

SEDGE AND AQUATIC WARBLERS PHOTO GUIDE



1 Aquatic Warbler (Biebrza Marshes, Poland, 6 May 2008). This spring male Aquatic in full song ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem schistisagus. Lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem schistisagus.



Andy Stoddart

One is a common British summer visitor, the other a fast-declining and increasingly rare autumn migrant. When Sedge and Aquatic Warblers meet, separation is not always as straightforward as it should be, especially in the case of autumn juveniles glimpsed in dense wetland vegetation. **Andy Stoddart** takes a closer look at how to sort them out in the field.

Birdwatch

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STEVE YOUNG

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ILYA UKOLOV

2 Sedge Warbler (Conway RSPB, Conwy, 15 May 2004). Lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem schistisagus.

3 Aquatic Warbler (Russia, date unknown but spring). Lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem schistisagus.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

In early August our reedbeds are still full of Sedge Warblers, rapidly putting on weight prior to their departure to Africa. At the same time, the species' rare eastern European cousin, Aquatic Warbler, is embarking on its own migration, a journey which brings very small numbers to our shores each autumn. August therefore enables us to take a last look at our native Sedge Warblers while also providing the only opportunity of the year to enjoy an Aquatic Warbler – if you are lucky enough to encounter one. The latter species is becoming increasingly rare, so a definitive identification requires particular care.

Sedge Warbler

This is a common and familiar breeding species across most of Britain. It also has a large

range, occurring right across the northern part of the Western Palearctic, from Ireland in the west to western Siberia in the east. Its loud, varied song and its high display flight are conspicuous features of our spring and early summer wetlands. The species breeds in a variety of marshy areas, often in reeds but typically also in areas with wet ditches and scattered bushes. Though they may be conspicuous in such habitats even in June, by August things have gone much quieter.

The adults leave our shores in mid to late July, while juveniles/first-winters gradually disperse to favoured fattening areas in southern Britain and northern France, departing mainly from late July to mid-August. For these latter birds, all efforts are directed to putting on weight for the long migration. Indeed, Sedge

Warblers are famous for the amount of extra weight they gain during this process, allowing them to make a particularly long first migratory flight. Their wintering grounds lie throughout sub-Saharan Africa, apart from the far south and south-west.

The last Sedge Warblers of the year are therefore often glimpsed not at migration sites but still in typical breeding habitat, slinking quietly through the reeds and wetland vegetation.

Aquatic Warbler

This species has a small and declining population and a highly restricted world range, and it is now Europe's rarest migratory passerine. Aquatic Warbler breeds patchily from north-east Germany east through parts of Poland, Belarus, Ukraine and European Russia, with possibly a few still breeding in the southern Ural region; an outlying population

in eastern Hungary has recently died out. The entire world population is considered to be around 22,000-30,000 pairs. It breeds not in reedbeds but in low, foot-high wet sedgey grassland, particularly around the fringes of lakes. On passage it also occurs mainly in low stands of sedge and reed near open water, but of course vagrants may appear in other contexts.

Its return migration is early (late July to early September) and it has a curious strongly westerly component to its autumn movement, with birds passing through Holland, France, Iberia and Morocco en route to winter quarters in Africa. The precise location of its wintering grounds is, however, not well understood, though they are thought to lie in coastal wetlands in Senegal and neighbouring parts of west Africa. The species performs a 'loop migration' so that its spring migration occurs further

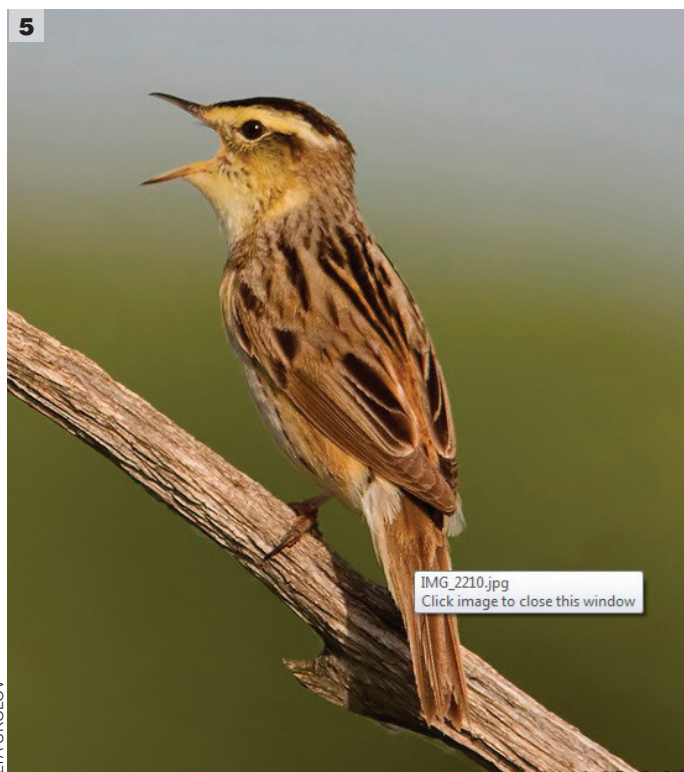
4



PETER BEESLEY

4 Sedge Warbler (Cley, Norfolk, 9 May 2011). Lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem schistisagus.

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ILYA UKOLOV

5 Aquatic Warbler (Russia, date unknown but presumed spring). Lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem schistisagus.

to the east in Europe. It is therefore very rare in north-west Europe in spring and effectively unknown in Britain then.

Until relatively recently Aquatic Warbler was regarded as a scarce migrant in Britain, peaking in mid-August, and recorded regularly in the South-East and along southern coasts in early autumn. In recent decades, however, in line with its declining population, it has become much rarer, and this is now a quality 'find'. A few localities in the South-West, for example Radipole and Lodmoor in Dorset, Marazion in Cornwall and Kenfig in Glamorgan, have always yielded regular Aquatic Warblers, and still do so occasionally today, but elsewhere, particularly away from the Channel coast, this has become an exceptional rarity. A significant number of records also involve birds pulled out of mist nets rather than seen in the field.

Identification

In reality, when seen well first-winter Aquatic Warbler is a distinctive bird, a bright orangey-straw colour and boldly striped blackish. It is often likened to a diminutive Bobolink with a spiky bill. The only confusion species is a brightly coloured first-winter Sedge Warbler but these are, of course, common in August. They may look strangely pale and buffy compared to the familiar darker plumage of spring adults.

The main problem facing the observer may be getting good views, but patience is often rewarded. Then, faced with a bright-looking streaky *Acrocephalus*, a number of features need to be checked thoroughly and a firm identification based on as many of them as possible. Particular attention should be paid to the following questions:

- Is the bird an overall orangey-straw colour or is it more brown?

- Is the crown solidly dark with a narrow, crisp, clearly-demarcated pale central stripe, or is it just dull brown with a wider and rather diffuse central stripe?
- Does it have a 'soft', 'open' facial expression or does it look more 'intense'?
- Is the mantle blackish in the centre and marked with long straw-coloured 'braces' or 'tramlines', or is it more uniformly brown and streaked?
- Are the lores pale or dark?
- Is it 'open-faced' or does it have a more prominent lower border to the ear coverts?
- Is the rump a pale straw colour and lightly-streaked throughout, or is it plain and unmarked and more tawny or ginger-coloured?
- Is the tail 'spiky' with sharply-pointed tail feathers or does the tail appear more 'normal'?
- Are its legs pinkish or dark brown?
- Is the bill a little on the short

side or is it more 'normal'?

These are the key points separating the rarer Aquatic from the familiar Sedge, and learning these differences should help pinpoint any suspected Aquatic that turns up in Britain in the coming weeks. Reading the above list in conjunction with the photo captions in this article, and examining the differences in the photos presented here, should readily prepare you for any seemingly problematic streaked 'acro' you encounter in the field. ■

Acknowledgements

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RUSS SHERRIFF

6 Sedge Warbler (Ingrebourne Valley, Greater London, 17 April 2013). Lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem schistisagus et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod.



DANIELE OCCHIATO

7 Sedge Warbler (location needed, Italy, 4 September 2006). Lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem schistisagus et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod.



RAPHAEL LEBRUN

8 Aquatic Warbler (Zeebrugge, Belgium, 15 August 2011). Lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem schistisagus et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis.



RENE VAN ROSSUM

9 Aquatic Warbler (Wassenaar, Netherlands, 5 September 2010). Lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem schistisagus et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis.



10 Sedge Warbler (Seaforth NR, Lancashire, 11 August 2004). Lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem schistisagus et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod.



11 Sedge Warbler (Utš, Finland, 22 May 2009). Lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem schistisagus et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis.



12 Aquatic Warbler (Zeebrugge, Belgium, 15 August 2011). Same individual as in photo 8. Lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem schistisagus et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis.



13 Aquatic Warbler (Southern Urals, Russia, 4 September 2011). Lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem schistisagus et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis.xxx



14 Adult Aquatic Warbler (Maine-et-Loire, France, 8 August 2011). Lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor et mea diem schistisagus et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis.



15 Sedge Warbler (left) and adult male Aquatic Warbler (Maine-et-Loire, France, 12 August 2011). Lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor et mea diem schistisagus et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis.



16 Juvenile (left) and adult Aquatic Warblers (Maine-et-Loire, France, 12 August 2010). Lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor et mea diem schistisagus et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis.



17 Adult male Aquatic Warbler (left) and Sedge Warbler (Maine-et-Loire, France, 12 August 2010). Lorem ipsum facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis culpa sculptum in excelsis et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor et mea diem schistisagus et mea diem cephalus sine quod caveat emptor lorem ipsum facto arge quod facto arge quod argis ne mea culpa sculptum in excelsis.

Further reading



Reed and Bush Warblers by Peter Kennerly, David Pearson and Brian Small.
This comprehensive ID guide covers *Acrocephalus*, *Locustella*, *Cettia* and *Bradypterus* warblers. Get yours for just £57.99, or £55.99 for subscribers; SRP £65.
To order, see page 56, call 020 8881 0550 or visit www.birdwatch.co.uk/store.



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Find an Aquatic this autumn

This species is most likely in Britain August and early September. Most are trapped at sites south of a line from the Thames Estuary to South Wales, with records in recent years from these locations:

- **Scilly:** St Agnes (SV 8708) and St Mary's (SV 9110)
- **Cornwall:** Marazion Marsh RSPB (SW 510312)
- **Devon:** Slapton Ley (SX 829441) and South Milton Ley (SX 678418)
- **Dorset:** Radipole Lake RSPB (SY 671804), Lodmoor RSPB (SY 688809), Poole Harbour (SZ 0089) and Christchurch Harbour (SZ 1791)
- **Gwent:** Newport Wetlands RSPB (ST 334834)
- **Glamorgan:** Kenfig NNR (SS 793817)