

WATCH OUT FOR THE YAKUT WILLOW WARBLER

In the thirties, Ticehurst described a subspecies of Willow Warbler from eastern Siberia, *Phylloscopus trochilus yakutensis*. Although the subspecies has been identified on its winter grounds in eastern and southern Africa, little work seems to have been done on its migratory behaviour and breeding biology. The most recent guide to Soviet birds (Flint, *et al.* 1984) does not deal with this subspecies at all, confining its treatment to the binomial taxon *Phylloscopus trochilus*. There are no European records.

This short note reports a sight record from Malta. One bird was seen in the company of Wood Warblers (*P. sibilatrix*) at San Anton gardens on the 28th, 29th and 30 April 1987. The Rarities committee of the Malta Ornithological Society does not usually consider records of subspecies, and the record was not accepted formally. Nevertheless, it was transcribed in the records of the Committee. A similar bird was seen at San Anton gardens on 8 April 1980, again in the company of Wood warblers, but it was not identified at the time and was never submitted to the Rarities committee.

According to Williamson (1967) the upperparts of the Yakut Willow Warbler are grey brown, with only a trace of olive-green on the rump and edges to the wing and tail feathers. The underparts are dull white, clouded grey on the breast, and without any yellow except at the bend of the wing and on the thighs. The subspecies' breeding distribution according to Ticehurst (1938) is eastern Siberia, from the Taimyr peninsula and Angara river eastward to the Kolyma, Yana and Andayr rivers, south to about 60° North. On migration, it is said to skirt the deserts of central Asia to reach its winter grounds in eastern and southern Africa.

The Yakut Willow Warbler can be distinguished from Bonelli's Warbler (the species which it resembles most) as follows. The bird is large for a *Phylloscopus*, approaching the upper limits of size for Bonelli's Warbler (*Phylloscopus bonelli*). Whereas Bonelli's Warbler is generally greyish brown to brownish grey above, the Yakut Willow Warbler is grey enough to be colour sketched realistically using an HB pencil. Bonelli's warbler is usually paler on the head, while the Yakut Willow Warbler is as uniform in tone as a Willow Warbler. Finally, Bonelli's Warbler has primary edges which vary in colour from greenish-yellow to golden brown, giving a distinctive wing panel. This wing panel is completely lacking in the Yakut Willow Warbler. If the bird I saw at San Anton in 1987 is at all typical the yellowish green wash on the rump feathers is conspicuous enough in bright sunlight to be useful as a field character, if a dorsal view of the hovering bird is obtained. Williamson (1967) gives the impression that it is as inconspicuous as the edging to the wing and tail feathers. It is the yellowish rump which causes the bird to resemble a Bonelli's Warbler (particularly *P. bonelli orientalis*) as otherwise it would pass for an aberrant grey Willow Warbler.

This short note is primarily intended to alert European bird-watchers and ringers to the possibility of this *Phylloscopus* turning up at least as far west as Malta. In addition, the taxon is so distinctive in the field as to suggest that further study of its breeding behaviour is desirable. In particular, does it interbreed with the Willow Warblers to the west of its range? By comparison with other *Phylloscopi*, the Yakut Willow Warbler is easy to identify and this "true siberian" might well turn out to be a full species.

References

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