

Chinese Pond Heron - new to Norfolk and Britain

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The autumn of 2004, particularly October, was an exceptional one for Far Eastern vagrants in Britain. October had already seen the arrival of two 'firsts' from the region, with both Chestnut-eared Bunting and Rufous-tailed Robin in the Northern Isles.

On the morning of 31st October I was birding around my local patch of Eccles-on-Sea when one of my neighbours pulled up in his car and told me of a strange bird he had noticed that morning around a small fish-pond in the field behind his house.

The house is situated in a three-acre field of rough grass which the householder is slowly turning into a garden. An area of blackthorn scrub runs down one side of the plot next to both the house and pond. The field itself is situated directly behind the coastal sand dunes. The pond is stocked with a large number of small goldfish and is largely surrounded by rank vegetation with the addition of the stumps of a few felled trees.

He said that he had been trying to identify it from his bird book, but that he had been unable to come up with a good match, although he wondered if it might be some sort of grebe. Intrigued, I returned with him to his house where I was astonished to find a superb summer plumage adult Chinese Pond Heron standing on a tree stump by the pond. The bird seemed settled so I immediately went home to collect my camera. By the time I returned the bird had moved off the stump and down into the pond-side vegetation. I needed to approach quite closely to take a photograph but the bird was concerned by my approach and flew off over the adjacent blackthorn scrub.

I was hoping that it would return and discussed with the householder the possibility of arranging access for other birders to see it if it did so. Rather reluctantly, the householder agreed to my bringing a couple of other local birders (Mick Fiszler and Andy Kane) onto the site but was adamant that there was to be no public release of the news.

After almost an hour the bird reappeared. It perched on some distant trees before making a gradual and cautious approach, via a number of raised perches, to the pond. I now left the house by the other side and proceeded rather more cautiously to photograph the bird. It departed at about 3 pm and did not return subsequently to the pond, nor could it be relocated in the area despite extensive searching.

The heron was the size and structure of Squacco Heron. Its head and neck were a rich chestnut colour, as were the head plumes. There was some white around the base of the bill and in a thin strip down the very front of the throat. The mantle was slate-grey with delicately fringing onto the wing coverts. The grey also seemed to underlay the chestnut on the sides of

the neck. The rest of the underparts, wings and tail were pure white. The legs were bright, slightly orangey, yellow. The bill was yellow with a black tip and culmen. The bird was in immaculate condition with no visible damage to any of the plumage. It was also unringed.

Remarkably, the same individual was relocated at East Dean, Hampshire on 13th November. Here it made a similarly short stay and was never seen again.

Editor's comment

The process which led to BOURC's final acceptance of this bird as the first record for Britain was particularly long and tortuous. The identification of the bird was accepted by BBRC in 2005 and the record forwarded to BOURC. The full subsequent assessment history of the record is described in detail in McNerny & Stoddart (2017) but a summary is given here.

Chinese Pond Heron breeds in the Russian Far East, northeast and east China, northern Burma and northern Indochina, with northern populations moving south in autumn to winter mainly in Indochina, Malaysia, Borneo and Sumatra (HBW Alive). At the time of the first circulation the species had also occurred as a vagrant elsewhere in Asia and the Pacific. It had also occurred outside Asia on three occasions: on St. Paul Island, Alaska, from 4th to 9th August 1996, at Hellesylt, Møre og Romsdal, Norway shot in 'autumn' (probably October) 1973, and at Virágoskút fish-ponds, Hortobágy, Hungary from 14th to 22nd August 2000. All three were adults in breeding plumage.

BOURC acknowledged that Chinese Pond Heron had vagrancy potential, noting that although the sample size was very small all three records beyond Asia fell in the autumn period. Furthermore, the preponderance of adults might be explained by the harder-to-identify immatures being overlooked, misidentified as young Squacco Herons, which look superficially similar. It was therefore possible that the true level of vagrancy was being understated.

As for the specific circumstances of the Norfolk and Hampshire individual, its wariness, lack of a ring, apparently undamaged condition, and initial English east coast location all supported the notion of natural vagrancy. The October date was suggestive of a natural occurrence as was the fact that the bird appeared to be on migration, moving on rapidly in a south-westerly direction to Hampshire and then quickly moving on again, a scenario which suggested a wild bird.

However, the bird was still in full breeding plumage in late October and November, when instead it would be expected to have moulted into non-breeding plumage. This apparently anomalous plumage state of the Norfolk bird therefore posed a conundrum. Could a wild vagrant exhibit such a plumage, or did it instead indicate that it had been kept in a captive environment resulting in the normal moult cycle being interrupted or delayed? Independent advice from multiple sources in Asia indicated that Chinese Pond Herons moult into non-

breeding plumage by October with no known instances of birds still in breeding plumage in late October or November.

Given this evidence, it was important to determine the species' status in captivity and its potential to occur as an escape. Following these investigations, it was established that London Zoo had held eight Chinese Pond Herons in 1999 and had successfully bred the species. However, in 2004 the zoo held only one individual and this was still present, and in non-breeding plumage. No other captive Chinese Pond Herons could be traced elsewhere in zoos or public collections.

BOURC therefore faced a dilemma. Chinese Pond Heron was a possible vagrant to Britain, though the other European records were regarded as escapes. On the other hand it appeared to be an unlikely, though possible, escape. Furthermore, the breeding plumage state of the Norfolk and Hampshire individual in October and November was undocumented in a wild bird, yet did not necessarily indicate captivity. In view of these uncertainties, the record was placed in Category E of the British List.

Almost ten years later, on 17th January 2014, a Chinese Pond Heron was found at Hythe, Kent. It remained in the Hythe and Saltwood area until it was last seen on 13th March. Given an increasing pattern of vagrancy in the ten years since the occurrence of the Norfolk bird, a minimal (and decreasing) likelihood of escape and nothing untoward about the habits, plumage, stable isotope analysis or condition of the Kent bird, BOURC accepted Chinese Pond Heron to Category A.

The acceptance and publication of the Kent bird as Britain's first Chinese Pond Heron inevitably raised questions over the categorisation of the Norfolk individual. As a consequence, Tim Allwood and the observers of the Norfolk bird resubmitted the record in 2016 and the file was reconsidered by BOURC.

Any lingering doubts over the species' ability to occur in Britain as a natural vagrant and concerns over its escape potential had been dispelled during the consideration of the Kent record. It was now an established, and increasing, vagrant to Western Europe, with in contrast a minimal and decreasing escape risk. Even in 2004 it had been rare in captivity and the Norfolk and Hampshire bird now fitted neatly into the emerging pattern of European vagrant records.

The only issue to be addressed, and the chief obstacle to its acceptance to Category A on the original circulation, was the apparently anomalous plumage state - full breeding plumage in late October and November. However, photographs taken in Bangkok, Thailand on 15th and 18th October and 24th November 2014 now illustrated an adult Chinese Pond Heron in full breeding plumage. Although such a plumage state in late autumn in a wild bird was thought to be exceptional, it had nevertheless been demonstrated to be possible. The record was therefore accepted as the first Chinese Pond Heron for Britain, pre-dating the Kent record.

References

McInerny, C. J. & Stoddart, A. 2017. Recent BOURC decisions - Mugimaki Flycatcher and Chinese Pond Heron. *British Birds* 110: **XXX-XXX**.