

THE FINDING OF THE EASTERN BLACK REDSTART (*Ochrurus semirufus* or *ochruros phoenicuroides*) MANDRIA BEACH 24th NOVEMBER 2011

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As is often the case, the finding of a rare bird is not the result of going out to look for that species, but the good fortune in being "in the right place at the right time" and then having the skill (or is that luck?) to realise what one is looking at.

With the Eastern Black Redstart, the seeds of being "in the right place at the right time" were sown two days previously. My wife and myself had just returned to the island, having been travelling for about 10 hours since just after 2am UK time. Unusually, instead of just collapsing upon arrival, we decided to make use of the last hour or so of sunlight by driving down to Mandria Beach. Within minutes we saw the Hen Harrier. I say **the Hen Harrier** because this bird had been reported several days earlier and was probably the reason for my enthusiasm to head for the beach area and not simply fall asleep. Hen Harrier is the European harrier that I see the least, so it was a welcome reward for the effort. A Sparrowhawk provided good raptor support.

Further along the beach, the roughly ploughed field to the east of Lark Corner held very large numbers of Skylarks and Greater Short-toed Larks. Too many to count and also too difficult in our state of tiredness, as they were continually on the move up, down and behind the large clods of red earth.

I quickly reported the sightings, plus 77 Golden Plover and two Northern Lapwings, to Colin Richardson – as much as anything to warn him that we were back! Well Colin remarked that he thought all the Greater Short-toed Larks had migrated onwards and was therefore surprised at my observation (I later discovered that I was not the only birdwatcher to have seen this large, late flock). The following day was spent shopping for the essentials of our return, Cyprus red wine, Keo beer, etc. and thus it was not until early on the morning of 24th November that, now armed with telescope as well as binoculars, I set out to count the Greater Short-toed Larks and search to see if any Lessers were also present. The reward for leaving my bed early was to see not a single Short Toed Lark, either Greater or Lesser.

At around 8.00 – 8.30 I gave up and drove slowly and dejectedly westward along the beach track, essentially heading for home. Just before the picnic area, on the frame of one of the many now disused summer tent-like structures, I saw a bird exhibiting the jizz of a Black Redstart, but which clearly had a reddish belly and lower breast. Using the car as a hide, I was able to eventually get within around 10 metres or so. Now some of you might find this surprising (go on, own up!) but my immediate reaction was that I had found an *ochruros semirufus* or Eastern Black Redstart to give it a more manageable name. A quick check in my field guide confirmed this.

Having watched the bird at close range for maybe 10 minutes, I sprinted for our apartment to collect my camera and mobile phone. Before 9am I was back, had re-found the bird in the same area and was able to approach as close as before. Using the 30x zoom capability of my new toy, I took various record photographs – very useful for dealing with Colin, or any other rare birds committee member anywhere (more of that later). I also telephoned several local birdwatchers whose numbers I knew.

I stayed with the bird until around mid-day, during which time I was able to help a few others get great views. Of course, as you probably know, the bird has proven to be a long stayer and more birders have now seen it and several photographers with better equipment than mine have obtained top quality pictures.

As a consequence of the latter, there maybe a sting in the tail with regards to the identification. My decision to disregard *ochruros ochruros* (Red-bellied Black Redstart) and Redstart has not been challenged. But, as is speedily possible in this electronic age, some of the photographs have been sent to experts around the world. The result has been a suggestion that the bird is in fact an

ochruros phoenicuroides, a subspecies of Black Redstart that has its stronghold in North East Iran. Now *ochruros phoenicuroides* and *ochruros semirufus* are difficult to tell apart and at the time of writing this article, I am not aware that a final decision has been made.

However, from my perspective it raises a question about field guides. There is no doubt that some of the field guides that are available today are far, far superior to those we had to rely upon years ago. I use the Collins Bird Guide (either the 1st or 2nd Edition) as my day-to-day “bible”, a superb book. If you look you will find, as I did, *ochruros semirufus* mentioned complete with picture, but you will not find *ochruros phoenicuroides*. So the latter was never an option for my ID. Clearly an acceptably sized field guide cannot include every species/subspecies that may or may not turn up in Europe. Annoyingly though, my 1995 edition of Collins Pocket Guide Birds of Britain & Europe which was first published 1972, although nowhere near as good as the current Collins Bird Guide, does have both *ochruros phoenicuroides* and *ochruros semirufus* complete with illustrations! If only this had been carried forward to the current guide then I could have examined the bird for the differences. I personally believe that separation of these two sub-species is easier in the field than from photographs, but that’s another story.

As a last note on field guides, if you are expert at bird topography then may I recommend The Advanced Bird Guide by Nils Van Diuwendijk. As dry as old boots with no pictures, but it contains a phenomenal amount of information about the ID of a huge number of species and their sub-species, including Black Redstarts. Tremendous value for money as well, particularly if purchased through Amazon. However, if like me topography is not your strong point, then it I should warn that it is more likely to gather dust rather than wear out.

Now we come to the last challenge, having found a rare bird, having identified (hopefully) the bird, having alerted other birders to its presence and having notified Colin Richardson, the nightmare of a Rare Bird Report Form arrives. The importance of this for a rare bird is that unless the Form is completed and unless it is accepted, after detailed scrutiny, by the Cyprus Rare Birds Committee then officially you did not see it! Please though do not let me put you off completing the Form, do it. A couple of words of advice in this task from someone who has had reports accepted and a report rejected. Firstly photographs, no matter how amateurish, are great evidence. It does not matter if you cannot scientifically describe the topography (that word again) of the bird if you have a picture. Secondly try to enable other, ideally good, birders to see the bird – apart from the goodwill that maybe repaid later, there is strength in numbers and name dropping. The Form does ask “who else saw the bird?” And lastly, try not to regard a rejection as a personal insult. Remember you saw a rare bird and the rejection of your Rare Bird Report was made by a group of bitter people who didn’t. (Only joking?)



*The bird in question!
Photographed by
Albert Stöcker at
Mandria on
December 12th.*