

Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin

Cercotrichas galactotes

Category N/A

No longer accepted.

0 records

World/British distribution (Snow & Perrins 1998):

Breeds in north Africa and the Mediterranean Basin from the southern Iberian Peninsula to Turkey, east to Kazakhstan and north-west China. Winters in arid tropics from Senegal to north-east Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.

Kent status (KOS 2022):

It is a very rare vagrant to the county.

British (BBRC) records to end 2020: 9

Kent (KOS) records to end 2020: 1



Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin at Hythe (per J. B. Nichols)

The Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin was formerly known as two species: the western (rufous) *Aedon galactotes* (known as the Rufous Warbler, Brown-backed Warbler or Rufous Bush Chat) and the eastern (grey-brown) *A. familiaris* (known as the Grey-backed Warbler). *Aedon* was later considered to be a junior synonym for *Cercotrichas* and the two former species were considered to be conspecific, with two distinct groups: of two western forms (*C. g. galactotes* and *C. g. minor*) and two eastern forms (*C. g. familiaris* and *C. g. syriacus*) (Naylor 2023, Snow & Perrins).

Ticehurst (1909) recounted what was accepted at the time as the first county and national record of Grey-backed Warbler (*A. familiaris*). It had been shot “near Hythe on the 15th July 1907, by a Mr. Whitehead, who sent it to Mr. Bristow of St. Leonards [in Hastings, East Sussex]. The latter brought it to me the next day in the flesh, and I find that I noted in my diary that it was an adult bird in worn breeding plumage. On dissection it proved to be a male”. He continues to state that “it was subsequently purchased by Mr. J. B. Nichols”. Ticehurst and Nichols had thought it to have been a ‘Rufous Warbler’ (*A. galactodes*) at the time, but it was later reidentified.

Mr. Nichols picks up the story in the first volume of the British Birds journal: “on 15th July 1907, a male ‘Rufous Warbler’ was shot at Hythe, Kent, and sent to Mr. Bristow, of St. Leonards, where it was seen in the flesh by Dr. N. F. Ticehurst. On receiving it from Mr. Bristow I thought it to be *Aedon galactodes*, but on its being submitted to Dr. R. B. Sharpe and Mr. W. R. Ogilvie-Grant, they identified it as the Grey-backed Warbler *Aedon familiaris* a bird which has not previously been obtained in this country”.

He further remarked that “it differs from *A. galactodes* by the greyish-brown rather than rufous-brown coloration of the upper parts, and by the central pair of tail-feathers being brown instead of chestnut. In range the Grey-backed Warbler replaces the Rufous Warbler as a breeding species in Asia Minor, Turkey and Greece, and further east. It has, however, wandered to Heligoland [Germany], Italy, and the south of France on a few occasions. *Aedon galactodes*, it may be noted, has only occurred three times in England and once in Ireland, all in the autumn”. The specimen was first exhibited at the 139th Meeting of the British Ornithologists' Club, held on the 19th February 1908 at the Restaurant Frascati in London (Ogilvie-Grant 1908).

However, the identification took a further twist in 1911 when H. F. Witherby (1911) wrote that “Mr. Nichols has very kindly allowed me to examine [the Grey-backed Warbler] and compare it with specimens of *A. g. syriacus*, kindly lent to me by Dr. Hartert. I find that this bird also is clearly of this form, and is much browner and darker than specimens of *A. g. familiaris* from Persia in my collection. The Grey-backed Warbler must thus come off the British list and be replaced by the Brown-backed Warbler (*A. g. syriacus*)”. Sadly, though it was all to be for nought.

Harrison (1953) was able to provide a second record for the county, when a “Rufous Warbler” (of indeterminate race) was seen at the Wicks on the 12th September 1951. There have been no further sightings in Kent and so this is the sole surviving record, with the Hythe bird no longer considered acceptable following developments in the 1960s.

In August 1962, an issue of *British Birds* (vol. 55, no. 8) was devoted to a review of the unprecedented quantity of records and specimens of rarities from the Hastings area in the last decade of the nineteenth and first two decades of the twentieth century, in a case to become known as “The Hastings Rarities” (Nicholson & Ferguson-Lees 1962). The authors listed 542 specimens obtained within 20 miles of Hastings which they recommended should be deleted from the annals of British Ornithology as being frauds.

Taylor *et al.* (1981) considered that “it is likely that some, at least, of the records from the area during the critical period were genuine, but for the sake of clarity, safety and scientific integrity, Nicholson & Ferguson-Lees erred deliberately on the side of caution when setting the record straight, suggesting rejection wholesale”. They continued to state that “their opinion, backed by complex statistical evaluation of probabilities and some careful detective work, was shared by the majority of ornithologists at that time”.

There were, however, notable exceptions including Dr. James Harrison, who “gathered dissenting opinion ... including evidence from Dr. Norman Ticehurst” (Harrison 1968, 1971). Nicholson & Ferguson-Lees responded to “emphasise again that the absurdities of the Hastings Rarities as a whole were the uniquely large proportion of class I [major] rarities, the absence or small numbers of many lesser rarities that one would expect if the policy were to encourage a wide circle of country people to bring in any unfamiliar birds, and the astonishing incidence of multiple records of pairs and parties” (included as a response within Harrison 1971).

Harrop *et al.* (2012) suggested that Harrison’s defence of the taxidermist at the heart of the affair (George Bristow) “may represent loyalty to an old friend from whom he had bought numerous specimens which he did not want discredited; and also wishful thinking that the species claimed at Hastings were plausible in light of subsequent records”. They also noted that similar arguments about plausibility have been given by later authors and stated that “it is true that most of the species deleted from the British List following exposure of the Hastings Rarities fraud have occurred subsequently. Such arguments, however, ignore the fact that the patterns of records from Hastings remain unique and implausible, and that there is a telling correlation between what we know was being imported at the time and what was being claimed”.

It has remained an exceptionally rare bird in Britain, with just four records since 1970 (in 1972, 1980, 2020 and 2021), whilst the occurrence of either of the eastern forms (*syriacus* or *familiaris*) in Britain has still not been proven. The most recent British example underwent DNA analysis, but its subspecies could not be determined and the results suggested that there was “more going on with Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin taxonomy than meets the eye” (Holt *et al.* 2022).

References

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