

The Orphean Story

6:45 am Friday November 16th: We had got up quite early so it was still pitch dark when Rosemary made her usual early morning visit to see what moths had been attracted to the outside light. Turning the corner of the house she was startled to find herself confronted with a huddle of darkly clad men. All she could think of to say was "Oh, you're here" and swiftly retreated indoors to report "It's really happening. It's started".

Actually it had all started six days earlier as we ate Sunday breakfast in our kitchen. Two Blackcaps in the apple trees were joined by another grey bird. Rosemary said "Isn't that a Lesser Whitethroat?" After a quick look with the binoculars which hang alongside the kitchen table, I agreed, noting that the white eye-ring seemed particularly noticeable, but thinking nothing further of it.

Rosemary and I have been birdwatchers for 40 years or so. We have participated in many BTO surveys and have birded extensively around the world, but are definitely not rarity spotters. Rosemary commented that it seemed rather late in the year for a Lesser Whitethroat and so we put a brief post on the Pembs Bird Blog. Mike Young-Powell, who is definitely a rarity spotter and "hot-birder" asked if we could take a picture of the bird to see whether it might be the eastern race.

Monday weather was dreadful and we did not see the bird. Tuesday was really nice so we went out for the day. Wednesday dawned gloomy - amazingly the bird was still around and although I got a few pictures they were not very good. Thursday dawned sunny and bright and now I managed to take some good pictures through the bedroom window. I quickly put them on the blog, and went out for the afternoon, returning mid evening

Meanwhile, as soon as Mike saw the pictures at around 6.00 pm, he began to think that the iris colour and size of bill suggested an Orphean Warbler. Despite his experience he was nervous of calling it, even after a couple of phone conversations with other birders. He confesses to being exhilarated, but beset by doubts, and his wife Kathy returned home from work to find the evening moussaka burning in the oven, forgotten in the excitement. Mike's dilemma was resolved by a phone call from Rich Brown, the Skokholm Warden, with the same thoughts as Mike. That was the clincher and so Mike, having sent us an email, (which we did not see until the following day) put it up on the Pembs Bird Blog at 7.16 pm, just ahead of Ian Bennell who raised the same question on Birdforum at 7.42 pm. Once this information had been posted on the web then it spread like wildfire, all unknown to us at that time.

I returned home at about 8:00 and walked into the study as the phone rang. "Hello, this is Steve, from Birdguides. Do you know you have an Orphean Warbler in your garden. Will you allow access?"

You have to agree that's a bit of a show stopper!

Some background here: An Orphean Warbler is a very rare bird in Britain – this would be only the 6th record. And it is complicated by the fact that it has now been split into two species - Western Orphean Warbler and Eastern Orphean Warbler, which are not very easy to tell apart. Three of the previous sightings had not been allocated to Western or Eastern, and 2 were definitely Western, including one which appeared last year in Hartlepool. If our bird turned out to be an Eastern then it would be a first for Britain, virtually every rarity-spotter in the country would want to see it and we would have a "mega mega twitch" on our hands! As it was, Birdguides, who are one of the companies that alert birdwatchers to rarities, had already rated it as a "mega"!

So I said "I'll call you back". A sequence of frantic phone calls then ensued. I arranged with our nearest neighbour, Russell Evans, some 400 yards away, to have the use of his camping field for car parking and Mike Young-Powell, Dave Astins, and Steve Sutcliffe had offered to help, so I rang Birdguides back to say "OK, we can do it". I initially thought we would have to use the house for viewing, but in the middle of the (rather sleepless) night realised that the bird could be seen from

the parking area at the top of our garden, looking down towards the apple trees where the bird habitually appeared.

Which brings us back to Friday morning as the first thirty or so birders took up position at the top of the garden just as it got light. (Some of them were local but many had driven all night and arrived well before dawn to ensure a place at the front of the queue.) It was a worrying time - would the bird come to the apples with all these people in the garden? Had it moved on overnight? It was a great relief when it appeared on its favourite apple tree at first light. It appeared periodically throughout the day but it was often not very easy to see and it chose to eat apples that were more-or-less out of sight for many of the viewers. However, in the end they all had reasonable views of the bird, often on the elm trees which surround the garden. A steady stream of birders arrived, probably 120 or more in total, and this was only a Friday, a weekday! The last visitors were a couple who arrived as it was almost dark and actually had very good views of the bird as it had its last meal before going to roost. The man had missed seeing the Orphean Warbler on the Scillies in 1982 by one day so he was very keen to see this one!

The question was asked - Eastern or Western? If it turned out to be Western then those who had seen the Hartlepool bird would not be coming, but if it were Eastern, Pembrokeshire might be overflowing with birders, scopes and long lenses! So Saturday dawned with around 40 birders inside the garden and at least 50 waiting in the road by the fence. As soon as people had seen the bird reasonably well they were asked to leave and go to the back of the queue, which they happily did - many waited for a second view which was generally a good idea as the light improved during the morning. The bird seemed more settled and performed well on the apple trees with the observers positioned a little further away than on Friday. The E v W debate raged through the day; was there a decent picture of the tail and undertail coverts? There was no definite resolution by Saturday evening despite the estimated 250 plus birders who had seen the bird during the course of the day.

Overnight consensus having moved overnight towards Western, the Sunday crowd was a little smaller. Good news for us though - we have seen Eastern several times but Western was our 4377th lifer, as well as the 90th Garden Bird.

This was the first Twitch we have ever "attended" - well we could hardly avoid it! We had read all the usual horror stories and were prepared for the worst but we need not have worried. Everyone was patient as they waited to get into the garden, and everyone stayed behind the tape which we had laid out to limit the viewing area. There was a general air of camaraderie and lots of happy people. However, I suspect this was primarily due to the fact that they had all seen the bird quite well - it may have been different if it hadn't been so well behaved! There were some downsides - we had to cope with only being able to get in and out of our house via the conservatory and only when the bird was not in view, we could not have the house lights on in the early morning, and we felt a tremendous personal responsibility for the bird showing well, silly as it may seem.

During the following week the "twitch" was officially closed - we really could not cope with the lack of privacy and could not spend time organising viewings as we did have another life to lead. However, a few people did try their luck - some were apologetic and offered donations but others just scrambled up the hedge-bank opposite and looked into the garden with telescopes - this was not quite so welcome.

We were open again for business on Sunday 24th, expecting only a few stragglers who couldn't make the previous weekend. In the event, another 150 people arrived and again the bird performed well, eating its rapidly diminishing supply of apples, along with 15 blackbirds, 10 chaffinches and a blackcap. (We could not open on Saturday as we were helping to organise the Pembrokeshire Bird Conference on that day, and most of our band of volunteers were going to be there as well.)

On the first morning I had hurriedly put out a bucket and scribbled a notice "Skokholm Island Restoration Fund". Both of us, and many of the volunteer marshals have worked as volunteers on

Skokholm including constructing the Heligoland traps, Rich Brown, one of the identifiers of the bird, is Warden on Skokholm, Yvonne, whose field we used for car parking, is a member of the Islands Advisory Committee, while Steve Sutcliffe is the driving force behind the Skokholm project. It was not a difficult choice! Over the four days the donations to the bucket totalled £1185, leaving Rich with a wide smile on his face as he thought about what they might spend it on.

We, as the owners of the house and garden, would not have coped without the tremendous efforts of Dave Astins, calling upon his experience as organiser of triathlons as well as being an ace birder, supported by Mike Young-Powell (who sort of felt responsible for it all) and Mark Hipkin (all round good bloke), Kathy Young-Powell, Dave's daughter Emily, Mervyn Jones and Brian Southern. They ensured that everyone had an enjoyable time and a fair crack of the whip, and I would like to thank them all most wholeheartedly.

And thanks to all those who visited us, their kind comments in person or on and via Birdforum etc. and to Birdguides who were very supportive in their control of information. Congratulations to "Billy Junior" who drove down from Aberdeen on Saturday night to see the bird – we think he probably travelled the furthest but there were numerous people who came long distances from East Anglia, Essex and the north of England.

As the light faded on Sunday evening the bird unexpectedly landed on the ground, next to the collection bucket, perhaps just checking whether it had all been worthwhile? Of course it was!!

For further information about the Skokholm Project see <http://www.welshwildlife.org/skomer-skokholm/skokholm/>

Footnote: The Orphean Warbler was last seen on the afternoon of Dec. 5th, still feeding on the very few remaining apples and those which Rosemary had hung out on the trees for it. On December 6th the bird was not seen at all, and it hasn't been seen since. The night of Dec 5th was clear with a W breeze, so it is likely the bird took the opportunity to move on – though where it has moved to is anybody's guess!