

Desert Wheatear

Oenanthe deserti

Category A

Very rare vagrant

1 record

Breeds in North Africa, the Middle East and central Asia, winters in north Africa, South-west Asia into western India.

There had been 114 British records up to the end of 2010. Following the first Kent record in 1989, there have been a further 11 records, ten of which have occurred since 1997. Records fall into two distinct arrival periods, in late March / early April (3) and from mid-October to early December (9), though with the majority (7 records) in November.

The only area record is as follows:

1998 Folkestone Warren, adult male, 28th March, video-recorded (D. A. Gibson, J. A. Gibson, I. A. Roberts)

An account of the first area record is given below.

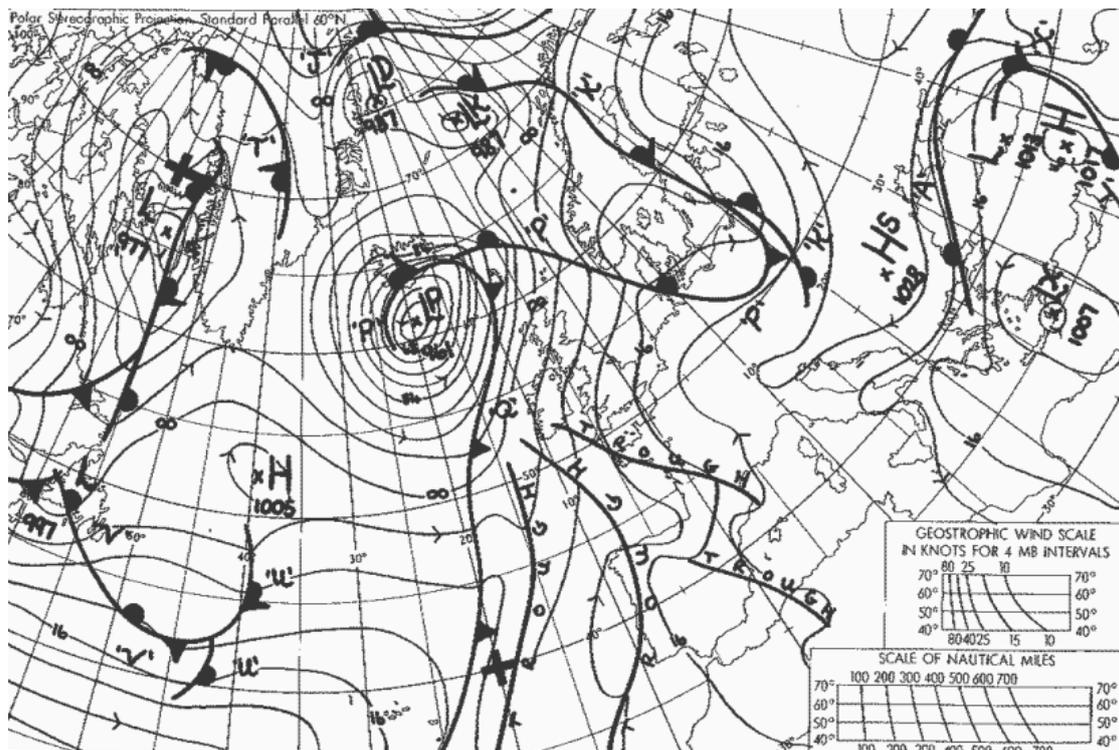
Desert Wheatear at Folkestone Warren 28th March 1998

(Dale A Gibson, Jamie A Gibson, Ian A Roberts)

Weather conditions:

SSW force 4-5, with dull and misty conditions in the morning, becoming calm and warm with a light E-SE breeze about force 2-3, c.3/8 high cloud and moderate visibility to sea.

The synoptic chart for the 28th March 1998 shows a fairly complex pattern with a ridge of high pressure producing a 'window' of clear weather from north-east Africa across central Europe to Britain in between a front and a series of troughs.



These conditions produced a large arrival of migrants in Kent which included almost 1,000 Redwings, 29 Goldcrests, 9 Chiffchaffs, 5 Black Redstarts and 3 Northern Wheatears in the Folkestone and Hythe area. Elsewhere there was an unprecedented total of at least 300 Black Redstarts around the Kent coast (including 150 at Foreness) and huge numbers of winter thrushes at St. Margaret's Bay. More unusual arrivals also included single Bluethroats at Foreness and Pegwell Bay, and a Serin at Dungeness.

Circumstances of the find:

While walking back to my car on the afternoon of the 28th March 1998, after birding at Capel-le-Ferne, I was called over by a chap who had been paragliding from the Gun Site down on to the concrete apron at Folkestone Warren. He asked if I was bird-watching, then mentioned that he'd noticed a wheatear on the apron where he had landed. He thought its throat looked darkish but as it was distant, and he had no bins, he couldn't be sure.

I drove the couple of miles down to the Warren, and, after about 15 minutes searching, I noticed a pale-looking passerine on the platform facing away from me. I walked towards the bird to get a closer look and watched in amazement as it turned around. I screamed "Oh my God!" as the bird showed all the characteristics of a male Desert Wheatear (a species I had seen twice before) - black throat, blackish wings and totally black tail, with the rest of the plumage being a pale sandy colour.

After watching for a short time I ran up to the nearest phone box, and phoned Ian Roberts and Jamie Gibson who arrived within a few minutes. We all enjoyed superb views for the next twenty minutes or so in good light, with the bird as close as about 40 feet away. Jamie managed to record some reasonable footage on his camcorder. We then phoned a few local birders and let Birdline know.

The following morning we arrived before dawn, but there was no sign of the bird after a thorough search. Although there was a report of it flying along the cliffs later in the day, it seems unlikely. As mentioned below it is possible that it had relocated to Reculver in the north of the county.

Description of the bird:

Size, shape, jizz: This was a rather small, compact-looking wheatear which was fairly tame and not concerned with us all watching. It had an unusual habit whilst catching insects of hopping and turning 90 degrees all in one movement, which was something I don't recall seeing from Northern Wheatear. It also had a rather short tail compared with Black-eared Wheatear.

Head and upperparts: Very contrasting, with black face and throat and a short dark line connecting the black throat to the blackish wings. The wings and wing-coverts were black with pale sandy-coloured fringes to the flight feathers, the tertials appearing more broadly fringed. The tail was all black, and lacked the distinctive 'T' shape of other wheatear species. The rump was pale buffish in colour, with the back, nape and crown pale sandy. It also showed a paler whitish supercilium and a paler line on the outer coverts.

Underparts: Pale, whitish underparts, with a peachy cast to the upper breast.

Bare parts: The bill was rather small and dagger-like, and it and the legs were blackish.

Age, sex: Adult male.

Comments on the record:

Following one in March 1997, there was a record autumn influx in Britain in that year with 16 individuals (compared to 50 previous records), including the first for Dungeness in October and Reculver in November, which were the 3rd and 4th for the county. On the 29th March 1998 there was a male, possibly the same bird, at Reculver and one other spring record in Britain in 1998 – a male at Flamborough, East Yorkshire on the 5-6th April.

The record was accepted by the BBRC and appears in their 2001 report (as the original description was lost in circulation).