

Subalpine Warbler

Sylvia cantillans

Category A

Very rare vagrant

1 record

Western Subalpine Warbler (the nominate race, *cantillans*) breeds in southern France, Iberia and parts of Italy, and winters in Africa south of the Sahel. Vagrancy to Britain in spring results from returning migrants overshooting the breeding grounds.

There had been c.540 records nationally to the end of 2005 when the British Birds Rarities Committee removed it from the list of species which it assessed. There had been 19 Kent records to the end of 2010, all since 1975, and 85% of these since 1985. Most have been of the western race when identified to form.

The vast majority of Kent records (almost 80%) have occurred in spring, between 13th April and 2nd June, with a peak in the second half of April / first half of May.

The only area record is as follows:

2006 Samphire Hoe, male, 19th April (I. A. Roberts)

An account of the first area record is given below.

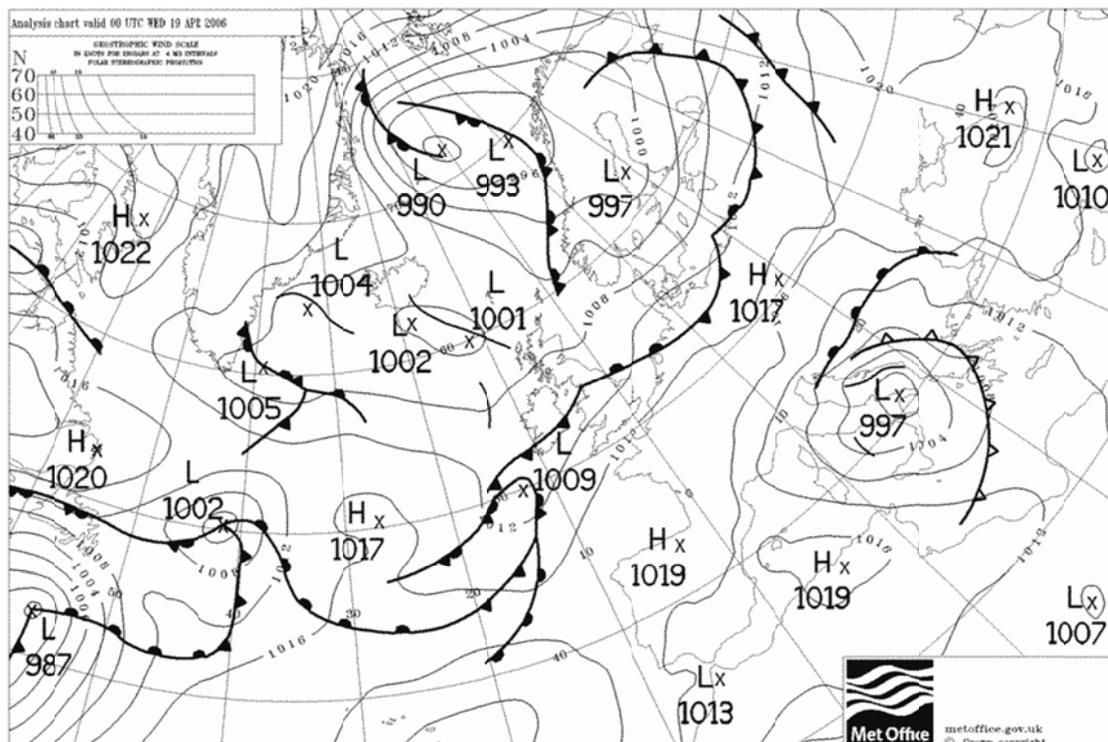
Subalpine Warbler at Samphire Hoe

19th April 2006

(Ian A Roberts)

Weather conditions:

High pressure and clear weather over the Balearics and Spain would have encouraged a northward movement of migrants only to be met by a long frontal system stretching from west of Britain right across north/central Europe, which was slowly moving south.



Circumstances of the find:

With a moderate south-westerly wind blowing and low cloud shrouding the cliffs, seawatching seemed the only viable option on the morning of the 19th April. I arrived at Samphire Hoe at 06:35 and gave the sea about 1 hour 20 minutes, which was at least an hour more than it deserved - as only 2 Arctic Skuas and 150 Common Scoter had passed by. I could stand no more, but had 45 minutes to kill before work so decided to give the bushes a quick look. I headed along the railway line towards the eastern end of the site which I thought may be more sheltered from the breeze.

From some low bushes I flushed a redstart sp. which flew into buddleia by the railway. I assumed it was a Common Redstart (which it turned out to be) as Black Redstarts rarely get into the bushes but, as it would have been new for the year and Black Redstarts were present on site, I wanted to make sure. I chased it around for a few minutes but it was elusive. As I was searching, a Willow Warbler popped up in a buddleia close by (c.25-30 feet away), and as I was looking at it I noticed another movement nearby. I focused on that and was completely stunned. For a few moments I couldn't place it, as the bird I was looking at didn't fit anything I was expecting to see: the body was blue-grey above and red below - a Dartford Warbler? But that seemed unlikely as it wasn't the habitat or time of year I would have expected for Dartford Warbler, and then I saw the head, and the white sub-moustachial stripes, and it all became clear: a SUBALPINE WARBLER! – a species I had dreamt about finding for many years.

It sat for a few seconds before moving around in the buddleia and shifting a few bushes to the west over the next few minutes, and I got a few more views of it, although the initial view was probably the closest. I took a fairly brief description, and got the news out. Unfortunately I lost track of it and couldn't re-find it. Several people turned up though the day but it wasn't seen again, despite an improvement in the weather, although a pair of Ravens provided some compensation!

Description of the bird:

Size and shape: Perhaps slightly larger than nearby Willow Warbler and similar to Whitethroat in shape and size (though slightly more compact?)

Upperparts: head and upperparts a bluish-grey, wing feathers slightly darker. Appeared to have a red eye (eyering?). Tail not as long as Dartford.

Underparts: a bright orangey-red and quite evenly-coloured underneath. Throat without any whitish spotting. Prominent whitish sub-moustachial stripes. Evenness of underpart colouration and lack of white spots on throat suggests nominate western race.

Bare parts: bill appeared greyish and leg colour not noted, though presumably orangey.

Voice: not heard to call or sing.

Comments on the record:

As this species has recently been removed from the list of those considered by the BBRC, it was assessed, and accepted, by the KOS rarities committee.