

Pine Bunting at Blakeney Point

Nick Franklin

The morning of the 24th October was a cloudy, cold one with a stiff north-easterly breeze blowing, and my family and I had been considering the seal boat trip from Morston Quay. The weather almost made us change our minds but the fact that we would land on Blakeney Point persuaded us to make the trip.

After a very enjoyable journey around the seal beaches, during which we saw both Common and Grey Seals, the boat dropped us on Blakeney Point for an hour at 1.15pm.

I left the family and meandered around the bushes, stopping to talk to a couple of other birdwatchers at the Plantation. There did not seem to be much about, despite the feeling of promise in the air and the odd thrush flying in off the sea. A Blackcap in the Lupins delayed me briefly and then I returned to the Blue National Trust building. Just as I arrived, a movement caught my eye on top of a fence behind the building. When I stopped to look, it proved to be a nice male Black Redstart and I took a few photographs. While doing this I noticed a bunting sitting on top of some nearby brambles in the roped-off area behind the building so I moved in for a closer look.

When I put my binoculars on it I realised it wasn't the expected Reed Bunting but rather a species of bunting I didn't recognise. I could see it had a white lower belly and a chest streaked with reddish marks on a pale buff-red background and a grey head with no visible supercilium but with a prominent white eye-ring and well-defined dark areas on the ear coverts. A distinct crescent of white ran from the base of the bill around the lower face and culminated in a white spot on the cheek. The back and wings appeared grey with two distinct white wing-bars. There were no yellow hues in the plumage.

My first impression was of a similar chest colouration to a female Rustic Bunting but the head patterning was wrong and I had to admit to being baffled. I watched the bird for a few minutes, managing to take about ten photographs, before it flew out over the channel towards the mainland, heading approximately south. The boat then returned to pick us up and take us back to Morston Quay and I was left with the feeling that this was something different but I didn't know what.

Unfortunately, I was on a family holiday with no computer access or books with me and although I looked at the photos again a couple of times on the camera I couldn't really get any further. Once we arrived back home the following Saturday I set to working out what it was, using the internet and identification guides, and fairly quickly came to the conclusion that it was a female Pine Bunting.

This was a bird that I had never seen before and it wasn't really on my radar as being a possible candidate, though perhaps it should have been given that there had been several

records in Britain during the month. I forwarded the photograph to Rare Bird Alert and they independently came to the same conclusion.

Editor's comment

Pine Bunting has a large breeding range which extends right across Siberia and northern Mongolia. In the western part of the range it hybridizes frequently with Yellowhammer and a few examples of such hybrids have reached Britain. However, none of the Norfolk records to date has shown any overt hybrid characters.

This is only the third Pine Bunting for Norfolk, the previous records being a male at Hopton (and also over the border in Suffolk) on 28th October 1995 and male at Choseley on 28th February to 11th March 2004. It is hardly a surprise that a Pine Bunting reached Norfolk in October 2016. The month saw the largest influx of this species ever recorded in Britain, with no fewer than **XXX** accepted to date.