

The EBS Identification Panel

Introduction

At the time of writing the list of birds recorded in Essex in an apparently wild state stands at 386 species (BOU Categories A, B and C). Of this impressive total some 89 species are currently treated as national rarities, records of which are adjudicated solely by the British Birds Rarities Committee (BBRC). There are a number of rare sub-species of common species on the Essex list (e.g. Least Tern, Dark-breasted Barn Owl, various races of Yellow Wagtail and Siberian Stonechat) that takes the total number of taxa that are adjudicated by the BBRC to approximately 100.

The remaining 297 species not adjudicated by the BBRC are split between those which are common in Essex and relatively easy to identify (201 species) and those which are scarce or rare in Essex and, in many cases, not so easy to identify (the remaining 96 species – see Appendix One). Again, there are various rare sub-species or races that occur in Essex (e.g. Taiga and Tundra Bean Geese, Black Brant and Siberian Chiffchaff).

More than half of the 96 species that make up the scarce or rare category (51 species) were formerly adjudicated by the BBRC.

The role of the EBSIP

The role of EBS Identification Panel (EBSIP) is largely directed towards reviewing the records of these rare species and subspecies submitted to the County Recorder by observers.

To this end the main aims of the EBSIP are to:

- assist in maintaining an accurate database of the occurrence of scarce and rare birds in Essex;
- assist with the preparation and publication of an accurate and comprehensive annual Essex Bird Report (EBR);
- assess all records of scarce and rare birds in Essex in an independent, open and consistent manner;
- review periodically the list of species and sub-species adjudicated by the EBSIP;
- assist with the wider aims of the EBS by working closely with the County Recorder and the Executive Committee.

As most members of the EBS will be aware, the EBR is an award winning annual publication, and the EBSIP plays a significant role in maintaining the integrity of the database and of the EBR.

What is the EBSIP

The EBSIP was formed in 1990 and currently consists of seven voting members, one of whom acts as the Chairman. Records are forwarded to the EBSIP Chairman by the County Recorder for assessment and are then circulated by post (although plans are currently being discussed to possibly move to electronic circulation). Members are tasked with independently assessing each individual record forwarded to the EBSIP by the County Recorder and stating whether they believe that the record to be “Proven” or “Not “Proven”.

For a record to be “Proven” at least four of the seven members (i.e. a simple majority) of the EBSIP must agree that the submitted description demonstrates beyond reasonable doubt that the record is “Proven”. Where there is reasonable doubt within the EBSIP over a specific record, that record will be “Not Proven”.

In either case the Chairman of the EBSIP advises the County Recorder of the decision and this is then passed onto the editors of the EBR.

In some instances, e.g. where the submitted description is felt to be borderline for “Proven” the EBSIP members may mark an individual record “Discuss” rather than “Proven” or “Not Proven”. Such records are then discussed when the EBSIP next meet and a decision taken at the meeting by way of a vote. EBSIP meetings are generally held two or three times per year.

It is worth noting here that the main reason for records assessed by the EBSIP being “Not Proven” is that the submitted description leaves reasonable doubt as to whether the observer has conclusively established a sound identification. For example, in many cases the submitted description is simply too brief and there is no mention of how a similar species was eliminated.

This is a potentially contentious and emotive area for observers, but bear in mind that the EBSIP is not saying that the observer of a record found to be “Not Proven” is necessarily wrong or has made a mistake. All that it means is that the submitted description (which is usually the only evidence that the EBSIP has on which to base its conclusions) is not sufficient in the view of the EBSIP to establish the identification beyond reasonable doubt.

For example, a submitted description of a Black Brant (without supporting photographs) that does not explain in some detail why the bird was not a hybrid Black Brant x Dark-bellied Brent Goose is unlikely to be considered “Proven”.

Mistakes do occasionally occur as well, but these are generally only apparent where the photograph(s) submitted in support of the written description clearly show a different species – it does happen sometimes.

Having said that, the vast majority of records assessed by the EBSIP are straightforward “Proven” cases with no need for further discussion. It is estimated that 80-85% of all records adjudicated by the EBSIP fall into this category, which is broadly similar to the BBRC acceptance rate.

What needs to be submitted to EBSIP?

This largely depends on the species concerned and a number of other factors. Appendix One lists the current EBSIP species.

Multi-observed and photographed birds

In line with the BBRC the EBSIP has recently adopted a “fast-track” approval process for multi-observed and photographed scarce and rare birds in Essex. For example, the Alpine Swift at Warren Gorge in April 2010 was seen by many Essex birders, many excellent photographs of the bird have been published on various websites and so it is not essential that a written description is submitted to the County Recorder by the finder for the record to be published in the 2010 EBR in due course. Having said that, we would still encourage the finder(s) of all rare birds in Essex to submit a written description in all cases to ensure that credit is given where it is due (i.e. to the original finder) in the relevant EBR.

Other records

Inevitably a large number of the records that are assessed by the EBSIP do not fall into the above category and are therefore not multi-observed or are not photographed or both. These records require the observer(s) to submit a written description for assessment by the EBSIP if they wish the record to be published in the EBR.

The level of detail required in the written description varies, depending on the circumstances and the species concerned. There are three levels used in the list of EBSIP species in Appendix One:

Notes – Generally required for species that are scarce, but annual in Essex (e.g. Razorbill, which is common in certain parts of the UK, but scarce in Essex) and relatively easy to identify given good views and experience of the species and also an awareness of possible confusion species. “Notes” means a brief description on how you identified the species concerned and that you were aware of and eliminated any possible confusion species at the time of the sighting.

See Appendix Two for an example of a “Proven” description in the “Notes” category.

Description – As for notes, but generally applies to birds that are less than annual in Essex and require a bit more detail on plumage, calls and behaviour, consideration of similar species and why they could be eliminated at the time of the sighting and relevant background details to demonstrate that the identification is proven.

See Appendix Three for an example of a “Proven” description in the “Description” category.

Full Description – mainly applies to former BBRC species, especially those that require accurate assessment of subtle characters to eliminate similar species (e.g. American Golden Plover, Caspian Gull and Arctic Redpoll) or where there is a need to consider hybrids (e.g. Black Brant). A full description implies a complete plumage description and notes on, for example, behaviour, flight action, calls, etc.

A full description would be expected to be of a similar level of detail to a submission to BBRC.

Writing a description

Bill Oddie famously dealt with description writing in the classic Little Black Bird Book as long ago as 1980 and, in typically tongue-in-cheek manner, titled the section “Fooling the committee”.

What he was really doing, of course, was explaining in a frivolous and amusing way what you need to cover in your descriptions. Or, in other words, if you want your record to be treated as “Proven” your submitted descriptions will need to be of a minimum standard and cover all the necessary background details as well as a description of the bird to demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt that you did see the species reported.

A Rarity Report Form is available on the EBS website. We encourage all observers to use this form (or its format) to complete and submit descriptions so that all the basic background details are covered (e.g. the species concerned, the date of observation, the exact location where the bird was seen, the name and contact details of the observer(s), the time of day, weather conditions, visibility, direction of the light in relation to the observer, distance from the bird, optical aids used, whether it was photographed or ringed, the presence of other observers, and comments on previous experience of this and similar species).

The remainder of the form is for the description. The level of detail of the description depends on the species concerned and whether the EBSIP requirement is for Notes, Description or Full Description as detailed above.

Other supporting evidence that might be submitted with a written description includes a copy of notes and sketches made in the field at the time of the sighting, photographs or video footage of the bird(s) and a recording of the song or calls of the bird(s).

This might sound quite daunting if you have never written a detailed description before. As can be seen in Appendix Two and Appendix Three, however, it is not necessary to write a

huge amount – just enough to detail the important identification features noted at the time of the sighting and how any similar species were eliminated.

We hope that this short article will assist finders and observers of rare birds in Essex in compiling descriptions for submission to the County Recorder, but we also welcome constructive feedback and suggestions from anybody on how to refine and improve the process further.

**The Essex Birdwatching Society Identification Panel
July 2010**

References

The Essex List – EBS Website: <http://www.essexbirdwatchesoc.co.uk/>

The British List - BOU Website: <http://www.bou.org.uk/recbrlst.html>

BBRC Current Rare Species – BBRC Website: <http://www.bbrc.org.uk/currentrarespecies.htm>

The Birds of Essex (Wood, 2007)

Bill Oddie's Little Black Bird Book (Oddie 1980)