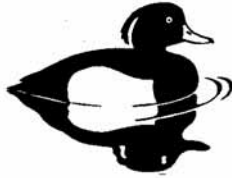


# The Birds of Berkshire



Annual Report  
2008

Published 2012

# Berkshire Ornithological Club

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The Berkshire Ornithological Club (BOC) was founded as Reading Ornithological Club in 1947 to promote education and study of wild birds, their habitats and their conservation, initially in the Reading area but now on a county wide basis. It is affiliated to the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO). Membership is open to anyone interested in birds and bird-watching, beginner or expert, local patch enthusiast or international twitcher. The Club provides the following in return for a modest annual subscription:

- A programme of indoor meetings with expert speakers on ornithological subjects
- Occasional social meetings
- An annual photographic competition of very high standard
- A programme of field meetings both locally and further afield. These can be for half days, whole days or weekends.
- Regular mid week bird walks in and around many of Berkshire's and neighbouring counties' best birdwatching areas.
- Exclusive access to the pre-eminent site Queen Mother Reservoir (subject to permit)
- Conservation involvement in important local habitats and species. BOC members are involved in practical conservation work with groups such as Friends of Lavell's Lake, Theale Area Bird Conservation Group and Moor Green Lakes Group.
- Opportunities to participate in survey work to help understand birds better. The surveys include supporting the BTO in its work and the new Berkshire 2007–11 County Atlas and avifauna.
- The Club runs the Birds of Berkshire Conservation Fund to support local bird conservation projects.

This Berkshire Bird Report is published by the Club and provided free to members. Members are encouraged to keep records of their local observations and submit them, electronically or in writing, to the Recorder for collation and analysis.

The Birds of Berkshire, published in 1996, the authoritative book on local avifauna, and the culmination of many years of member's field work, is available to members at the highly-discounted price of £5 while copies last.

For further details of the Club and membership visit [www.berksoc.org.uk](http://www.berksoc.org.uk) or contact the Hon. Secretary:

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# The Birds of Berkshire

*Annual Report for 2008*

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# Introduction

The Berkshire Ornithological Club is determined to achieve a more timely publication of annual reports; so this issue, for 2008, is the second annual report to be published in 2012. The report for 2009 is well on its way and work is in progress on 2010. We would like to receive articles and photographs for these years as soon as possible.

Collection of records is the first step in the preparation of a report and has been, perhaps, the biggest hold-up faced by the report production team. Records arrive by a plethora of routes, some a year or two after the report year end! By far the best way of getting in records into the County database is on-line submission ([www.berksbirds.co.uk](http://www.berksbirds.co.uk)) throughout the year; records can also be submitted confidentially this way. Otherwise records can be sent to by email to [records@berkoc.org.uk](mailto:records@berkoc.org.uk) or on paper to Ken Moore, Hillside, 7 Aldermaston Road, Sherborne St John, RG24 9LA. Species requiring a description are listed in the report of the Berkshire Records Committee. To expedite future report publication, please send in your records within three months of the year end.

2008 was the first full year of surveying for the new Berkshire Atlas & Avifauna and the national atlas. The Atlas, which involved four years of surveys, will provide a far fuller assessment of the status of summer and winter resident birds in the County than is possible in annual reports – publication is planned for 2013.

# Acknowledgements

The preparation of the County bird report relies on the voluntary efforts of many people for data collection, species account writing, preparing articles, providing photographs, editing and, critically, the observers who put in their records. At the end of this report is a list of the observers whose records contribute to the reports. We hope the list is accurate: please let us know of any errors or omissions, for which we apologise.

Once again this year a special thanks to Derek Barker, who has single-handedly prepared the systematic list. The County Recorder, Chris Heard, was the scientific editor of the systematic list and has provided articles on the two Lesser Scaups that were found in 2007 and 2008 and the highly nuanced identification of Siberian Chiffchaffs. Our thanks also go to Tim Ball, Bill Nicoll and Renton Righelato who provided other articles and the summary of weather.

A special thanks to Robert Gillmor for his picture of the two Red-footed Falcons at Woolhampton in May/June 2008.

Lastly, if anyone has inadvertently been omitted, my apologies: thanks are due to everyone who has contributed to the creation of this annual report.

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*Whooper Swans arriving at Woolhampton, 3 October 2008: Gavin Farnell.*



*Whooper Swans at Woolhampton, October 2008: Gavin Farnell.*



*Gannet, leaving White Swan Lake, Dinton Pastures Country Park, 10 September 2008: Pete Johns.*



*Great Northern Diver, Queen Mother Reservoir, 2 February 2008: Mike McKee.*



*Red-footed Falcon, first summer male, Woolhampton.  
In flight: 1 June 2008: Marek Walford.  
Perched: 4 June 2008: Gavin Farnell.*



*American Wigeon, Lower Farm, November 2008 – January 2009. Despite its long stay the bird proved difficult to photograph: this shot was taken by Marek Walford on 24 January 2009.*



*Spotted Redshank, Lavell's Lake, 30 August 2008: Marek Walford.*



*Marsh Tit, Sulham Woods, Richard Collins. Despite declining in the east of the county, this smart bird is still to be found in good numbers in woodlands in west Berkshire.*



# LESSER SCAUPS IN BERKSHIRE in 2007 & 2008

*Chris Heard*

Adding Lesser Scaup to the Berkshire list seems to have been a long and tortuous journey, with a number of false alarms along the way, but a *bona fide* individual was finally found at Woolhampton GP in 2007. Then, 'like London buses', a second one was found in East Berkshire the following year!

Putative Lesser Scaups date back as far as 1957 when one was suggested at Sutton Courtenay (then Berks, now Oxon). It returned in subsequent winters until March 1960 when, to resolve the disputes about its true identity, it was shot (under license issued by the Nature Conservancy) and proved to be a Tufted Duck × Pochard hybrid. In fact Lesser Scaup was only added to the British List after the discovery of a drake at Chasewater Reservoir, West Midlands in March 1987. 'Possible Lesser Scaups' were then claimed almost annually in Berkshire during the 1990s but when checked out they nearly always proved to be some sort of hybrid.

Then, on 27th October 2007, Ken Moore found what appeared to be a good candidate at Woolhampton GPs – but this wasn't to be a smooth ride either, with other local observers believing it to be a hybrid! The identification process wasn't helped by the presence of a convincing looking Scaup-type hybrid which, at first, was never present at the same time as the Lesser Scaup. This caused Ken no end of confusion as one minute he would be looking at a bird showing good credentials for a Lesser Scaup and the next minute he would be looking at a bird showing anomalous features! After two days he contacted CDRH, who then visited the site the following day and saw both the Scaup × Tufted Duck hybrid and a Lesser Scaup – which revealed both the critical bill tip and wing-pattern – enabling a firm identification to be broadcast; but, having left his mobile phone at home that day, Ken was one of the last to hear this news!

## **Description (from CDRH's submission to BBRC)**

I was aware (via [berksbirds.co.uk](http://berksbirds.co.uk)) that an *aythya* hybrid had been reported at Woolhampton GP on 29th October 2007 and, that evening, I got a phone-call from Ken Moore who told me that this bird showed some features of Lesser Scaup. However, others that had seen it were convinced that it was a hybrid, so he wanted me to come and take a look.

I got there at around 11.30am the following morning (30th Oct) and soon spotted Ken on the far side of the gravel-pit 'scoping some ducks in the westernmost corner. It was a long walk round to where he was so I moved to the near shore and 'scoped the ducks he was looking at. I soon spotted a scaup-type that he appeared to be examining and, although distant, I was a bit disappointed to see that it was a hybrid (based on the size – larger than accompanying Tufteds – and the extensive black tip to the bill).

Unfortunately, Ken had left his mobile at home that day, so I couldn't directly communicate with him. I decided to make my way round to him but en route (at about 12.45pm) I noticed another scaup-type much closer – in the centre of the pit. Although diving frequently, I was soon of the opinion that this was a genuine Lesser Scaup! Size, shape, and bill-tip pattern all looked good, but I wanted to make sure that the spread wing also showed the correct pattern. On the first wing-flap it was facing the wrong way, but the second displayed the upperside very nicely and, fully convinced, I telephoned Birdline South East to broadcast it (from about 1.10pm) as a 'definite Lesser Scaup'. I also 'phoned some local observers but I was, of course, unable to speak to Ken; it turns out he had departed the site unseen and only heard the 'good news' when he called in at home!

As this was the first record for Berkshire, a number of local observers had arrived by mid-afternoon and when I returned to the site they all seemed to be happy with the identification – including some who had seen the bird previously (!) but had not realised that there was a Scaup-type hybrid present *in addition* to a real Lesser Scaup (in fact, up to three Scaup-type hybrids were noted there in subsequent weeks).

**STRUCTURE** A small *aythya*, smaller than most Tufteds; generally compact in shape but with high rear-crown (though not forming a real crest or tuft); bill longer than Tufted's but not as heavy as Scaup's (partly due to less pronounced flanges).

**PLUMAGE** Head blackish, with mostly purplish reflections; sometimes, depending on light, equally greenish (but still very different from the consistent, strong 'bottle green' sheen of Scaup); breast similarly blackish, but without the coloured sheen. Flanks greyish-white, showing distinct vermiculations towards edges, plus a few brownish feathers intermixed. Vent/undertail-coverts grey (noticeably less black than the Scaup-type hybrid). Mantle light grey (darker than the flanks but, again, with a few dark feathers intermixed), strongly vermiculated – coarser than Scaup and much coarser than most Scaup-type hybrids – and also less extensive (due to darker rear scapulars). Spread wing showed pronounced contrast between diffuse grey wing-bar on primaries and clear white wing-bar on secondaries.

**BARE PARTS** Bill: wholly bluish-grey except for black nail – with no significant extension of black onto the sides of the bill-tip (GEW's observation of 'more black' on the bill-tip was, as he finally agreed, just the lip of the upper mandible). Eyes: bright golden-yellow (the bright eye-colour and mostly adult drake plumage leads me to believe it is an adult).

**Note:** this individual was nowhere near as dark on the body as the first-winter drake found just one month later at Sutton Courtenay, S.Oxon.

This bird stayed until Nov 16th 2007 and was duly accepted as the first record for Berkshire by the BBRC (*Brit. Birds* 101: 520); but note that they only accepted it from 28th.

Remarkably, just one year later, in October 2008 CDRH found the county's second record at Wraysbury GPs, later moving to QMR.

## Description (from CDRH's submission to BBRC)

The 5th October 2008 was a very dull, drizzly day. I had planned to walk around Queen Mother Reservoir, but this was curtailed when I received news of a juvenile Little Blue Heron in Ireland! Several hours elapsed before my travel plans were in place and it wasn't until late afternoon that I got back into the field – at nearby Wraysbury GPs (just a couple of miles from QMR). It was here that I first saw the Lesser Scaup but, although I did see it in flight briefly, the poor weather and fading light conditions meant that the wing-bar was not seen unequivocally and nor was the head sheen.

I was fairly confident of the identification but I was in Ireland all day on 6th (however, WAS who had managed to see the bird just before the light faded on 5th, looked for it without success). On Oct 7th I checked the whole Horton/Wraysbury GP complex for myself – and drew a blank. But when I visited Queen Mother Reservoir the following day, I relocated the Lesser Scaup at 10am. With good light and good views (including head sheen and wing-bar), I was happy to broadcast the news via Birdline South East. I watched it until 11.18am and, having taken a few 'record shots' with my mobile phone, I then left for the long drive to West Cornwall (for an *Empidonax* flycatcher). It was widely twitched later that day and over the following week.

**STRUCTURE** A small *aythya*, no larger than any of the accompanying Tufteds (though larger than the smallest females/imms); bill only slightly longer than Tufted's but broader towards the tip.

**PLUMAGE** Head blackish, with mostly purplish gloss; sometimes bluish-greenish (in bright sunlight); breast similarly blackish (but without the coloured sheen), as was vent/undertail-coverts.



*Lesser Scaup at Queen Mother Reservoir October 2008.  
Main picture swimming and spread wing showing wing bar: Mike McKee;  
head on showing peaked crown and bill: Andrew Moon.*

Flanks greyish-white, showing distinct vermiculations and rather dusky in places (but no mixture of brownish juv feathers). Mantle coarsely barred: dark grey bars, quite widely spaced, on a greyish-white ground – coarser than Scaup and most Scaup-type hybrids – and also less extensive (darker rear scapulars). Spread upperwing (seen 3 times on 8/10!) showed pronounced contrast between diffuse grey wing-bar on primaries and clear white wing-bar on secondaries; underwing mostly whitish, but with greyish underside to primaries ('ghosting' the pattern of the upperwing bar).

**BARE PARTS** Bill: bluish-grey, paler towards tip (but no subterminal band as such) with black nail – nail itself definitely smaller than Scaup's and with no extension of black onto the sides of the bill-tip. Note that the bill was rather short for Lesser Scaup (and thus clearly different from last year's bird at Woolhampton GP, Berks, which had a typical-length bill) but very similar in length to photos of a first-winter drake that had been at Draycote Water, in 2007; so, given that this was an adult, perhaps it was *that* bird returning to a different site. Eyes: bright golden-yellow (= clearly adult). Legs and feet: 'lead grey'.

With clear bill differences from the 2007 bird, this record was accepted as the second record for Berkshire by the BBRC (*Brit. Birds* 103: 569).

## Discussion

It will be clear from the foregoing accounts that firm identifications were only broadcast once a full suite of Lesser Scaup features had been observed. The problem, of course, is the frequency of look-alike hybrids and it has become clear in recent years that there is no fail-safe feature for excluding them! The two most critical features are the extent of black on the bill-tip and the two-tone wing-bar. But a drake Scaup-type hybrid at Wraybury GPs in Oct 1992 (and again in October 2001) showed a superficial resemblance to Lesser Scaup – including the black restricted to the nail of the bill (though in flight it did show a complete white wing-bar). And a female Scaup-type hybrid seen by Steve Lister and Andrew Harrop, at Eyebrook Reservoir in Oct 1996, also showed the black restricted to the nail (see *British Birds* 91 195–197). In 1999 a female hybrid seen by CDRH at Bray GPs showed a two-tone wing-bar – recalling Lesser Scaup's – although the white on the secondaries did 'bleed into' the grey-brown on the primaries (note: some 5% of true Lesser Scaup also show this, according to Kenn Kaufman in *Advanced Birding*); these complications were discussed by the BBRC Chairman (*British Birds* 98 91). Inevitably, in March 2004, an adult drake hybrid showed up with *both* these features (restricted black nail & two-tone wing-bar) on the Jubilee River at Dorney Wetlands; it had previously been at Little Marlow GP, in S Bucks, where it was promoted as a 'first-winter Lesser Scaup' (the identification was questioned in internet forums but the sighting was still submitted to BBRC). The parentage of this bird remains uncertain but it may well have been a back-cross (eg Scaup × Tufted × Pochard).

Clearly we are all still on a learning curve when dealing with *aythya* hybrids. So, although Lesser Scaup seems sure to reappear in Berkshire (in line with the increase in sightings nationally), it will always require a 'holistic' assessment of all the bird's features for a successful identification to be made.

## References

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- Kaufman, K. 1980. *Advanced Birding*. Boston.

# DARK-BREASTED BARN OWL, COLEY PARK, READING

*Renton Righelato*

In November 1915, a Barn Owl, *Tyto alba*, “obtained” at Coley Park, Reading was brought to Reading Museum where it was examined by H M Wallis and reported as a Dark-breasted Barn Owl, the northern European race, *T. a. guttata* (Wallis, 1916). The specimen was skinned and mounted and is still held by the museum. In view of the recent review of the differentiation of the race *T. a. guttata* and the nominate race, *T. a. alba* (French, 2009), prior to completing the species account on Barn Owl for the new edition of The Birds of Berkshire, in May 2012 I examined the specimen described by Wallis in order to review it against the criteria described by French.

The distinguishing features described by French (2009) are (i) deep rich buff ground colour of the mantle and extensive grey marbling covering two thirds or more of the upper parts; (ii) buff covering the sides of the head and the underparts, including the underwing and undertail coverts and the feathered tarsi; (iii) a prominent dark surround to the eye and a darker edge to the facial disc than most *alba*; (iv) grey tips to the remiges and dark bars extending the width of the primaries.



Figure 1: Dark-breasted Barn Owl  
*Tyto alba guttata*  
described by Wallis (1916),  
Reading Museum



Figure 2: Barn Owl *Tyto alba alba*  
Reading Museum  
(collected Donnington, Berkshire, 1953)

Wallis's bird (Fig 1) was simply mounted and kept in a box at the museum's repository. It was in fairly good condition, though with some loss of feathering above the bill and some damage to the right wing. There appeared to be some grey discolouration of feathers that may have been white. A specimen of the nominate race kept in a similar way (not shown) showed similar greying of white areas of the facial disc and underparts, whilst another (Figure 2) kept in a well sealed case, remained bright white, suggesting that the greying may be due to aerial pollutants.

The overall appearance of Wallis's bird was of a dark Barn Owl, with deep buff-ochre on the sides of the neck and the extensively speckled underparts (Figure 3). The underwing coverts were similar in tone to the breast and similarly speckled.

The ground colour of the mantle was less rufous than shown by French (2009), though darker than a typical *alba*. Grey marbling covered much of the mantle and the crown, though not the nape (Figure 5). Consistent with *guttata*, the primary tips were grey, but the dark barring across the primaries, though bold, was incomplete (Figure 3).

The vent, though somewhat paler than the breast, had the same buff tone, as had the leg feathering above the ankle (Figures 4). The lower leg feathers were a paler, greyer buff. The feathers around the eyes were a very dark brown. The majority of the facial disc was washed a pale sooty grey, probably discolouration, and the rim marked with a narrow darker band of feathers.

Whilst many of the characteristics of Wallis's owl match those described by French (2009) for the Dark-breasted Barn Owl, in some respects it differs: the ground colour of the mantle is not particularly rufous, the barring on the primaries is incomplete, the rim of the facial disc is not very dark. Intergrades cover the spectrum from the typical white *alba* to *guttata* (French, 2009); indeed, as Wallis (1916) noted, other intergrades are represented amongst the small number of Barn Owls in the Reading Museum and it may be that the specimen he described is best regarded as such.

Both typical *guttata* and intergrades are rare in the UK, particularly so far inland, and Wallis's bird remains the only documented Berkshire record. We can only speculate whether the bird was of vagrant origin or, as has been observed (French, 2006), bred locally of apparently *alba* parents.

## References

- Wallis, H.M. 1916. Dark-breasted Barn Owl in Berkshire. *Brit Birds* 9: 210
- French, P.R. (2006). Dark-breasted Barn Owl in Devon. *Brit Birds* 99: 210–11
- French, P. R. 2009. Identification of Dark-breasted Barn Owl in Britain. *Brit Birds* 102: 494–503

## Acknowledgements

Angela Houghton, Collection Systems Curator, Reading Museum for access and assistance in examining the specimens. Paul French for helpful comments on the manuscript.



LEFT (ABOVE) *Figure 3: Dark-breasted Barn Owl Tyto alba guttata described by Wallis (1916): note incomplete barring on primaries and dark underwing coverts.*

LEFT (BELOW) *Figure 4: Dark-breasted Barn Owl Tyto alba guttata described by Wallis (1916): note white lower breast, vent and leg feathers.*

BELOW *Figure 5: Dark-breasted Barn Owl Tyto alba guttata described by Wallis (1916): note extensive grey marbling.*





*Siberian Chiffchaff at Eton Wick December 2012: Marek Walford*





# SIBERIAN CHIFFCHAFFS IN BERKSHIRE

*Chris Heard*

In the Birds of Berkshire Report for 2000–07 the Siberian form of Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita tristis* was – for the first time – afforded a separate entry (coincidentally the London Bird Report also adopted this treatment from 2007 onwards). This reflects a growing awareness of the relevant identification features (fostered by the setting up of a ‘Siberian Chiffchaff Review Panel’ by the BBRC) as well as the realization that this may well be a separate species ‘in the making’.

## What is a Siberian Chiffchaff?

The short answer is: a Chiffchaff from Siberia! Which is not as facetious as it sounds, because there are in fact no other Chiffchaff subspecies in Siberia – although birds from the western half of the range (the West Siberian Plain) are often referred to as ‘*fulvescens*’ types due to the occurrence of some intermediate plumage features; however there is nothing to indicate that ‘*fulvescens*’ birds are some sort of hybrid population and indeed their song and call are typical of *tristis*.

This vast breeding range (with a world population many times greater than that of the combined European populations) is significant in that it provides a massive ‘reservoir’ of birds with potential for westward vagrancy. It also seems likely that there is more plumage variation within this range than is currently recognized. (eg a greyer variant ‘*naevia*’ was described by Severtzov but is not currently recognized as he failed to give a type location).

## Siberian Chiffchaff Review – *British Birds*, 2010

The review by Dean *et al* (2010) was prompted by scepticism from Scandinavia – where *tristis* is treated as a true rarity! However, this approach is somewhat self-perpetuating in that only trapped individuals are accepted in many countries (although in Sweden, for example, sight records suggest they are more numerous). The perceived problem was that some of the more striking ‘grey and white’ chiffchaffs were being claimed as *tristis* when they were in fact extremes of Scandinavian *abietinus* (or intergrades) and that such birds might be inflating the UK statistics.

The review eventually showed that, in 2008 at least, *tristis* was as frequent as previously thought (eg at least 120 individuals were estimated in the UK for 2008, and there was no reason to believe that this year was not typical), thereby qualifying it a ‘scarce migrant’ rather than a real rarity. There was nevertheless a drive to avoid describing *tristis* with reference to ‘greyness’ and ‘whiteness’ (even though it had been described, and illustrated, like that as recently as 1998 in *Brit. Birds* 91: 361–376). Some were even inclined to what has been termed ‘wishful grouping’ whereby only truly classic *tristis* were deemed admissible, but real life is less clear-cut (all the evidence supports ‘*fulvescens*’ as part of *tristis*). The same subject was covered in *Dutch Birding* 31: 79–85 but with a more pragmatic approach – arguing that even the atypical ‘grey and white’ birds are *tristis* – if their vocalizations match.

## Status of *tristis* Chiffchaff in Berkshire

At least five definite *tristis* Chiffchaffs have been seen in Berkshire up to and including 2008 (see below). A previous discussion (Heard, 1989) has suggested that the occurrence of eastern Chiffchaffs in Berkshire was more closely linked to overall wintering numbers than to weather conditions in late autumn.

The Birds of Berkshire (1996) lists just one example of a *tristis* Chiffchaff. This was at Wraybury GPs in December 1984; found by CDRH, and also seen well by DJB and EW, it was heard calling on a number of occasions and, like the Arthur Jacob birds, it regularly fed on or near the ground.

There is a previous record – at Wraybury GP on Jan 10th 1975 – which was not submitted to the Birds of Berkshire, although a description was sent to the MTNHS Bird Bulletin. It was published as an ‘eastern race’ Chiffchaff but the description (and a colour painting by CDRH) clearly shows the washed-out upperparts and strong “mackintosh buff” coloration on the sides of the neck and breast; it also showed a pale wing-bar (not infrequent on *tristis*) – indicating that it may have been responsible for the report of a ‘Greenish Warbler’ there at the time (there were up to 9 Chiffchaffs present in this area since Dec 1974, including at least 1 *abietinus*-type seen by CDRH).

Two at Arthur Jacob NR wintered in Nov 2006–Jan 2007 (see below)

One was accepted by BBRC’s *tristis* Review Panel at Sandhurst SF for 2008 (Feb-Mar and again Dec). A second bird at this site was not accepted as it was reported to have given both *tristis* and *collybita*-type calls (so-called “call switching”). Cautionary note: a rather sombre bird at Bray GP in Dec 2002–Jan 2003 showed a number of *tristis*-type plumage features but was only heard giving *collybita*-type calls!

One was seen at close range at Horton GPs in Dec 2008.

There has been some ambiguity in the reporting of *tristis* Chiffchaffs in earlier Berkshire Bird Reports. Most often submitted, and published, as simply ‘eastern races’ – no doubt reflecting confusion over the appropriate identification criteria – some sightings may well have involved good *tristis* (although probably with insufficient detail to eliminate the palest ‘Scandinavian’ Chiffchaffs). Nevertheless, the BRC would be happy to review any past records based on contemporaneous descriptions.

## The Arthur Jacob Two

Arthur Jacob NR is a small reserve near Poyle with several small areas of *phragmites* reeds and a scatter of young Willows. It regularly attracts a few Chiffchaffs in late autumn and winter and, once again, several were present in late Nov 2006. These increased to five, on the 28th, including two eastern race birds. Better views over the following days led me to believe that these were probably of the Siberian race *P.c. tristis* because they lacked any greenish tinges in the body plumage or yellow tinges to the underparts, supercilium or eye-ring. Several subsequent visits provided opportunities to confirm the plumage features as the two *tristis*-types often fed close to the ground in nettles but, typically, they remained silent until the cold, bright morning of Jan 5th, when one of them suddenly started calling repeatedly.

### **DESCRIPTION (composite description derived from views on at least 5 different dates during Nov-Jan)**

Two *tristis* -type Chiffchaffs, only present intermittently, but sometimes affording excellent views

– down to 5 feet – as they fed on or close to the ground in dead Nettles. Direct cf with up to 3 western Chiffchaffs.

**Upperparts:** ‘stone’ or pale greyish-brown, completely lacking any trace of green on crown or mantle; rump slightly greenish on one, just paler (fawn) on the other; greenish/olive fringes to remiges and rectrices and, by January, a slight wing-bar effect on one (paler edging to greater coverts, perhaps resulting from wear).

**Underparts:** greyish-white, lacking any yellow tinges – even on ‘knees’ (feathered part of tibia) which were dun coloured – or undertail coverts, which were washed buff on one bird. Supercilium and eyelids: pale, with warm buff tinges and completely lacking any yellow; definite buff tinge to ear-coverts.

**Bill and legs:** uniformly blackish.

**Calls** (both birds, eventually, heard well on 5/1): a slightly shrill, off-key “heep” (reminiscent of Dunnock’s call but quieter and less pure in tone).

News of the ‘Siberian Chiffchaffs’ was broadcast on Birdline South East later that day, but (along with several other items of local news) did not appear to have been picked up by other news agencies and subsequent visits confirmed that they were only present at this site erratically; my attempts to show them to KEM, SR & LGRE only provided distant views of 1–2 birds on the (inaccessible) opposite side of the R.Colne.

## The Eton Wick Two & lessons derived

Two *tristis*-type birds were found along the Roundmoor Ditch at Eton Wick in February 2012 along with up to seven nominate Chiffchaffs. They normally fed in *phragmites* reeds growing in the stream and were often together (recalling the Arthur Jacob birds). Although originally broadcast (on both BLSE and the berkbirds forum) as Siberian Chiffchaffs the large number of visiting birders spawned a wide range of views on the bird’s appearance and identity (interestingly 2 *tristis* at Streatley SF around this time drew very few observers and virtually no contradictory comments even though, judging from the photos, they were no better candidates). Some observers saw two *tristis* Chiffchaffs at Eton Wick (and even reported all the characteristic features), but others reported ‘grey & white’ Chiffchaffs which they considered to be *abietinus*; personally, on the original and subsequent visits I never saw an identifiable *abietinus* Chiffchaff there (though I’m prepared to believe that there may have been some in with the nominates).

The subsequent visits did reveal that there were (relatively subtle) differences between the two birds: one was slightly greyer on the upperparts, with rudimentary olive streaks on the scapulars, but none of these features disqualified it as a *tristis*. Indeed, I asked Grahame Walbridge to view a selection of online photos (some of which are reproduced here and are believed to show both of the *tristis*-type individuals). Grahame is a member of BBRC’s *tristis* Review Panel and, perhaps as importantly, sees *tristis* Chiffchaffs annually in Dorset. He commented as follows:

“I’ve had a look at the images which look fine for *tristis*. Buff tones are often reduced this late in the season, presumably through wear. If the birds remain long enough they should undergo a partial moult, which, includes a body moult, through Mar–Apr. This is a lot later than *collybita* which undergoes a similar moult on its winter quarters.” – Grahame Walbridge (18/2/12).

## Confusing issues

It is interesting to speculate on why the Eton Wick birds caused such debate. First it has to be acknowledged that the internet does give 'equal voice' to a wide range of observers. This is one of its (democratic) strengths but it can leave latecomers to the discussion very confused (and their subsequent posts can just make things worse).

The confusion seems to derive from issues of colour terminology, perception & misconception. We know that observers have differing perceptions of colour as well as widely varying ways of describing them. When applied to the relatively subtle grey-brown tones on 'Eastern Chiffchaffs' a degree of confusion is inevitable!

Also, some people have a degree of colour blindness (particularly to red/brown tones) of which they may not even be aware. I recall that two Olivaceous Warblers on St Marys, Isles of Scilly in 1984 & 1985 were both described by some experienced observers as "grey *Hippolais* warblers" when, in reality, they were clearly a washed-out pale brown (= fawn) on the upperparts.

Some observers seem to have concluded that the so-called 'grey & white' Chiffchaffs are identified by either their greyness or their whiteness. This may be the general impression but the crucial features are the presence of greenish tones on the crown and mantle and the presence of yellow on the supercilium, eye-ring and underparts (although the rudimentary presence of yellow could still indicate a *tristis* of the '*fulvescens*' type). Thus the impression of greyness or paleness does not rule out a *tristis* (photos taken in the Far East, thousands of miles from any congeners or 'hybrid zones' have shown that even some of these *tristis* can look variably 'grey and white' (per G.Walbridge).

It is probably worth stating that the 'Eton Wick two' would not look out of place on *tristis*' wintering grounds in India – where *abietinus* does not occur (incidentally, the type locality for *tristis* is not somewhere in Siberia, but Calcutta!). They also match many among the photo-spread of trapped *tristis* (in *Dutch Birding* 91: 79–85) taken in S. Kazakhstan - where, again, *abietinus* does not occur. Interestingly, and in contrast to our difficulties, the Eton Wick birds seemed to have no problem recognizing each other and regularly kept slightly apart from the rest of the Chiffchaffs.

## Colour variation & limitations of photographs

The modern trend of taking photographs, and then posting them on the internet for others to confirm the identification, doesn't really work with Chiffchaffs. A critical assessment of the apparent colours in the field is an essential precondition because photos may, for a number of reasons, misrepresent what was actually there. These include:

**Lighting effects:** this is the most widely appreciated factor affecting colours in photos. But also bear in mind that a photograph freezes a moment in time, whereas a human observer is constantly making allowance for transitory lighting effects.

**Photographic effects:** this discussion is beyond the scope of this article (or this writer!) but suffice to say that we seem to have replaced one set of factors (eg film quality, exposure etc) with another set in the digital age.

**Plumage does not present a solid surface!** Feathers are multi-faceted and different colours are reflected by the feather structure. Colours that would not have been apparent in the field can then be enhanced by the chromatic effects of magnification.

## Conclusions

*Tristis* is not especially rare in the UK and may well occur annually in Berkshire.

However, plumage and bare parts need to be examined critically and described accurately for sightings to be acceptable; ideally the distinctive call (or song) should be noted (although this will often not be possible).

The problem of 'grey & white' look-alikes has, perhaps, been exaggerated – they represent a small minority of birds (compared to the significant numbers of *tristis* that occur nationally) and even some of these may be variant *tristis* (especially if the vocalizations are OK).

Siberian Chiffchaffs may seem remarkably 'at home' when wintering beside a Berkshire stream or sewage farm, but they present birdwatchers with a whole array of questions... Exactly where have they come from? Have they been here before (like many of the wintering Blackcaps)? Are they pure-bred *tristis* (and, indeed, are there any hybrids?!) And do they, in fact, constitute a distinct species?

## Acknowledgements

My thanks to Grahame Walbridge for reading through a previous draft of this article and for many chiffchaff discussions over the years

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# BERKSHIRE WEATHER 2008

*By Bill Nicoll*

**January** was very mild but very wet. The wind, which was often strong and gusty, was consistently from the SW, except during the first 4 days when it was from the easterly quarter. There was almost no frost and daily temperature maxima were well above average, close to 10°C throughout. Some rain fell on most days but the period 8th to 18th was very wet. Sunshine was slightly above average at about 2½ hours per day, fairly evenly spread over the month.

**February** was mostly mild, settled, dry and very sunny. Winds were predominantly from SW in the first and last 10 day periods. During the middle 10 days a high pressure area (exceeding 1040 mbar) provided light winds from the NE and there were hard frosts overnight. Daily maximum temperatures throughout the month were in the range 7 – 12°C, but up to 15°C in the east in the 2nd week. Some rain fell on 3rd to 5th and 25/26th, only about 20mm in total.

**March** was dull, wet and windy, but mild. The airstream was from the southwest for the 1st two weeks, backing to northerly for a few days before backing to westerly again for the final 10 days. The windiest days were 1st, 9th, 16th, 21st and 28th, and these dates (apart from 1st) coincided with the wettest weather. Daily maximum temperatures were never far from 10 °C. There were light frosts on 4 nights in the east and 9 nights in the west.

**April** was close to average for temperature, wind, rain and sunshine, i.e. it was changeable with many showers but only one really wet day (29th). The wind was predominantly from the westerly quadrant except for the third week, when it was from the NE. Daily maximum temperature was generally around 14°C, while at night it fell to about 5°C except from 6th to 16th when there was frost on most nights.

Conditions in **May** were dominated by a north-easterly air flow resulting in a mostly dry month except from 24th to 27th when over 50mm fell. It was a warm month with daily maxima exceeding 20°C on more than half of the days, and over 25°C from 7th to 12th, but sunshine hours were only slightly above average (at about 6 hours per day).

In **June** light winds came from the NW during the first two weeks and from the SW, moderate to strong, in rest of the month, resulting in very consistent temperatures (close to 20°C daytime max and around 10°C nightly min). Total rainfall was average, but there were two very wet days, on 2nd (when local flooding occurred) and 11/12th, otherwise it was mainly dry. The first 3 days were overcast but sunshine over the month was above average at 7 hours per day, with little daily variation.

In **July**, winds were moderate to fresh from the SW quarter for the first 3 weeks then light to moderate and variable with a southerly bias during the last 10 days. The first 3 weeks were cool (4°C below average) but in the last week 4°C above average. 80% of the rain (nearly 60mm) fell between 6th and 11th, and 28th was wet. Sunshine was average but most of it came between 6th and 18th and in the final 3 days. .

The weather during **August** was mild, wet and dull, and varied little from day to day. A moderate south-westerly airflow prevailed throughout, keeping daytime temperatures close to 20°C; at night minima were in the range 11°C ± 5°C. There were only about 3½ hours of sun per day. Rain fell on most days, 12th and 31st being the wettest, but as it took the form of heavy but local showers it varied across the county.

In **September** the wind was moderate from the SW until 12th, when it veered to a light NE until 26th, then it veered to the W. Daily temperatures were close to average at around 18°C and there was no frost. Rainfall was average for the month but 60% of it fell between 4th and 6th and, in the west, the 12th was also wet, but it fell as showers and so varied across the county. Sunshine was a little below average at 4 hours per day due to a dull spell from 3rd to 13th.

**October** was dry and sunny, but cool with temperatures mostly below 15°C. The wind was light to moderate from the southwest all month except in the final 4 days when it came from the NE, which brought a cold, frosty spell giving snow in many places on 28th. As compensation, most days were bright and there were 14 days with 7 or more hours of sun.

**November** was mostly dull and damp but mild, with a few nights of mild frost in the final 10 days. The wind was mostly light and northerly in the first week, and then from 6th to 26th it veered slowly from south to north before backing right round to the north again in the final week. Many days saw some rain but 1st and 7th to 10th were wet. Most days were overcast and only four were sunny. Temperatures never exceeded 14 o C and dropped near the end of the month.

**December** was quite cold (apart for a mild spell from 21st to 25th) despite the mostly light to moderate winds from the (normally mild) westerly quarter that predominated in the first 23 days. The final 8 days were coldest as the wind moved to the northeast. It was sunny, with 19 days of over 3 hours of sun including six days with 6 hours. Rainfall was half the normal with most of this falling on the very wet 13th. About half of the nights had a few degrees of frost.

This report is based mostly on combined data from two weather stations, at Newbury and Wokingham.

<http://weather.kennetsignalling.com/archive/2008noaa.html>

<http://www.woksat.info/wwp1.html>



Great Tit, Phil Jones

# REPORT FOR 2008 BY THE BERKSHIRE RECORDS COMMITTEE (BRC)

*By Ken Moore*

Committee for 2008: Chris Heard (Chairman), Ken Moore, Peter Standley

The BRC examines all records that involve rare species (see the accompanying lists), unusual dates and unusually large counts that are accompanied with descriptive notes. Unfortunately there are still a substantial number of records that have to be omitted from the report due to the lack of supporting notes. On occasions when the bird has been seen by a large number of observers the BRC may accept the record without further details. However the record may run the risk of being attributed to the wrong observer/s, or may be attributed to many observers (MO).

Species for which notes or descriptions are required fall into 3 categories: (Cat 1) Nationally rare species for which records first have to be accepted by the British Birds Rarities Committee; (Cat 2) Locally rare species for which a full description is required; (Cat 3) Locally scarce species (or commoner species seen at an unusual time of year or exceptional circumstances) for which short supporting notes are required. The species in categories 2 and 3 are as follows:

## **Category 2**

Bean Goose; Pink-footed Goose; American Wigeon; Green-winged Teal; Ring-necked Duck; Ferruginous Duck; Velvet Scoter; Fulmar; Manx Shearwater; Storm Petrel; Night Heron; Purple Heron; White Stork; Spoonbill; Honey Buzzard; Black Kite; White-tailed Eagle; Goshawk; Rough-legged Buzzard; Golden Eagle; Red-footed Falcon; Spotted Crane; Corncrake; Crane; Kentish Plover; Dotterel; Pectoral Sandpiper; Purple Sandpiper; Red-necked Phalarope; Grey Phalarope; Pomarine Skua; Arctic Skua; Long-tailed Skua; Great Skua; Sabine's Gull; Ring-billed Gull; Caspian Gull; Iceland Gull; Glaucous Gull; White-winged Black Tern; Roseate Tern; Guillemot; Razorbill; Little Auk; Puffin; Alpine Swift; Short-toed Lark; Shore Lark; Red-rumped Swallow; Richard's Pipit; Tawny Pipit; Red-throated Pipit; Dipper; Bluethroat; Aquatic Warbler; Marsh Warbler; Icterine Warbler; Melodious Warbler; Yellow-browed Warbler; Bearded Tit; Golden Oriole; Woodchat Shrike; Hooded Crow; Rose-coloured Starling; Serin; Twite; Common (Mealy) Redpoll; Common Rosefinch; Lapland Bunting; Cirl Bunting; Ortolan Bunting; Little Bunting; all rare subspecies (e.g. Scandinavian Rock Pipit; Yellow Wagtail races and Siberian Chiffchaff) and all non-BB Rarity species (Cat 1) not currently on the Berkshire List.

## **Category 3**

Bewick's Swan; Whooper Swan (unless feral); White-fronted Goose; Brent Goose; Barnacle Goose (unless feral); Garganey; Scaup; Eider; Long-tailed Duck; Common Scoter; Redbreasted Merganser; Quail; Red-throated Diver; Black-throated Diver; Great Northern Diver; Red-necked Grebe; Slavonian Grebe; Black-necked Grebe; Leach's Storm Petrel; Gannet; Shag; Bittern; Marsh Harrier; Hen Harrier; Montagu's Harrier; Osprey; Merlin; Avocet; Grey Plover; Knot; Sanderling; Little Stint; Temminck's Stint; Curlew Sandpiper; Black-tailed Godwit; Bar-tailed Godwit; Whimbrel; Spotted Redshank; Wood Sandpiper; Mediterranean Gull; Little Gull; Yellow-legged Gull (spring records); Kittiwake; Little Tern; Sandwich Tern; Arctic Tern; Long-eared Owl; Hoopoe; Lesser Spotted Woodpecker (where i.d. is based on drumming only); Wryneck; Woodlark (away from usual habitat); Rock



Pipit; Water Pipit; White Wagtail (rump colour needed and full details for autumn records); Waxwing; Black Redstart; Ring Ouzel; Wood Warbler; Pied Flycatcher; Willow Tit; Red-backed Shrike; Great Grey Shrike; Raven; Tree Sparrow; Hawfinch; Snow Bunting.

**Review of records for 2008:** Records that the Committee has not been able to accept are listed below, although as comprehensive as possible, we may not have included all records not accepted. Please note that \* indicates that no description was received, 'date' indicates an unusual sighting date and 'count' indicates a highly unusual number.

Pink-footed Goose	16, Moatlands GP 17th Feb: reported as a possible only
Black Brant	2, Loddon Drive 31st Oct: not proven
Scaup	1, Hosehill Lake 24th Jan: not proven
Lesser Scaup	1, Woolhampton GP 1st Feb*
Goosander	1, Crookham Common 6th Aug: date*
Ruddy Duck	1, Theale Main GP 11th Dec: not proven
Common Quail	3, Datchet 22nd Nov.*
Black-necked Grebe	1, Searles Farm 10th Feb. not proven
Shag	3, Jubilee River 16th Apr.*
Bittern	1, Thatcham Marsh 4th Oct. not proven
Honey Buzzard	1, A329 (M) 17th Sept.*; 1, A329(M) Binfield 22nd June*; 1, Bottle Lane, Binfield 1st June*; 1, Foxley Fields, Binfield 20th June*; 2, Caversham Heights 14/15th Sept*; 1, Langley, Slough 22nd Sept not proven; 1, Woolhampton 19th Sept*
Black Kite	1, Greenham Common 24th April; reported as a possible; 1 Crowthorne 6th May; 1, Tilehurst 8th May: photos indicate Red Kite; 1, Dorney Wetlands 20th May reported as a possible; 1, Woolhampton GP 5th June*
Marsh Harrier	1, Lavells Lake 26th Jan: not proven; 1, Great Shefford 14th Oct*; 1, Compton Downs 20th July: not proven; 1, Tilehurst 22th Apr*;
Hen Harrier	1, Calcot 12th July: date*
Goshawk	1, Boxford Common 9th Apr*; 1, Bussock Wood 22nd Jan: reported as possible; 1, Burghfield GPs 22nd Mar*; 1, Crowthorne 12th Jan: reported as a possible; 1, Frogmill, Hurley 16th Apr*
Osprey	1, Windsor Gt. Pk 18th Mar. Date & unknown observer
Gyr Falcon	1, Bury Down 9th Jun: not proven
Merlin	1, Swinley Forest, 19th Oct: reported as possible; 1, M4, Englefield 17th Nov: not proven; 1, Aldermaston 14th Nov reported as a probable; 1, Beedon 21st Feb reported as a probable
Corncrake	1, Brimpton 9th May*
Avocet	3, Eton to Windsor 6th May: not proven to enter Berks
Temminck's Stint	1, Eversley GP 16th May*
Dunlin	2, Slough Garden 12th Apr location & no notes
Black Tailed Godwit	1, River Thames 27th Jul: not proven to enter Berks
Whimbrel	5, Greenham Common 2nd Oct. Date & no notes
Whimbrel	4, Windsor 17th Apr. not proven to enter Berks
Greenshank	1, River Thames 15th Aug: not proven to enter Berks

Wood Sandpiper	1, Pingewood GP 14th May*
Turnstone	1, Theale Main Pit 17th Aug: not proven
Turnstone	3, Windsor 3rd Aug. Not proven to enter Berks
Common Gull	10, Jubilee River 16th Apr. Count & date
Herring Gull	50, Lower Farm GP 29th Oct: count & location.
Caspian Gull	1, Bracknell 15th Mar*; 1, Eversley GP 8th Mar.*
Arctic Tern	5, Lea Farm GP 1st May*; 1, Dinton Pastures 25th Apr*
Cuckoo	1, Swinley Forest 21st Mar date
Barn Owl	3, Twyford Garden 6th Apr.*
Short-Eared Owl	24, Bury Down 1st Jan: count
Alpine Swift	Bracknell 23rd Sep.*
Bee-eater	1 or 2 Greenham Common 7th May Heard only
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	1, Cold Harbour 27th Jan.*; 1, Cold Harbour 28th Jan. pager report*; 1, Datchet 2nd Mar.*; 1, Lea Farm GP 2nd Oct reported as a possible; 1, Wishmoor Bottom 6th Jan.*; 1, Thatcham 4th Oct: not proven
Scandinavian Rock Pipit	5, QMR 8th Oct: not proven
Yellow Wagtail	2, Swinley Forest 21st Mar: date & location
White Wagtail	1, N.Maidenhead 25th Oct*
Waxwing	1, Wokingham 1st Jun: date
Redstart	2, Combe Hill 8th Oct.*; 2, Kintbury 8th Oct.*
Wood Warbler	2, Freemans Marsh 19th Sept*
Siberian Chiffchaff	1, Sandhurst STW 11th Dec: not proven
Willow Warbler	1, Eversley GP 17th Oct date & no notes
Willow Tit	1, Lavells Lake 27th Jan* ; 1, Ceasars Camp 19th Mar: location*; 2, Swinley Forest 6th Apr: location*; 1, Swinley Forest 9th Apr: location*
Red-backed Shrike	1, Dorney Wetlands 29th Jun.*
Raven	1, Bray GP 28th Aug Pager report: not proven; 1, Dinton Pastures 2nd Apr withdrawn by observer; 1, Theale GP 11th Dec: observer not certain.
Tree Sparrow	2, Arthur Jacobs NR 24th Mar.*; 2, Newbury 28th Sept: not proven; 3, Slough garden 12th Apr: record not proven; 1, Slough garden 7th Aug: not proven
Mealy Redpoll	1, Wraysbury GPs 22nd Jan*; 1, Wraysbury 30th Dec*
Hawfinch	1, Waltham St. Lawrence 11th Dec*
Ortolan Bunting	3, Greenham Common 8th Oct
Corn Bunting	5, Combe 14th Sept: not proven

Please also note that some WEBS count figures from the Wraysbury Area have been excluded from the systematic list due to unacceptably high figures reported.