

Magnolia Warbler 23rd September 2012: the first for Fair Isle

Jason Moss and Will Miles

'Wardening a Mega' by David Parnaby

Sunday 23rd September was already a good day; three weeks of westerlies had finally given way to lighter winds earlier in the week and a run of good birds had started with an 'Eastern' Grasshopper Warbler on Thursday, Arctic Warbler and Citrine Wagtail on Friday and Blyth's Reed Warbler and 14 Yellow-browed Warblers on Saturday. Sunday was another promising day with light easterly winds seeing Yellow-browed Warblers increase to 21 before that classic Fair Isle rarity, a Lanceolated Warbler was found at Da Water and trapped to confirm identification.

A sunny Sunday afternoon, full of roast dinner and having seen some great birds, it would be tempting to maybe take things easy, but that isn't how things work on Fair Isle. The Transit had received a puncture whilst parking at Da Water, so I headed down at about five o'clock to fix it (and get the people carrier filled with diesel, as it had spent the day with the fuel warning light on) whilst JM and WM showed their dedication to the cause by forsaking their afternoon off to head back into their census areas.



Magnolia Warbler with
Yellow-browed Warbler *by W. Miles*

Having sorted the Transit, I was heading to Skerryholm for fuel when the phone went, it was Jason who yelled a message along the lines of 'get everyone now, there's an American warbler on Lerness - it's yellow with a grey head, green mantle and white panels in the tail like a Crag Martin. Come quickly, bring the books!'. It was after half past five, there was probably only an hour and a half or so of good light and this was something mega that everyone had to get to. There was no time to panic, but it was hard not to. First of all: start spreading the news, I tried Will whose phone was engaged, a message was left at the Obs, I called Deryk who sounded very pleasantly surprised and said he'd head straight up, and then concentrated on driving. The lack of diesel was forgotten and the people carrier went roaring (at about 25mph, but that's as close as you get to a roar on Fair Isle's roads) up the island. WM was sighted by Da Water and the news was relayed to him, with the instruction to take the Transit and get straight up there (having experience of ringing in Canada he'd be able to nail the ID). I'll admit it was very tempting to head straight up there myself, but with no vehicles left at the Obs, that wouldn't have been popular - I just had to hope it would stick around. Guests were picked up and bundled into the vehicle and with every extra person jammed in, the level of excitement ratcheted up another notch. Conversation was flying around the back seats 'could be Magnolia', 'where's Lerness?', 'was it showing well?'. Dropping the first load of people at the airstrip, I headed back to the Obs where responsibilities for finding everyone else were handed to Susannah and I took flight, leading a charge of staff and guests across the Eas Brecks and Mire of Vatnagard (including a group who had misheard the original message and would have made a potentially crucial error of heading to Meoness at the opposite end of the island had they not been caught in time!). As we streamed west, it became clear that, although Jason thought he was probably at Copper Geo, he wasn't sure, and we weren't entirely sure where Copper Geo was anyway. Nevermind, keep going and things would work out! The phone went again 'it's Magnolia, it's definitely Magnolia!', Will had got there and recognised the species from his Canadian experiences. Everyone on the island knew about the bird now and people from further afield were starting to join in the experience, but it was obvious the sun was on its way down and the fear of the bird flicking down the cliff never to be seen again was starting to raise its head.

Eventually as the charge from the Obs reached the brow of the hill, the location could be seen - and now it was downhill, we were off again, sweating, panicking but getting closer. At the geo people all seemed to be looking the same way (always a good sign), 'it's there - it's in the scope' and there it was, every bit as amazing as Jason's description. Feeding actively on the cliff, it remained in place whilst a steady stream of staff, islanders and visitors arrived. Trying to liaise with Susannah and work out who was there was rewarded with the sight of the last of the guests being directed to the correct geo by about quarter to seven and finally Susannah, having done her bit, also getting to see the bird.

The happy, smiling crowd were surely what birding should all be about, an absolutely stunning location, as the sun set behind us over the Atlantic, a glowing gem of a bird the subject of our attention, the call of a Yellow-browed Warbler ringing out around the geo and, at one point, the Magnolia Warbler, Yellow-browed Warbler and Fair Isle Wren all feeding in the same binocular view - literally nowhere else in the world could that happen! The happy chatter was all about the bird (the winding up of birding friends elsewhere, the competition with other sites, the blogging, updating of lists and posting of photos would all be saved for the bar later that evening), pretty much a perfect birding moment.

As most folk headed back for a late dinner, a few of us stayed on to watch the bird for as long as possible, partially to take in as much of the experience as possible, partially to make sure we had the maximum information for potential twitchers the next day. Eventually, after feeding near the top of the cliff for some time, the Magnolia Warbler found a small nook (which turned out to be the left nostril of a distinctive 'monkey's head' rock formation - handy for relocating the site the following morning), turned to face us, tucked its head under its wing, fluffed itself up (taking on the appearance of a lemon in the gathering gloom) and went to roost at 7.25pm.

Heading back to the Obs, the bar was already busy (Jason racked up a lot of free drinks that night!) but our work wasn't quite done. The blog was updated, the various information services were informed of the latest news, calls were made to accommodate charter planes the next day should the bird still be present and then some relaxing was done.

The next morning a small group of us went across to Lerness before first light to check for the bird, but it soon became apparent it wasn't there. A group of Shetland birders made the journey anyway and, although virtually every other migrant from the previous day was relocated (and Paddyfield Warbler, Olive-backed Pipit and Little Bunting were amongst the new birds found), there was no sign of the one they really wanted. Whilst it was great to have been one of just 34 lucky observers to have witnessed this amazing rarity, it would also have been good to have been able to share it with others, but it wasn't to be.

Description (JM)

Behaviour: A very active bird, appearing completely at home on the rugged cliff-face. Constantly searching for food (though I never actually saw it physically catch anything, or what it was catching was too small to see easily), both by fly-catching and by picking items from the rock and lichen itself, with jerking flights and movements of the head. Occasionally acrobatic in its behaviour, sometimes hanging from overhanging rocks whilst seeking food. In flight the bird would fan its tail broadly. It would frequently flick and shuffle its wings. **Size and Structure:** On direct comparison the bird was clearly smaller than a Rock Pipit, being roughly similar in size to a Blackcap, though differing structurally by being a larger headed and shorter tailed bird with a broader, more rounded body shape. The primary projection was roughly equivalent to half the length of the longest tertial and the

undertail coverts extended along less than a third of the tail's total length. **Upperparts:** The head was fairly plain, with a slate blue/grey crown, nape and ear-coverts (the latter being a slight shade darker), with a sharp dividing line from the base of the bill where the grey head met a bright yellow, unmarked throat. The mantle was a rich moss-green colour, with a weakly marked series of darker mantle stripes. The wings consisted of dark blackish-grey primaries, secondaries and tertials, with all feathers fringed by a narrow, sharply demarcated, pale slate grey border. Greater and median coverts were similarly patterned, with a distinctly dark centred feather narrowly fringed pale, but with each feather bearing a broad white tip, forming a distinctive double wing bar on both wings. The broad square rump patch was bright, vivid yellow and clearly demarcated from the mantle and upper-tail coverts. The upper-tail coverts were dark centred with narrow greenish fringing. When closed the tail appeared all black, with the central pair of feathers being entirely dark. However, when the tail was opened it revealed a striking pattern of broad white outer feather bases (on the 5 outermost feathers). The white extended across the majority of the base of the broad inner web of each feather, but not the narrow outer web, giving the impression of bright white squares at the base of each feather. **Underparts:** The underparts, from throat to vent, were a bright, vivid, sulphurous yellow throughout, with 2 rows of wispy dark greyish streaks along the length of the flanks. The undertail coverts were pure white. **Bare parts:** The legs were a dark brownish-black and the eye was dark surrounded by a distinct, broad white eye-ring. The bill was short, stout and pointed, with a pale pinkish-brown lower mandible, tipped dark, and dark upper mandible. **Voice:** The bird was not heard to call.

ID, ageing and sexing (WM)

When the bird first appeared it was side-on and the immediate impression was a small warbler with dazzling yellow underparts and throat, white undertail coverts, greyish upperparts, and a distinct pale eye-ring. This initial basic image presented only two possibilities in my mind: Magnolia Warbler or Canada Warbler. The bird quickly flitted into a position facing away from us and I could then see that it had a rump patch of the same dazzling yellow as the underparts and that the tail was black with long white panels at the feather bases, except on the central pair. These features ruled-out Canada Warbler and perfectly fitted Magnolia. The moss-green mantle, double-white wing bars, weak grey throat stripe and faint dark streaking on the flanks were additional good features for Magnolia, and the bird was soon identified as this species.

The bird could be aged as a first year because the tail feathers were all very sharply pointed, the mantle was relatively plain and uniform green (lacking prominent dark streaking), and the dark streaking on the flanks was very weak and almost entirely limited to the rear flanks.

The bird could be sexed almost certainly as a male because the plumage was extremely bright and the colours very rich, pure and saturated. This appearance would be unusual in a female. For example, the yellow colouration of the throat, breast, chest and rump was particularly bright and intense and the green tone of the mantle was deep and lacking any brown.

This was the UK's second Magnolia Warbler, following one on St Agnes on the Isles of Scilly on 27th–28th September 1981.

References

- Moss, J. 2012.** The Magnolia Warbler on Fair Isle - the second British record. *Birding World* 25: 379.
- Moss, J. & Miles, W.T.S. 2012.** Magnolia Warbler on Fair Isle - first record for Scotland. *Scottish Birds* 32: 353–357.