

ISABELLINE WHEATEAR – A FIRST FOR LUNDY AND DEVON

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On 12 October 2019 I travelled to Lundy with Tim Davis, James Diamond and Tim Jones to spend my first ever week on the island. Each day had its own theme, with the theme for 18 October being force 8 south-westerly winds and heavy rain showers. The only sensible birding options were seawatching and working the East Side lower slopes.

At 16:00 hrs I headed down the Beach Road where TD had seen a Short-eared Owl. As I walked back up, and just before reaching Smelly Gully, a wheatear flew across the road and landed above me. The bird hunkered down on a rock, sheltering from the gale. I was struck by its pale brown uniform colour, with the dark alula [a tiny feather on the leading edge of the wings] standing out. Alarm bells rang! However, it did not strike me as an obvious Isabelline Wheatear. I had no experience of this species and I could only recall pictures of tall, slim, long-legged birds on short turf.



I quickly took a few photographs. Being a digital camera, there is a delay between taking a photograph and returning to a live view. The wheatear flew while I took the last photograph so I didn't see where it had gone. Unable to relocate the bird, I sought help. TJ arrived quickly but we could not relocate it. I searched the headland above Beach Road, but the wind was such that it made standing difficult. The bird was either sheltering among the boulders and vegetation on the slope or had been caught in the wind. It was not seen again and I had watched it for less than five minutes.

With limited bird identification resources to hand, we (TJ, JD and myself) thought the body and upper-wing plumage looked good for Isabelline, but were concerned by the structure and head pattern. It was only the following day that I received comments on Twitter that I may have found an Isabelline. After spending the next few days researching and analysing my photographs, everything pointed towards Isabelline Wheatear. The record has been accepted by the British Birds Rarities Committee as the first for Lundy and Devon.

Descriptive notes

- The wheatear lacked any rusty tones to the tertials, secondaries and coverts. The colour of these feather tracts was cold, pale brown without any obvious black or dark brown markings on the closed wing. The secondaries appeared to have pale fringes. The bird appeared concolourous above, with only the primaries and alula standing out as dark feathers. Underparts were concolourous (and paler than the upperparts) other than a slightly brighter tone on the flanks.
- The head pattern was consistent with photographs of Isabelline, albeit at the less distinct end of the spectrum. The supercilium, such as there was, was restricted to before the eye and contrasted with the dark lores.
- The wing and tail proportions were entirely consistent with Isabelline, with primary projection equal to the exposed tertials and wings only reaching level with the tip of the undertail-coverts.
- My photograph of the tail pattern in flight wasn't conclusive but seemed to demonstrate a black band equal in width to the white rump/undertail coverts. The images of the closed tail also seemed to show a deep black terminal tail band, approximately two-thirds of the outer-tail feathers.
- The only key feature not noted was the underwing, which was always going to be a challenge given the brief views.