Letters

Distribution and identification of Iberian Chiffchaff

Collinson & Melling (2008) discussed the potential pitfalls of identifying vagrant Iberian Chiffchaffs *Phylloscopus ibericus* (*Brit. Birds* 101: 174–188). Some of their statements prompt a correction and a discussion.

Their paper showing the breeding range of the Iberian Chiffchaff (fig. 1, p. 175) is inaccurate. Rather than being widely spread over the entire Iberian Peninsula, Iberian Chiffchaff is confined largely to the westernmost Pyrenees and to western parts of the peninsula; away from this stronghold there are just isolated occurrences. A more accurate map is presented here (fig. 1), which has been prepared by Lars Svensson for a forthcoming revision of the *Collins Bird Guide* and is based mainly on information provided by myself and modern fieldwork by Spanish and Portuguese ornithologists. Collinson & Melling cited Martí & del Moral (2003) as a source for their map, but the latter showed both Iberian and Common Chiffchaffs *P. collybita* on the same map (owing to difficulties in separating the two species at the time). However, the text of the atlas is clear in mentioning the exclusive presence of *collybita* in Catalonia, Valencia, Murcia, Albacete and most of Soria, as well as in the Pyrenees in Huesca province.

Another point to discuss is the claimed validity of the subspecies *biscayensis*, described by Salomon *et al.* (2003). The type description mentions the allopatric distribution of a northern population (*biscayensis*) and a southern one (*ibericus*), differences in habitat selection between the two, and statistical differences in some morphological characters (including length of wing, tarsus and bill). However, Elias (2004) drew attention to the continuous rather than allopatric distribution of *ibericus* in western Iberia, based on several sources and good field knowledge (the continuous breeding range is conveniently supported by the map presented by Collinson & Melling themselves – and fig. 1 here). The claimed habitat preferences might simply be the product of different habitat availability in northern and southern parts of the Iberian Peninsula. In fact, riverine forests, one of the habitats preferred by Iberian Chiffchaffs, are occupied continuously from north to south (Elias 2004; pers. obs.). In addition, Salomon *et al.* (2003) found an average difference in wing length of only 1.28 mm between males of *biscayensis* and *ibericus* – by itself a very minor difference on which to base a new taxon, and one that is most likely to reflect simply a somewhat longer migration distance for northern Iberian birds to their winter quarters in Africa. Similar clinal differences probably exist within many taxa. Furthermore, Lars Svensson (pers. comm.) analysed his dataset of measurements of *ibericus* of known provenance and found that wing, tarsus, and bill co-varied geographically, all being a trifle larger in the north than in the south. This is in contrast to the data presented by Salomon *et al.* (2003), who found shorter tarsus and bill length for males in the north, but longer wing length. Svensson's dataset is limited (n=49), but it offers a different interpretation of the variation. Until other and more tangible differences are presented, it seems advisable to continue to treat *P. ibericus* as monotypic.

Collinson & Melling stated that Iberian and Common Chiffchaffs have virtually identical bill length, or that Iberian, if anything, has a shorter bill than Common Chiffchaff (based on unspecified biometrics). According to Svensson (pers. comm.), the bill of Iberian is fractionally longer on average, although the difference is very small (1.7% longer; *ibericus* 10.4–13.3 mm, mean 12.0, n=49; *collybita* 10.4–12.7, mean 11.8, n=122).

Collinson & Melling discussed identification pitfalls linked to the above-mentioned variation, postulating that Iberian Chiffchaffs from southern Iberia might be more difficult to separate on morphology from Common Chiffchaffs than northern ones. I have already pointed out that geographical variation in size is marginal, and that existing biometrics do not support the existence of a separate taxon. However, sexual dimorphism is a more significant problem, females being more similar between the two species than males (females of both species having shorter and more rounded wings and being less distinct). This was not discussed by Collinson & Melling.

I would advise ringers who catch a potential Iberian Chiffchaff in Britain to refer to the discriminant formula worked out by Svensson

(2001) (the multiple character value or 'MCV'). At a symposium in Riello, León, in May 2007, devoted solely to the identification of Iberian Chiffchaff and related subjects, it was agreed that this formula worked best of those available. The formula, used in combination with the coloration of certain feather tracts (ear-coverts, hind neck, breast, and mantle), has been tested in field conditions by Onrubia & Arroyo (2003) on a large sample of ringed birds (>400), in northern and southern Spain. More than 80% of the birds could be identified using the formula and the plumage characters in combination. Most ringers with experience of the species in Iberia agree that this MCV is a useful method by which to discriminate a majority of Iberian Chiffchaffs.

Finally, the moult status should be considered when handling a possible Iberian Chiffchaff. Monteagudo *et al.* (2003) found that all of a sample of 12 second-calendar-year birds had eccentric (partial) primary moult, all or most of P1–P6 (counted from the outside inwards) being renewed during an extensive post-juvenile winter moult. They confirmed the age of these birds as first-year birds after retrapping several birds ringed locally the previous year. Moult of the outer primaries by Common Chiffchaff in winter/spring is extremely rare. Out of several thousand birds checked in spring in Spain, very few cases of replaced primaries have been encountered (<1%; Gargallo & Clarabuch 1995; pers. obs.). It may thus be useful to note the moult of a suspected Iberian Chiffchaff and look for two generations of primaries. The two generations of feathers are easiest to detect in early spring (March–April) and become less obvious through wear in mid May.

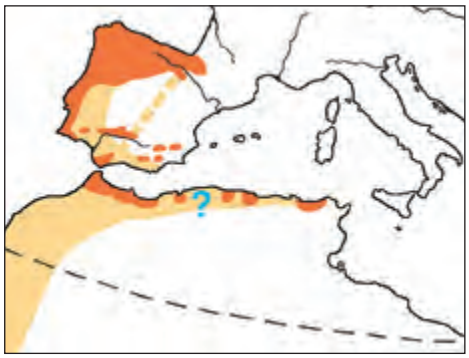

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Fig. 1. Distribution of Iberian Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus ibericus* (dark orange shows breeding range, abandoned in winter, pale orange shows distribution on migration).

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Mixed-singing Iberian Chiffchaffs: is it their 'swan song'?

The map in the recent paper on Iberian Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus ibericus* (Collinson & Melling 2008) is not really right from a French point of view. The most up-to-date information (Dubois *et al.* in press) suggests (approximately) that Iberian Chiffchaff breeds *only* in the orange-shaded area of the map shown by Collinson & Melling – i.e. the area where they suggested that this species hybridises with Common Chiffchaff *P. collybita*.

During the past 10–15 years, the breeding range of Iberian Chiffchaff in France has been greatly reduced, leaving just a very small area in the extreme southwest. From the limited information available, it is clear that this is now a severely declining species in France. In many places, it has disappeared and been superseded by Common Chiffchaff. For example, in an area above Biarritz, Pyrénées-Atlantiques, there is now no Iberian where, about 15–20 years ago

there were some 20 singing birds (J. F. Terrasse pers. comm.). Common Chiffchaff is now a widespread species there. There are other examples where Common Chiffchaff has taken over areas formerly occupied by Iberian. In other places where Iberian was heard several years ago, only mixed singers are now heard in spring (J.-L. Grangé *in litt.*). During the 1990s, the French population was estimated to be 10,000–30,000 pairs (Dubois *et al.* 2000). Now, the population probably barely exceeds 5,000 pairs (Dubois *et al.* in press). Over the same period, there has been an upsurge of extralimital records in France, with 20 records up to 2007, most of them since the 1980s.

Hybridisation is perhaps the most logical explanation for mixed songs. However, a pure Iberian could perfectly well incorporate some Common Chiffchaff phrases in its song, in a situation either where there is a shortage of partners or where it is far away from traditional breeding areas. It would be difficult to establish whether such mixed song is simply a 'conflict song' or if the advertising song includes some Common Chiffchaff elements to improve the chances of finding a partner in a non-assortative mating system. There is no direct evidence for the latter hypothesis, but a shortage of partners in the core breeding area might conceivably be one factor in the recent upsurge of extralimital singing males in France (and elsewhere in northwestern Europe). In short, all 'mixed' singers are not *inevitably* hybrids but could include true Iberian Chiffchaffs in search of a mate.

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Colour nomenclature

Martin Woodcock's reflections upon 'colour nomenclature' (*Brit. Birds* 101: 259) confirm the importance of the topic but I think that he is a little pessimistic in his conclusions. While the editors of *British Birds* undoubtedly try to ensure the accuracy of graphics appearing in the journal, I am sure they would acknowledge that its colour reproduction does not adhere to any precise colour standard, and that economic constraints preclude such close colour-control. Unfortunately, the printed versions of the colour swatches in my letter (Colour nomenclature and Siberian Chiffchaffs, *Brit Birds* 101: 146–149) have been impaired by an overall green bias and the RGB values of several of the individual hues are significantly different from the originals. However, the annotated colour swatch was intended to *illustrate a point* (or technique) and not of itself to provide a standard reference for the colours cited. Indeed, as my letter emphasised, publication of a new and readily accessible reference for 'colour standards' is a pre-requisite for consistent colour nomenclature. In practice, colour citations would be based upon closely controlled swatches in such a guide and certainly not upon less precise graphics appearing in journals and magazines. When cited hues are accompanied by their associated numerical parameters (including RGB or CMYK values among others), then they do constitute an objective standard.

Martin Woodcock is right to highlight the difficulties which beset accurate colour reproduction but, when colour fidelity is set as a priority, then a high degree of accuracy is achievable using modern colour-printing techniques – though at a cost. Martin's comments upon the subjectivity of colour naming and colour perception simply echo the fourth and fifth paragraphs of my letter and are, of course, the very reasons why I have advocated a new and readily available colour standard. Although absolute terminology will remain elusive, an accessible 'colour standard' would provide a consistent point of reference and would be immeasurably preferable to the ambiguity that currently besets colour nomenclature.

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Past British birds and the Sherborne Missal

Bill Bourne's letter (*Brit. Birds* 101: 214) provides further information on possible past British breeding birds but my own research into the bird portraits in the fifteenth-century Sherborne Missal suggests some alternative interpretations, which may affect their value as evidence for past populations.

For example, I disagree that the Missal shows 'a young Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*'. The image shows a pale brown bird covered with distinct black streaks, many showing transverse dark bars, and appears more likely to be a Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*. I agree that the 'Waryghanger' shows enough characters to be reasonably considered a Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis*, but the 'Viuene Cok' is altogether less satisfactory. It does have the characteristic head pattern of a Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator* but, given the accuracy of that depiction, it is surprising that the body lacks obvious field marks, notably the white scapular patches, while it has an atypically spotted and barred tail.

The images of birds in the Sherborne Missal fall into three distinct groups. The first is of species that are instantly recognisable and acutely observed. This group seems to be made up predominantly of species of culinary significance and includes Common Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*, Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* and Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*. The second group is predominantly of passerines or smaller non-passerines which, like the 'Viuene Cok', frequently show extraordinary inconsistencies of plumage. Among these is a 'Mose Cok' which, given the constraints of the medium, is a fair likeness of a Great Tit *Parus major*, but with the wing of a Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*. The third group is described by Backhouse (2001) and Yapp (1982) as being of 'imaginary birds', many of them bizarre in form but still with some recognisable parts.

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These plumage discrepancies could be explained if, among the copy books used for reference by scribes and illuminators, some held a stock of dried fragments of birds; it is a simple matter to preserve wings, tails, legs and even heads of small birds in this way. They are easily portable and would provide a useful source of true colour and pattern in an age before field guides or even effective taxidermy. Given that the first group of illustrations demonstrate considerable familiarity with the species in question, the discrepancies in the other two groups could result from reliance on this sort of fragmentary reference by someone unfamiliar with the species. Stylistically, there is evidence of French influence in the Sherborne Missal (Yapp 1982) and a tradition of bird images in contemporary French manuscripts. Both ideas and reference material might have been shared or traded between France and England and the origins of relatively inert material such as dried wings and tails could have been even farther away.

This is merely a hypothesis but it suggests an alternative explanation for the apparent presence of southern species in fifteenth-century Dorset. The Sherborne Missal also contains convincing illustrations of an apparent Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*, Peacock (Indian Peafowl) *Pavo cristatus* and even an Ostrich *Struthio camelus*; the last probably derived from an earlier bestiary. We have no difficulty in rejecting the notion that these were part of the avian community of medieval Dorset and we should exercise caution in interpreting manuscript images as evidence of the former status of unusual species.

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Bill Bourne's suggestion (*Brit. Birds* 101: 214) that the birds reported nesting on St Giles' in Edinburgh in 1416 might have been Grey Herons *Ardea cinerea* and not White Storks *Ciconia ciconia* is not very convincing. The report originates with Walter Bower, abbot of Inchcolm Abbey in the Firth of Forth, who had some passing interest in natural history and would have known the heron very well as a shore bird, no doubt visible daily from his study. He wrote *Scotichronicon* as a record of remarkable events. This is exactly what he said,

in the most recent translation (Watt 1998): 'In the same year a pair of birds called storks [*ciconiarium*] came to Scotland and nested on the church of St Giles in Edinburgh. They stayed there for part of the year, but where they went afterwards is unknown. They give the greatest care to their offspring, as Pliny says, to the extent that while they are carefully looking after their nests, they continuously cast their soft feathers while lying down. But no less extraordinary devotion is shown by the chicks to their mothers, for however long the mothers have spent on the training of their young, they are supported by the chicks for as long. Hence the stork is called the affectionate bird.'

The point is not whether the comment attributed to Pliny is correct or not (it was actually by the third-century AD naturalist Solinus, who added among other things that storks were migratory, ate serpents and were held in high regard). Rather, it emphasises how Bower is reporting on something remarkable and unfamiliar, and that he explicitly relates it to the storks upon which the classical naturalist had commented. In context, the evidence that White Stork and not Grey Heron was intended by Bower seems strong.

Bill's comment that in a 'deforested Edinburgh' Grey Herons might have nested on St Giles' overlooks the fact that the first plan of Edinburgh, from the English siege of 1544, shows some trees within the city, and the second, of 1573, shows stylised clumps of trees to the north and south of the city walls. There is no reason to think that these were a new feature. Herons in any case very seldom nest on buildings and perhaps have never been recorded doing so on an occupied building; the only reference I can find anywhere of a Grey Heron breeding on a man-made construction of any sort is one on the wall of a ruined croft on Oronsay, Argyll (Forrester *et al.* 2007).

The main reason adduced for supposing that the reference may be to Grey Herons is the fact that the court accounts of James V in the early sixteenth century refer to the provision of both storks (*ciconii*) and herons (*ardeae*) for the royal table. Some of the references to *ciconii* were in winter. As White Storks were unlikely to have been residents in Scotland at that time, the conclusion is drawn that the clerks who drew up the accounts used both Latin terms interchangeably for Grey Herons, and that if they had done so in 1530, the term *ciconii* could also have meant 'heron' in 1416. Perhaps indeed these particular clerks were so careless, though that is no reason to assume that Bower was also. But another explanation could be that the two terms were not interchangeable at all, and that storks were imported for food, as Bill says they apparently were in sixteenth-century England. Scotland, no less than England, had vibrant and immediate cultural and commercial contact with the south of Europe. Syphilis, for instance, was first reported in Europe in 1495 and in Edinburgh in 1497 – if bacilli could be instantaneously imported, so could storks. Kept in cages, as was common with large birds reared for food at the time, the storks could have been eaten at feasts in summer or winter.

In the same letter, Bill proposed that on the basis of the Sherborne Missal we should consider the Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*, the Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis* and the Woodchat Shrike *L. senator* as possible English breeding birds but, as he himself has observed elsewhere (Bourne 2007), the missal artistically shows strong continental influence, possibly French, and is perhaps of little value for English ornithological history. Many Englishmen of the age of Henry V would have been well acquainted with France and could perhaps have given the birds which they saw in the fields and vineyards English names.

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