



Northumberland & Tyneside
Bird Club

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This is a short paper produced by Colin Bradshaw.

Central Asian Lesser Whitethroats

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by
Colin Bradshaw

In 2002 I was asked to analyse the issue of identifying Central Asian Lesser Whitethroats for BBRC after the occurrence of birds on Fair Isle and Teeside and find a rational way of addressing the issue and particularly the place of the subspecies *Sylvia curruca halimodendri*. This was largely because, although both *halimodendri* and *minula* are long-distance vagrants and would surely be worth recording if we could, there was some doubt as to how accurately we could distinguish between the two forms.



Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca curruca* Sumburgh Head, Shetland September 2008

(C. Bradshaw)

Shirihai *et al* had placed *halimodendri* in the *curruca* group but my experience from the southern end of their geographical range suggested that this was by no means the last word and that view was shared by several European taxonomists who knew a lot more about the subject than me. In May 2006 I spent a few weeks in southern Kazakhstan watching & photographing Lesser Whitethroats and it made me totally re-evaluate my position.

In 2002 after all the reading and the experience of the 2000 Teeside bird, I believed that we should be prepared to consider three groups, nominate including *blythi*, the Desert Lesser Whitethroat group *minula/margelenica* and the Mountain or Hume's Lesser Whitethroat group *althea*. However, for several reasons, *margelenica* and *althea* are highly unlikely vagrants so the rest of this discussion will focus on *halimodendri* and *minula*. This, so far, was running along with all that had been suggested in BWP and Shirihai *et al*. In addition, I believed that the Desert Lesser Whitethroat group were so distinctive that they could be safely identified in the field, as long as the observers had prolonged and close views of them [using the same sort of viewing criteria we now use for female Pine Bunting *Emberiza leucocephalos*]. After my 2006 trip to Kazakhstan, I no longer believe that.

Most of the birds that I saw in Kazakhstan were *halimodendri*, on range anyway, as they are the resident breeding population in the lowlands of southeastern Kazakhstan. We saw lots over a range of about 300 miles east to west and variation in colour was quite significant with many at the western end of their range being paler and sandy with a less obvious dark mask. Many bird tours 'identify' these in the Taukum Sands Desert as *minula* which, in reality, have a closest breeding range more than 600 miles from the Taukum Sands. This may lead you to believe that the identification of 'Desert' Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia minula/halimodendri* must be relatively straightforward but, according to both Lars Svensson [*pers. comm.*] and Shirihai *et al* the further north you go the more *halimodendri* gets to look like *curruca*. At what stage do you draw the cut-off. LS says "It follows from this that field records (without trapping and handling of the birds) are extremely difficult to be certain of, especially when you need to separate *minula*, *halimodendri* and southerly *blythi*."

As you can see, the problem seems to revolve around the placement of *halimodendri* and the geographical variation of that form. The data, separating *halimodendri* from *curruca*, are very limited and most appears to be geographical rather than biometric. We can be fairly sure that *blythi*, which is said to winter in India and breed in northern Siberia, will migrate through areas where *halimodendri* breed. How sure can we be what forms have been collected when both occur in an area? Separation of the races is reliant on relatively subtle assessments of plumage tone. This works OK when comparing trays of skins in the British Museum but is less easy when confronted with a record of a vagrant in the field.



'Hume's Lesser Whitethroat' *Sylvia curruca althea* Konshengel, Kazakhstan May 2006
(C. Bradshaw)



'Central Asian Lesser Whitethroat' *Sylvia curruca halimodendri* Aldarly, Kazakhstan May 2006
(C. Bradshaw)

Even biometrics don't help as *halimodendri* at the smaller end of range overlaps with *minula* in size, wing-formula, plumage, song and call. Just to blur the picture even more, careful reading of Shirihai *et al* shows, however, another problem. The biometrics show that eastern *curruca* from Siberia to be shorter and blunter-winged than Western European birds.

However, this problem all depends on *halimodendri* being placed in the nominate group. Should that be the case? What does seem certain is that a group of Lesser Whitethroats in Central Asia, including *halimodendri*, share an unusual tit-like call and have similar songs which seem to fall outside those given by nominate Lesser Whitethroats. In general these birds fall into two categories - the large long-tailed ones that are or look like *althea* [and are unlikely vagrants] and the smaller, paler, short-winged & short-billed birds that lack contrast in the mask and cap and mantle.

For rare bird recording purposes, one option would be to include *halimodendri* into a group of 'Central Asian' Lesser Whitethroats that would all appear to be vagrants and thus worthy of record. This would not necessarily align with future splits but would be a pragmatic solution for important vagrants. We may not be able to distinguish those at the northern end of the range that look closest to nominate but we would be able to 'do' a lot of them. The characteristic call which no-one claims can be uttered by either *curruca* or *bythi* would be one clear-cut feature.



'Central Asian Lesser Whitethroat' *Sylvia curruca halimodendri* Aldarly, Kazakhstan May 2006
(C. Bradshaw)

One problem of course would be that this system doesn't separate *minula* from *halimodendri* and if genuine *minula* at the small end of biometric range and pale end of plumage spectrum occurred it might just get lost in this supergroup. However, we would have a much better picture of the vagrancy pattern of this fascinating group.

We could identify to a subspecific level both *minula* and *althea* if they are in the biometric range that is outside that of *halimodendri* but otherwise, at least, they would be assessed and recorded and add to our knowledge of vagrancy.

Assessment would, however, need to be based on fairly rigorous criteria :

- We should ONLY CONSIDER those that are trapped and possibly those that have detailed photos that allow some assessment of wing-formula and relative lengths of primary projection, bill etc.
- We should thus be prepared to accept only birds that fall within both the plumage and biometric of *minula/halimodendri* as Central Asian Lesser Whitethroat.

- Field-only claims if ever acceptable would require :
 - Watched for a protracted period of time with close views
 - Brown on nape
 - Lack of contrast between crown and mantle
 - White throat contrasting with peachy or buffy flanks and breast
 - Lack of clear dark mask
 - Lores paler than usual
 - Sandy or pale to mid-brown upperparts
 - Short-winged/long-tailed jizz
 - Tit-like call
 - Preferably tail noted as lots of white in outer tail and centre not contrasting with mantle

This report was finalised in 2007.

In 2009 I had the chance to test out the criteria on a bird found by Alan Curry at St Mary's Island on 17th October and it fulfils all the criteria although the lores are not as pale as I would liked to have seen them. The St Mary's bird was noticeably pale, showed a lot of white in the tail in flight - more so than most Lesser Whitethroats but which we were unable to quantify - , had a short primary projection and sounded like an alarm-calling Blue Tit - a repeated "dzee-dzee-dzee" usually between 3-6 syllables but occasionally lasting longer - and most frequently uttered when just landing from one of its short flights.

The rest of the details of the St. Mary's Island bird can be seen in the accompanying photos below. These can be compared with the photos above of a nominate race bird taken at Sumburgh, Shetland Isles in September 2008, both *halimodendri* and *althea* from Kazakhstan in 2006 and more recently another nominate race bird on Holy Island in October 2009.

What can't be seen from the photos is the behaviour of the St Mary's individual which moved in a restless, 'wired', fidgety tail-flicking manner spending as much time in the tops of the willows as low down, taking frequent short flicking flights and all-in-all behaving much more like a *Phylloscopus* than a *Sylvia*. I had previously noted this behaviour in Kazakhstan but thought that it was a function of temperature and habitat there.

References

Cramp, S (ed.) (1992) *The Birds of the Western Palearctic* Vol. VI Oxford University Press
 Shirihai, H., Gargallo, G., Helbig, A.J., Harris, A. & Cottridge, D. (2001) *Sylvia Warblers*. Helm

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October 2009

Putative 'Central Asian Lesser Whitethroat' *Sylvia curruca halimodendri*
St. Mary's Island, Northumberland 17th October 2009





(photos Colin Bradshaw)

**Nominate Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca curruca*
Holy Island, Northumberland October 2009**



