

## Isabelline Wheatear

*Oenanthe isabellina*

Category A

Very rare vagrant

1 record

Breeds in dry, usually mountainous areas from North-east Greece eastwards to Mongolia and NE China, winters mostly in Africa, Arabia and S. Asia. A very rare vagrant to Western Europe.

There had been 28 British records to the end of 2010, only one of which was in Kent. The first national record was in May 1887 but the next not until November 1977. The vast majority of British records (82%) have been in the last two decades. Apart from the first two national records all have occurred between mid-September and late October.

Records are from well scattered coastal localities, with three counties (Scilly, Shetland and Suffolk) boasting four each.



Isabelline Wheatear at Church Hougham (Rob Wilson)

The only area record is as follows:

**1996** Abbotscliffe and Church Hougham, one, 6<sup>th</sup> October, photographed (I. A. Roberts, J. A. Gibson *et al*)

An account of the first area record is given below:

### **Isabelline Wheatear at Abbotscliffe and Church Hougham 6<sup>th</sup> October 1996**

(Ian A Roberts, Jamie A Gibson)

#### **Weather conditions:**

A dry, mostly overcast day, with a light north-westerly wind, and showers from midday.

#### **Circumstances of the find:**

At about 10 a.m. on the 6<sup>th</sup> October 1996 Jamie Gibson and I were walking along the cliff top path at Abbotscliffe when I noticed a pale passerine on the fence in front, about 30 feet away. I raised my bins and saw a very pale looking Wheatear, and attracted JAG's attention to it. It flew past us and landed again on the fence only 25 feet or so away.

In flight I saw pale underwings, and (having seen two Isabelline Wheatears before) realised what this meant, so was very keen to get the 'scope on it when it landed. We noted a number of features which indicated Isabelline; the upperparts were pale, with little marking to the head, and the wings were very pale, with broad buff fringes and a dark and contrasting alula. It also appeared large and robust, with a short tail and a big bill. We were both very cautious of this identification to begin with, but after several flight views when the underwings were clearly seen and some excellent views of the bird perched, we became certain that this was the county's first Isabelline Wheatear.

It had worked its way inland (for almost a mile) while we were watching it, before it settled in a field at Church Hougham, where it remained for the rest of the day. We 'phoned the news out about 11:30 a.m. and about 500 or more birders saw it during the afternoon. Everyone was happy with the identification. It was not seen on the 7th, despite searching. The bird was photographed by Rob Wilson.

**Description of the bird:**

Size, shape, jizz: compared to memories of Northern, it appeared larger and more robust, longer-legged and shorter-tailed, with a "pot-bellied" appearance. It was noticeably large-billed. It was often upright, with the tail being short and well clear of the ground. In flight the wings were broader and more rounded.

Head and upperparts: The upperparts were pale sandy-brown, but their appearance varied considerably with the light conditions. The head was relatively plain, with slightly darker lores, being more obvious when seen head-on, and there was no eye-stripe behind the eye. It had a whitish supercilium extending to just behind the eye.

The wing feathers were mid-brown, with thin buff edges to the primaries, and broad buff edges to the tertials and secondaries, the latter forming an obvious panel. The coverts also had broad pale fringes, and the alula was contrastingly dark, appearing blackish, with a neat white fringe. The underwing was very pale, appearing translucent in flight. The underwing coverts/axillaries, seen when the bird was preening, were white. The underside of remiges were very pale (whitish), with darker tips forming a dark surround to the underwing. The underwings were an easily seen and diagnostic feature, and one I had noticed with ease on the two Isabellines I have seen previously, although I generally find the underwing on Northern Wheatear very difficult to see.

The tail had more black than on Northern, extending for about two-thirds of the tail, and had less stem to the 'T', appearing almost as a solid black square.

Underparts: The chin and throat were whitish, and the breast and sides of the neck had a warm peachy wash. The belly and vent were whitish.

**Comments on the record:**

This was the first record for Kent and the tenth for Britain. It is interesting to note that the first for Holland was also recorded in October 1996 (at Maasvlakte from the 21st). The record was accepted by the relevant rarity committees and appears in the Kent Bird Report for 1996 (with a copy of the finder's account) and the BBRC report for the same year (p.27)