

CONTINENTAL COAL TITS ON LUNDY, OCTOBER 2010

by

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A party of six ringers operated on Lundy from 9-16 October 2010. Several Coal Tits (*Parus ater*) were present on the island during the week and we caught four different birds: one on 11 October and, remarkably, three on 12 October. In Berkshire, we ring some 60 to 130 Coal Tits each year and consider ourselves reasonably familiar with the appearance of *Parus ater britannicus*, the British race, in the hand. All the birds we handle in Berkshire are *britannicus* and so these four birds on Lundy immediately struck all of us as something distinctly different, being much bluer on the mantle and lesser wing coverts. Unfortunately, we only took photos of one bird but all four were very similar and the descriptive comments below apply to all four birds. We believe they were all of the continental race *Parus ater ater*.

Three Coal Tit subspecies could reasonably be expected to occur on Lundy: *P. britannicus*, *P. ater* and the Irish race *P. hibernicus*. According to *Birds of the Western Palearctic*, *ater* is the bluest, with the cleanest white and little if any greenish olive on the mantle; *britannicus* is olive with generally clean white; and *hibernicus* is even less blue and frequently has yellowish suffusions on the white.

All four birds had a monochrome blue-grey mantle with very little, if any, contrast between the colour of the mantle and coverts. The photo of the Lundy bird (see Figure 1, colour plate 7) has an unfortunate colour caste which was not present in real life and exaggerates the difference between mantle and coverts. The blue shown on the lesser coverts on the wing shot was real and is very different to even adult *britannicus*, and the contrast with a typical same age and sex *britannicus* is marked. The photo of *britannicus* (Figure 2, colour plate 7) is typical and was selected for inclusion because it was the same age and sex and had the same number of unmoulted greater coverts as the Lundy birds.

There is a belief that continental Coal Tits are larger, but this is only poorly borne out by published wing length data and there is a large overlap between the races. The four Lundy birds each had wing lengths and weights which were indistinguishable from the *britannicus* we routinely catch. Bill measurements were not taken but subsequent discussions with Richard Broughton, who studies tit species professionally, indicated that while Coal Tit bill morphology varies between the races, there are significant overlaps which are compounded by niche occupancy, sex, age and even seasonal variations, so bill measurements of these four birds would have been unlikely to influence sub-specific identification of these birds. Richard's comment on the bill of the Lundy bird shown in the photographs was: "I think it's fair to say that, with a bill like that, your bird is from somewhere coniferous."



Figure 1. A continental Coal Tit (*Parus ater ater*), caught on Lundy, 11 October 2010 – this is a bird of the year which has completed its post-juvenile moult and has four unmolted greater coverts. Note the bluish caste to the mantle. © Tim Ball



Figure 2. For comparison, this Coal Tit (*Parus ater britannicus*) – caught at Caversham Heights, Berkshire, 23 October 2010 – also a bird of the year which has completed its post-juvenile moult and has four unmolted greater coverts, is typical of *britannicus* Coal Tits, having a more olive caste to the mantle – see page 66. © Tim Ball