that has been recorded, presumably a dozen or more must have passed unnoticed.

Geographically, perhaps the most likely bird in this group to turn up which has not already done so, is Hume's Yellow-browed Warbler (*Ph. i. humei*) which breeds no further away than *Ph. proregulus*. This race totally lacks the yellow tinge to the superciliary stripe that has given the species its English name. Hume's is a widely spread bird very common all over northern India in winter. Apart from its much whiter appearance, it has a distinct call-note; distinct that is from the note of typical *inornatus*. Unhappily, however, its call-note, normally a sharp fairly long double "tiss-yip", is almost indistinguishable from the note of *Ph. trochiloides*. Some watcher of the northern isles, who has heard the Greenish Warbler, and then one day finds a different *Phylloscopus*, small, short-tailed, grey-brown and white, with conspicuous wing-bars, uttering the same double note, might fairly conclude that he has Hume's Yellow-browed Warbler under observation. The colour of the bill is again important in this species. It is the only *Phylloscopus* with a dark tip to the lower mandible. This is a useful character if the bird is handled after trapping. It applies equally to both sub-species. The white tips to the secondaries of both sub-species are also conspicuous.

Several of the present group of *Phylloscopus* are fairly easy to identify if seen well. Thus the Orange-barred Warbler (*Ph. pulcher*) has striking orange wing-bars, a yellow rump and white in the outer tail-feathers. Baker's Warbler (*Ph. reguloides*) however, is another bright coloured little bird with yellowish wing-bars, but it has no yellow on the rump, or white in the tail, and its mantle is bright olive-green, not brownish as in *Ph. pulcher*. *Ph. reguloides*, in the breeding season, calls "kee-kew-i" constantly. *Ph. pulcher's* call-note is a single sharp "twick". The White-tailed Warbler (*Ph. davisoni*) is very near to *reguloides*, but has conspicuous white in the tail. The Grey-faced Warbler (*Ph. maculipennis*) is grey on most of the head, face and neck, contrasting with olive-green mantle. This is another species which has yellow wing-bars and white in the tail. Rickett's Warbler (*Ph. ricketti*) has a face-pattern like a small tiger, with black lateral coronal streaks contrasting with a pale yellowish central coronal band and bright yellow superciliary. The Pale-legged Warbler (*Ph. tenellipes*) perhaps comes nearest to *Ph. i. humei*, but it has a golden brown rump and the under-parts are pure white. These

last two species I saw on migration in south-west China in April 1943. They were easy to identify. There are three other small species with wing-bars whose ranges are restricted that they need not be mentioned.

It will be seen that *Ph. pulcher*, *Ph. maculipennis* and *Ph. tenellipes* have a yellow rump, which is also one of the striking features of *Ph. proregulus*. That feature alone, therefore, is by no means diagnostic of Pallas's Willow Warbler. The absence of white in the tail and of yellow in the wing-bars, however, together with the yellow rump, are diagnostic of Pallas's which also appears to be the only species that regularly flutters, like a Goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*), to take insects from the air just below the foliage of trees or bushes. This important field-character was observed in the Northumberland bird in 1951 (*antea*, vol. xlv, pp. 258-259).

#### SUMMARY

It is pointed out that a number of *Phylloscopi* never hitherto recorded from western Europe might occur with no less improbability than some which have occurred. In this paper only those which have a pale wing-bar or bars are dealt with. The Greenish Warbler (*Ph. trochiloides*) is shown to be a species with a wide range of plumage, and it sometimes shows no wing-bars at all in the field. Four species or forms of the group of larger leaf-warblers not hitherto recorded from Britain are referred to. The importance of noting the colour and shape of the bills of certain species is stressed. The group of small leaf-warblers with wing-bars is shown to be more extensive, but in most cases the field-characters are more distinct, and in several the distribution is restricted. Call-notes are often, but not invariably, important additional clues to identification.

At trapping-stations the wing-formula can often be of decisive importance. But in this article emphasis has been laid on features that can be of use in the field when the bird cannot be handled.

#### APPENDIX—ENGLISH NAMES OF LEAF-WARBLEDERS

There has not been any uniformity in applying English names to the birds of this genus. Collectively they are known as the leaf-warblers or willow-warblers. Ticehurst, in his monograph (1938), uses the scientific name only for individual forms. Probably the book in the English language, apart from Ticehurst's monograph, which describes the largest number of forms, is Stuart Baker's *Fauna of British India* (1922, etc.) where he deals with thirty-five forms and provides every one with an English name. Moreover, he calls every single one a willow-warbler. Even *Phylloscopus collybita tristis*, widely known, not only among British ornithologists, as the Siberian Chiffchaff, he calls the "Brown Willow-Warbler". Smythies, in the more recently published *Birds of Burma* (1940), also calls each form a willow-warbler, though he has only seventeen forms to describe, not including any race of *Ph. collybita*.

Witherby, on the other hand, in *The Handbook*, dealing with twelve forms, only applies the name "Willow-Warbler" to *Ph. trochilus*. So we have two extremes to choose from, or to compromise with. I think the case against including the English word "Willow" in front of Warbler in most cases is powerful. There is no point in giving birds longer names than is necessary to distinguish them satisfactorily. If the names used in the Asian books were, in fact, well established names in the areas in which the various species and races are common, then I for one should invite English ornithologists to adopt them. But it is not so. Nearly all are purely book names; and I notice that Salim Ali, who refers to six forms in his *Indian Hill Birds* (1949), though he calls them all willow-warblers, with the exception of the Chiffchaff, uses in some cases different English names from those used by Stuart Baker. In other words, many have no established English name in the parts of the world where they are regularly found. So it seems reasonable to use the shortest name wherever this is adequate. In certain cases, the only name I can find seems so cumbersome and unsatisfactory that I have been tempted to employ a new name. I have yielded to the temptation in one or two instances.

I am venturing two amendments with regard to the names now to be found in *The Handbook*. In the case of *Ph. proregulus*, I think to call it simply Pallas's Warbler is ambiguous. For there is also Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler (*Locustella certhiola*). So here it seems to me important to signify that Pallas's Leaf Warbler is the bird under consideration. On the other hand, I see no reason for calling *Ph. schwarzi*, Radde's Bush Warbler. No other warbler, as far as I know, has been named after Radde. I believe the name "Bush Warbler" was applied to it when it was put into a separate genus from *Phylloscopus*. If it is called "Bush Warbler" to emphasize the fact that it normally keeps near the ground, then several other members of the genus, such as the Dusky Warbler (*P. fuscatus*) ought also to be called bush-warblers. It is simpler to drop the needless word, and to call it Radde's Warbler.

It might be urged that the same principles should be applied to the *Acrocephali*. In fact, we normally call some of them reed-warblers, but not others. The Great Reed Warbler (*A. arundinaceus*) needs the middle name, because, while it is much larger than any other European warbler, in other parts of the world there occur other species, belonging to different genera, that are as large or larger. In the case of Blyth's Reed Warbler, this name seems to have been applied to *A. dumetorum* so generally and for so long that it seems unwise to try to change it. To my mind the same argument does not apply equally, and does not outweigh other factors already noted, in the case of Radde's Warbler.