

A paper from the British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee

The rise and fall of Bulwer's Petrel

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ABSTRACT This short paper examines two recent reviews of records of Bulwer's Petrel *Bulweria bulwerii* in Britain by BOURC. Four records were assessed, including three specimen records from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and a modern-day sighting from Cumbria. None was found acceptable, and the reasons are discussed here.

Bulwer's Petrel *Bulweria bulwerii* was named after Rev. James Bulwer, an amateur Norfolk collector, naturalist and conchologist, who first collected it in Madeira, probably in 1825 during a short expedition to Deserta Grande (Mearns & Mearns 1988). It was first described by Sir William Jardine and Prideaux John Selby, in *Illustrations of Ornithology* in 1828 (Jardine & Selby 1828). The species has had a turbulent history as a British bird. This paper provides a brief summary of records in the British ornithological literature, presents the results of two BOURC reviews, and explains why it has been removed from the British List.

Historical 'status' in Britain

Bulwer's Petrel is a monotypic species of tropical waters, which breeds on islands of the eastern North Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans between 10°S and 40°N (Onley & Scofield 2007). In the Atlantic it breeds on the Azores, Madeira, the Desertas, Great Salvage, the Canary Islands and Cape Verde. Most of those which breed in the Atlantic are believed to move south and west into the tropical Atlantic outside the breeding season (Cramp & Simmons 1977). They feed mainly at night on bioluminescent prey species which migrate to surface waters in the dark (Zonfrillo 1986).

By the early twentieth century, Bulwer's Petrel was acknowledged as a rare visitor to Britain, with five occurrences published in the second edition of the British List (BOU 1915).

By the time *The Handbook* was published, seven records were listed for Britain, all in England (Witherby *et al.* 1940), and these were repeated in Bannerman's *The Birds of the British Isles* (1959). Of these seven, four (all from Sussex, between 1904 and 1914) were subsequently rejected as 'Hastings Rarities' (Nicholson & Ferguson-Lees 1962; see plate 380) and a fifth, said to have been picked up at Beachy Head, Sussex, by an unnamed person on 3rd February 1903, escaped this fate only because it occurred outside the area used to define 'Hastings' records (Bourne 1967). The remaining two (both from Yorkshire, in 1837 and 1908), together with one from Scilly in 1897 and a recent record from Cumbria in 1990, formed the basis of the BOURC reviews.

It is of interest that a third Yorkshire bird was reported, without details, from Scarborough in 'spring' 1849 by 'Mr Graham, the talented bird-stuffer of York' (Higgins 1849). David Graham was closely involved with a number of rare-bird records, including the infamous 'Tadcaster rarities' (Melling 2005), so even if there were more details of this record it is unlikely that it would be acceptable.

The background to the BOURC reviews thus comprised a series of records that had attracted varying degrees of doubt. Like other petrels, Bulwer's Petrel is easy to catch on the breeding grounds, which may have tempted some unscrupulous sailors and dealers to present specimens as British for financial or other reward. As noted in the correspondence about

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the rejected 1908 record of Kermadec Petrel *Pterodroma neglecta* (Melling 2008; *Brit. Birds* 101: 211–213, 322–324), fraud of this kind was probably not uncommon during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The BOURC reviews

The first review, in 1991, considered a record from the Isles of Scilly on 2nd October 1897, following discovery of the specimen in Oldham Museum. The second review, in 2002, considered the records from Yorkshire in 1837 and 1908, as well as the 1990 Cumbria record. The Cumbria record was potentially the first British record eligible for Category A, following separation of the British and Irish lists (BOU 1999). The records are treated chronologically here. None was found to be acceptable (BOU 1992, 2006).

1837 Yorkshire

This bird was said to have been found dead by an unnamed person, either on the banks of the River Ure, near Tanfield, or on the bridge at Tanfield, on 8th May 1837, and brought to Captain Dalton of Slenningford (near Ripon), who had inherited a collection of stuffed birds begun by his father, Colonel Dalton. The specimen was described and illustrated by Gould in his *Birds of Europe* (1832–37) but was not included in *Birds of Great Britain* (1862–73). This led Saunders (1889) to comment that he suspected that later information had cast some doubt on the record.

On 15th November 1887, a week after the Dalton collection had been dispersed by sale, William Eagle Clarke, then curator of the Museum of the Philosophical and Literary Society at Leeds, and local naturalist James Carter traced the specimen, which was exhibited at a meeting of the Zoological Society (Newton 1887). It was said to have been presented to the Yorkshire Museum by Clarke, and is often presumed to be one of the two specimens of Bulwer's Petrel held there. However, the museum has no documentation which actually

links the collection details to a specimen, so it has proved impossible to confirm the continued existence of the Tanfield specimen.

The record presented BOURC with a number of problems, which ultimately made it unacceptable. Most importantly, the locality, c. 60 km from the coast, is implausible for a record of Bulwer's Petrel, while the record lacks a credible, detailed account of the circumstances in which it was obtained. It is also notable, and surprising, that Newton (1887) mentioned that 'curiously enough' Colonel Dalton had sent Bewick the specimen of the 'Common Stormy Petrel [*Hydrobates pelagicus*] (also found dead in that neighbourhood) from which the figure in his well-known work was taken.' That two of the petrel specimens used to illustrate seminal works (Bewick 1804 and Gould 1832–37) should really have come from the same inland locality seems improbable. Although the original identification as Bulwer's Petrel is not in doubt, it is uncertain that one of the two specimens now in the Yorkshire Museum is the one illustrated by Gould and subsequently copied by others (e.g. Yarrell 1856, Lilford 1885–97, Saunders 1889) since the bird portrayed in the original figure is positioned differently from the mounted specimen. Although it is possible that the mounted specimen may have been repositioned at some stage, there is no record of this.

1897 Scilly

The bird collection of Oldham Museum contains a specimen of Bulwer's Petrel with a



380. Male Bulwer's Petrel *Bulweria bulwerii*, dated 1914 and possibly Hastings Rarity 27, said to be from Jury's Gap, Sussex; now in the Ayscoughfee Hall Museum, Spalding, Lincolnshire. The same case holds a Wilson's Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*, dated 1914 (and possibly Hastings Rarity 1).

Andrew Harrop © Ayscoughfee Hall Museum

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Stuart Ogilvy © Yorkshire Museum



381. Bulwer's Petrels *Bulweria bulwerii*, Yorkshire Museum, York. The upper bird is labelled 'washed up Scalby Mills Scarborough'. The lower, which is often presumed to be the 1837 Yorkshire specimen, is unlabelled.

label on the base which reads: 'One of two birds that was taken on the fishing boat belonging to John Humphreys, Mousehole. They was [*sic*] purchased on Sunday and was ordered to be set at liberty by Mr. Baily. One got back to sea but the other was recaptured near Scilly, October 2nd 1897.' The specimen was originally in the collection of William Daws of Mansfield, Nottinghamshire (Case No. 141 also contains three European Storm-petrels and a Leach's Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma leucorhoa*). The case was bought intact from the dealer C. H. Gowland in 1932 for £3.00 (Hayhow 1989).

The Committee was unwilling to accept this record for several reasons: the record requires us to believe that two birds (or three if the 'recaptured' bird is considered different) were involved, which is highly unlikely; the date on which the first birds were caught is unrecorded; the likelihood of one being recaptured is remote; and the provenance trail for the Oldham Museum specimen of Bulwer's Petrel was considered too incomplete to exclude the possibility that the label originally referred to one of the other petrels in the case.

1908 Yorkshire

The specimen of this bird, said to have been found 'washed ashore' at Scalby Mills, near Scarborough, on 28th February 1908, is in the Yorkshire Museum (plate 381). It was said to have been in 'somewhat bad condition' and was not recorded until 14 years later, when it was presented to the museum (Collinge 1922).

In this case, the identity of the specimen is not in doubt, but the Committee was unwilling to accept the record mainly because the date seems unlikely for a British record of a warm-water oceanic species, and it is unclear whether the bird was ever alive in British waters. Ship-assistance is a possibility for this species, as shown by a 1993 record from The Netherlands of a bird taken alive from a ship at harbour in Europoort during the last week of November (Moeliker & Kompanje 1996). The delay

in reporting the record, combined with the context of a series of dubious records from elsewhere during the same period, also undermined confidence in its reliability.

1990 Cumbria

This record concerned a sighting of a bird flying past South Walney on 17th April 1990 and was thus quite different from the three records discussed above. It presented the Committee with different problems, similar to those discussed by Bradshaw (2002) in relation to a record of Herald Petrel *Pterodroma arminjoniana* in Kent. The difficulties faced both by the observers and by the assessors are illustrated by the fact that initially, before the bird became a potential first British record, the file was circulated four times by BBRC (with input from the specialist Seabird Advisory Panel) before coming to BOURC.

The bird was seen at a range of 600–800 m, in 'excellent light', for an estimated 8–10 minutes, during a north-westerly gale (force 7–8) with occasional squally showers. The three observers provided written documentation, from which the following extracts are taken:

Description 1. The most obvious features were its blackness, its long and pointed wings and its positive pattern of flight. It flew low and purposefully over the waves: three or four lazy, measured flaps with wings held in a forward position preceded a short careening and twisting glide before flapping again. It veered away from a dredger, and as it did so a long, pointed, all-dark tail was clearly seen. At a range of 600 m it flew

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in front of a Common Tern [*Sterna hirundo*], and was estimated to be 25% smaller. It displayed a total sooty blackness with no hint of pale.

We mentioned the possibility of Bulwer's Petrel but were not confident because we all felt that a wedge-shaped tail needed to be seen in order to identify that species. However, after reading all the current available literature, we realised that the wedge-shaped tail is not always visible.

Description 2. The most striking feature initially was its long wings, but as it came closer a long tail was also visible giving the bird something of a long-winged Merlin [*Falco columbarius*] look. The flight was very distinctive – skua-like but with touches of Sooty Shearwater [*Puffinus griseus*]. Considering the strength of the wind, it moved very quickly. It flew with a series of strong flaps interspersed with short bouts of sheering and veering. The whole time the bird kept in a straight line (apart from the veering) and purposefully headed out to sea. It also kept a constant height above the water, which must have been only a metre or two.

All I could say about coloration is that the bird appeared all over black with no sign of a covert bar.

While we were watching, we discussed possibilities and the tentative conclusion was that we should check up Bulwer's in the literature.

Description 3. The most obvious features were the long wings and darkness of the bird. It was flying fast with four or five wingbeats followed by a long glide almost like an Arctic Skua [*Stercorarius parasiticus*]. After about 30 seconds it flew next to a boat from which it quickly veered away. This is when we could see a long pointed tail, which was not obvious when the bird was first sighted.

We could see no white whatsoever on the bird in question. The wings were very long and angled forward, which reminded me of a Sooty Shearwater. The body appeared fattish but tapered down to a long pointed tail. The tail did not appear wedge-shaped at any time during the observation.

We had been watching the bird for approximately 8–10 minutes when we lost it as it flew out to sea. We all realised that we had seen a small dark shearwater or a large petrel. After consulting identification books and using the notes we made in the field, we realised there were only two species that came close to our bird (Jouanin's Petrel [*Bulweria fallax*] and Bulwer's Petrel). The Jouanin's Petrel has a completely different flight path and is bigger. We therefore came to the conclusion that the Walney bird was a Bulwer's Petrel.

Some of the problems with this record were due to the limited experience of Bulwer's Petrel, both of the observers (no prior experience) and of the assessors (several of whom also lacked prior

experience). This resulted in conflicting views about which aspects of the descriptions (and, in particular, the differences between them) were most important. The assessment did not imply any criticism of the observers, who had provided sincere and objective accounts of their experiences, but was more concerned with the quality of evidence required to establish such an exceptional record.

BOURC, which was assessing this record as a potential first for Britain, was unwilling to accept it mainly because the bird was not seen sufficiently well to establish its features beyond doubt. Consequently, the identification (as the observers acknowledged) rested too much on a process of elimination which did not fully exclude other, similar species. When BBRC looked at it in this context (and for a fifth time) in 2004, it agreed that the identification was not proven, and proposed that for a sight record to be acceptable the following features should be seen and recorded:

- size should be assessed accurately through direct comparison with other species
- the long, rounded tail shape should be seen clearly (that is, sufficiently well to exclude the possibility that it might be a folded forked tail)
- the bird's structure, especially wing length, should be described carefully
- colour should be assessed (Bulwer's Petrel shows brown tones, except in poor light and at long range)
- the flight should be carefully described and consistent with that of Bulwer's Petrel

Future records

Although none of the records to date has proved acceptable, Bulwer's Petrel is certainly worth looking for in British waters. There is one accepted record from Ireland, on 3rd August 1975 (Alibone 1980), and one from The Netherlands, on 21st August 1995 (Schaftenaar 1996). It should be noted, however, that in both cases there are elements of the accounts which are surprising: the Irish bird had a tail which was 'distinctly long' but also 'appeared square-ended'; while the Dutch bird's behaviour was atypical for a Bulwer's Petrel (it stayed for nearly three hours along the edge of tidal sandbanks, and foraged by picking up small parts of food with raised wings, spread tail and hanging feet 'quite like a Leach's Petrel'). The photographs of

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382 & 383. Bulwer's Petrel *Bulweria bulwerii*, between Madeira and the Selvagens, July 2005.

the Dutch bird are unfortunately of poor quality, and the identification has been disputed (van den Berg & Bosman 2001). Other records of Bulwer's Petrel in the North Atlantic were discussed by Morrison (1998).

There have also been three accepted records from North America (Alderfer 2006), all during July and August and from localities (in California and North Carolina) at about 35°N and within the 15–20°C isotherm. Since Bulwer's Petrel is primarily a species of tropical waters, it is most likely to occur in Britain during the summer months. The pelagic trips from Scilly perhaps offer the best hope, and already

have an excellent track record of producing well-documented records of other rare seabirds, often supported by photographs, which make assessment easier and sometimes prove vital.

Although this species is relatively distinctive, the long-held but perhaps unfounded expectation that it should occur in British waters with some regularity has perhaps been one of the reasons for records which now seem unacceptable. There are other, similar dark petrels, especially Swinhoe's Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma monorhis*, which need to be excluded if identification of vagrants is to be safe (see Garner & Mullarney 2004) and, if the bird is distant, other seabirds, including Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*, and even non-seabirds may need to be considered (Gutiérrez 2006; Onley & Scofield 2007).

Acknowledgments

Sue Sladen provided information about the specimen now at Ayscoughfee Hall, Spalding (believed to be Hastings Rarity 27). Stuart Ogilvy of the Yorkshire Museum provided information about their specimens and a

photograph of the 1908 bird. Mark Adams (Tring) checked data for the type specimen of *Bulweria bulwerii* Jardine & Selby. Bob McGowan, Tim Melling and Adam Rowlands commented on a draft of this paper and members of BOURC and BBRC commented on records during circulation.

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Request

Sightings of colour-ringed Tree Sparrows in northwest Norfolk

As part of an ongoing project, a number of Tree Sparrows *Passer montanus* have been colour-ringed at a breeding colony near Thornham, Norfolk, during the last four years. Each bird carries a BTO metal ring on the right leg and a single colour ring on the left leg. This aspect of the study concerns dispersal from the breeding site, and most birds leave the colony between late September and mid October.

In 2006, all birds trapped were fitted with a white

colour ring; those ringed in 2007 have a single red colour ring (adults) or a red/white striped ring (juveniles); in 2008, birds were fitted with either an orange or orange/white striped ring.

Any sightings of colour-ringed birds from adjacent areas, such as Holme, Thornham, Titchwell, Choseley, the Ringstead area, or even from further afield are most welcome. Please send details to Keith Herber, e-mail keith.herber@btopenworld.com or tel. 07785 920044.

Looking back

One hundred years ago:

"PALLAS'S SAND-GROUSE IN YORKSHIRE.—Two records of a few birds each have been reported (*antea*, pp. 98 and 134) of *Syrrhaptes paradoxus* in Yorkshire during the recent irruption of this bird. Mr. W. H. St. Quintin now records (*Naturalist*, 1908, p. 420) that a flock of 30 to 40 was noticed early in June near Knapton. A considerable number remained at any rate until the beginning of October. The flock appears

never to have broken up into pairs, although it certainly decreased, and there is no evidence that the birds ever attempted to breed.

PRATINCOLE AT THE FLANNAN ISLANDS.—An adult female *Glareola pratincola* was obtained on July 13th, 1908, at this out-of-the-way spot. It is the third example of the species obtained in Scotland (W. Eagle Clarke, *Ann. S.N.H.*, 1908, p. 256). (*Brit. Birds* 2: 245, December 1908)