

Stejneger's Stonechat ~ Thornham Point, October 9th 2016

Mark Golley & James McCallum



(photo Penny Clarke)

The find & field identification

Much of a rather cold, sometimes wet October Sunday morning had been spent gazing out from on top of the cliffs at Hunstanton in the long-shot hope that the reported Black-browed Albatross of the previous day (one of several claims of the species along the Norfolk coast at the time) would materialise somewhere in the vast expanse of the Wash.

The first five hours of the day produced little of note, bar a decent breakfast in the café nearby and certainly nothing in the shape of an Albatross. Around midday, with the weather now much improved on what it had been, the cold wind and rain conceding ground to sunny spells and increasingly blue skies, I teamed up with James McCallum to try our luck at a few passerine spots in northwest Norfolk.

Neither of us had ventured much beyond our favoured locations much closer to Cley and Blakeney during the autumn but the conditions seemed more than a little encouraging to give it a go in areas of the county that we rarely ventured in to. A quick stop in Thornham village, close to the coastal path, produced instant success with a calling Yellow-browed Warbler above the car. Soon though, a couple of other birders appeared in the area so we decided to revert back to our Plan A, working Thornham Point. From the footpath we could see that no one was on the sandy peninsula leading west from Titchwell RSPB reserve, so we ditched the coastal route for somewhere a little more remote with no birders.

As we walked through the tallows around the trails at Titchwell, we came across a further four Yellow-browed Warblers along with a couple of Bramblings. Once James and I reached the eastern end of Thornham Point, we immediately began to investigate the mixed sand dune vegetation comprised of a scattering of *Suaeda* bushes along with, predominantly, Sea Buckthorn. We soon began to come across a few autumn migrants, Song Thrushes, Redwings and plenty of Goldcrests, along with a few Robins, a single Wheatear as well as a (regulation) nice male Stonechat. The area around the old block-house, towards the west end of the point, yielded a few more 'crests, a Chiffchaff or two, as well as more thrushes and several Reed Buntings. I broke off to the far end where the sandy hollows held good numbers of Meadow Pipit along with a flighty, vocal Lapland Bunting. I rejoined James once he'd emerged from the seemingly impenetrable Sea Buckthorn.

We began to head through the large *Suaeda* belt that runs south southeast of the spit, loosely inland, extending in towards the saltings. As we moved slowly and methodically through the vegetation, it was immediately obvious that as the afternoon had progressed, the familiar pattern that we both know from years of experience of watching the coast was happening again; birds were clearly arriving as we moved through the *Suaeda*, Goldcrests in particular were now being found in some abundance. It was getting rather exciting and then, sometime just after 3 o'clock, my pager beeped with a "Mega Alert", on the screen was news of Britain's first Siberian Accentor on Mainland Shetland; I gasped a little as I relayed the news to James. We chatted about it as we continued to the far inland tip of the *Suaeda*, marvelling at what an autumn it was. We turned back to work the same extensive stretch again; as we came to a small hummock, in front of me, on the inland, sheltered side of the *Suaeda* was a chat; it was head on and facing me but instantly it was registering as something rather different from the norm. It was also unquestionably rare-looking.

I said to James something like "crikey James, we're on to something here, there's a *really* striking Stonechat here; it's almost looks like a Whinchat..." A combination of James being lower down than me, on the other side of the hummock, and my awful directions meant that he didn't see the bird initially. It flew a short way and we repositioned ourselves; there, just a few yards in front of us, sat in the sunshine, was a white-throated, apricot-breasted pretty-as-a-picture "Siberian" Stonechat, but clearly not a regular *maurus* type. *The following description is taken directly from my notebook...*

"Siberian Stonechat", first winter male, *pres.*, Stejneger's. Watched for over an hour and a half in superb light, moving around the edge of the saltings, generally perching on the outmost branches of the waist high *Suaeda*. A stunning looking bird, really rather beautiful and full of field marks (almost reminiscent, at some angles, of a mini Black-eared Wheatear)."

"Head: - finely streaked mid-brown crown, contrasting of an off-white supercilia, fading just behind the ear coverts (at times in an upward flared look). The supercilia were particularly striking at certain angles even extending across the forehead and lores. Faint hint of a blackish, pencil thin eye stripe too (ultra narrow). Lores pale and buffy, again finely streaked, with some black wearing thru' on the area closest to the eyes."

"Nape also pale and finely streaked, some contrast with the crown and definitely the gleaming white throat (a bleed of apricot from the upper breast extended on to the nape sides in a small "thumb-print" mark). Depending on the angle, the supercilium almost melted to nothing ~ strange when at times it is pretty obvious. Lower ear coverts washed apricot, darker in the upper area of ear coverts."

"Underparts:- extensive apricot wash across the breast to upper belly, blending and fading down and across the upper and mid flanks. Rear flanks fading from apricot to creamy white, extending to whiter undertail coverts. Central belly white."

“Upperparts:- depending on the light, the ground colour of the mantle was mid to dark brown with obvious deeper brown variegated striations running down the mantle too.”

“Closed wing:- very obvious black lesser and median coverts with narrow, v. neat buff edges. Bold black alula too. Greater coverts dark centred with some very narrow and very fresh buff looking fringes (forming short almost wing-barred look). Primary coverts quite obvious, markings similar to coverts. Primaries black and, again, very fresh looking with neat pale (and narrow) tips (wing seems quite long but could be wrong). Tertiaries also super-fresh looking; black with narrow buff fringes and more obvious pale tips (so neat and so crisp). White also noted across visible scap., panel (very obvious in flight of course).”

“Rich, really deep apricot unmarked uppertail and rump, very striking throughout (and very different to the pale, frosty tones and colour of “old skool *maurus*”) ~ the beautiful rump colour appearing very striking *c.f.* with the rich, almost shiny coal-black tail; the tail itself showed white outer feathers and, when flycatching and hovering, very narrow, fresh (almost translucent) tips to the tail feathers as well (the bird spending a lot of time feeding and moving through the *Suaeda*).” (James describes the rump as being unmarked with a colour akin to a burnt caramel or toffee colour). ”

“The bold white scapular patches contrasting with the deep apricot tones of the unstreaked rump and the jet black tail were really quite something in flight in such perfect light; ditto the silvery white looking underwing flecked neatly with emerging black feathers across the underwing coverts.”

“Bill black, deepish at the base; beady black eyes with the legs and feet being the same colour.”

James and I enjoyed some marvellous views for an hour or more, often ‘scoped in perfect autumn sunlight. Throughout the time we were watching the bird, often at very close range, we discussed this engrossing bird’s (sub-)specific identification and Stejneger’s Stonechat was the main topic of conversation between us.

The first views suggested that this was anything but a “standard” frosted *maurus* and Caspian Stonechat was discounted as soon as the solidly black tail was noted. Between us, we’d seen a good number (well in excess of double figures) of vagrant Siberian Stonechats (in Norfolk, Cornwall, Scilly and Shetland). I’d not encountered a vagrant Stonechat quite as dark as this but James had seen a dark 1st winter female on Fair Isle in late September 2008, which he’d flagged at the time as having the potential to be a Stejneger’s-type.

The Thornham bird really stood out as being exceptionally dark and saturated with colour; the mantle and strikingly deep toned (and clearly unstreaked) dark apricot/toffee coloured rump, along with the gleaming white throat and striking white supercilia presented quite a sight.

I rang a few people who I knew to be at Titchwell and popped the news of the Stonechat’s presence out to RBA. Around seven or eight people saw it before dark and, sadly, it wasn’t noted again. Thankfully one of those I contacted, Penny Clarke, was able to obtain some very helpful record shots, which are presented in the composite below.

(This account is directly based on MAG’s written submission to BBRC)



Thornham Point, late evening, October 9th 2016

(photos Penny Clarke)

Siberian Stonechat, 1st w male, Thornham Point, Norfolk, 9th October 2016

James R McCallum

Pale buffy edges and tips to greater coverts forming wingbar. Alula and primary coverts also having buffy edges.

Tertials and secondaries having pale buffy edges these becoming whiter towards tips. Primaries tipped buffy white.

Rump + uppertail Striking in being a completely different colour and tone to the underparts. MAG described them as a dark apricot but I felt that the colour was quite different - to me it was more caramel or toffee coloured. This area of the plumage was particularly nice as the colouration was even over both feather tracts.

Tail nice coal black contrasting beautifully with the uppertail and rump. Tail feathers having pale tips.

Upperparts medium earthy brown. Quite dark compared most Siberian Stonechats I've seen. Slightly darker dotting/scalloping on scapulars, back and crown but lacking great contrast

Apricot colour spilling onto nape sides, becoming browner towards hind nape

Extensive white 'shoulder patches' and striking blackish 'armpits'.

Narrow buffy brown supercilium flaring slightly at rear. Blackish feathering behind eye, rear eyestripe & top corner of ear coverts
clean white throat

underparts lovely rich apricot with distinct darker, deep apricot 'pectoral band'. Undertail coverts contrastingly whitish.

Legs and feet black



These sketches, I believe give an accurate impression of how the bird looked in the field - importantly in terms of colour hues and relative plumage tones.

(Notes and sketches submitted by JM to BBRC)

Discussion

Before our encounter on Thornham Point (and as mentioned above) both of us had seen a number of "classic" pale, frosted Siberian Stonechats and other, darker looking, presumed *maurus* types too, but this individual was a step up from them as well. A number of features shown in the field by both the trapped, ringed and DNA analysed Portland Stejneger's Stonechat of autumn 2012 (a bird that, remarkably, had first appeared in the Netherlands) and the Landguard Point bird (like the Portland bird, suspected of being Stejneger's in the field with DNA analysis confirming it) that arrived just a couple of days before ours resonated almost immediately with both of us as we admired this amazing looking bird.

Arguably ours was more striking than even the Dorset and Suffolk birds and it also shared a number of features exhibited by a trapped and ringed Stejneger's Stonechat in Finland in November 2013 (and the DNA confirmed Stejneger's subsequently found at Spurn 12 days after the Norfolk individual).

Although submitted as a Stejneger's Stonechat, a potential first for Norfolk, it was accepted by the *BBRC* within the wider bracket of "Siberian Stonechat". This was somewhat disappointing given the startling look of the bird in the field and how it compared to known *stejnegeri*.

Some confusion had occurred elsewhere (perhaps, in part, because birders realised that Stejneger's Stonechat was soon to become a split as the *BOU* adopted the new *IOC* list for Britain); along with a couple of more ambitious claims in southeastern England (one at Dungeness raised premature hopes after an error in the laboratory), a bird that certainly warranted further investigation was a distinctive first-winter bird on Fair Isle, seen and photographed soon after the Norfolk individual. Widely held to be a putative Stejneger's at the time, from a far in Norfolk, it felt as though the sum of the parts didn't quite add up; the paler, mealy-hued mantle tones, the less intensely coloured, orangey rather than intense deep apricot/burnt caramel rump and absence of a gleaming white throat all seemed to count against it. The subsequent DNA results revealed that it was indeed *maurus*.

Perhaps with that in mind (at least to a degree), the *BBRC* are still researching the in-field identification of Stejneger's Stonechat. What appears to be clear is that all accepted vagrant *stejnegeri*, both here and elsewhere in western and northern Europe, all conform to a suite of characters exemplified by the Thornham Point bird. Field marks hold up in the hand and vice versa.

Perhaps those tell-tale features are, at present, judged only as "soft features" (which feels odd given how they hold up on vagrants and birds within the species core range). Presumably the concern that "dark *maurus*" or birds from some unknown Asian intergrade area may resemble the very look of a Stejneger's Stonechat is one that committees across Europe will be researching.

For the moment, it is possible to look at images of the Dorset, Suffolk and East Yorkshire birds of 2012 and 2016 and compare them favourably to not only other accepted vagrants in the Western Palearctic (and to birds from their core range) but also to the Thornham Point bird.

For birders searching for potential Stejneger's Stonechats within the main autumn migration season, the following six features are shared by the birds discussed above.

1. **dark brown base colour to mantle**
2. **unstreaked, deep apricot/burnt caramel coloured rump**
3. **gleaming white throat (a noticeable feature on accepted, DNA tested Stejneger's)**
4. **the whitish supercilia and how it extends to the bill base/forehead area (Yoav Perlman, *pers. comm.* suggested that a high % of first-winter male *stejnegeri* on passage in Israel exhibit the combination of white throat and white looking supercilia)**
5. **a thicker, stouter bill than *maurus* Siberian Stonechats**
6. **a relatively short primary projection**

These half dozen features certainly seem to stand up well and we've both had the feeling, from the get-go, that they should be viewed as extremely positive pointers for the Thornham bird's specific identity. Observers with experience of the (then) form were contacted and the response was overwhelming in favour of it being a Stejneger's Stonechat. Paul Leader, who has a wealth of experience with the species in eastern Asia immediately responded that the Thornham bird "looks spot on for Stejneger's Stonechat based on my experience in Hong Kong".

Comparison of DNA proven vagrants to the Thornham Point bird



Top - Dutch/Portland



Middle - Thornham



Bottom left - Languard: Bottom middle & right - Spurn



Left - Thornham Point. Right - Dutch/Portland



This striking first-winter male was trapped and ringed at Orivesi, Pappilanniemi, Finland on November 7 2013. It shares a number of features with the Thornham bird and other (known) vagrant Stejneger's Stonechats from elsewhere in the Western Palearctic. The wear and moult on the rump, along with the dark flecking on the throat, set it apart from the Norfolk male (and other birds featured here) but it is most likely an artefact of being a month later in the autumn when birds are more likely to exhibit wear and moult.

Currently the *BBRC* have accepted birds only where DNA samples have been made available (three so far, all illustrated above). However, they have announced that they are working towards criteria that can be applied to in-field observations and subsequent identifications. We look forward to this development and, once ready, we are confident that this striking and distinctive bird will qualify for acceptance as a first-winter male Stejneger's Stonechat and, in turn, be added to the county archive.

Mark Golley & James McCallum

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Thornham Point, October 9th 2016

(photo Penny Clarke)