

Eurasian Reed Warblers (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) Breeding In The Tay Reedbeds.

Derek Robertson. Woodlands Studios. Bandrum nr. Saline. Fife. KY12 9HR.

Introduction

In Scotland, the Eurasian Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* occurs regularly on migration in spring and autumn. Most records are associated with drift migrants along the east coast. Until the 1990's, it was thought to have bred only once in Scotland: in Shetland in 1973 (Thom 1986). In England and Wales it is a common breeding bird where the species is closely associated with reedbeds since the favoured nesting habitat consists of reeds above standing water. This is the habitat indicated by all the possible breeding habitats in mainland Scotland, although, in England, birds will nest in dry herbage or arable crops.

Authors have differing views on the historical absence of breeding Eurasian Reed Warblers in Scotland (and other areas of Northern Europe) where suitable habitat appears to exist. Most have ventured a climatic reason for this distribution with the species avoiding the colder, wetter, north and west of the UK. (e.g. Sharrock 1976). In recent years, however, the species has expanded its range to the north and west in Britain and northward in Scandinavia (Kelsey 1993).

Breeding in Mainland Scotland

Breeding was suspected at a site in south west Scotland in 1992 and confirmed in 1993 (Bruce 1997). Since then, breeding has occurred there annually and a second breeding site was located in south west Scotland in 1996. One pair bred at St. Abb's Head in 1997 (Rideout in litt.) and breeding was thought likely at the same site in 1998 but has probably not taken place since. In Fife, a bird was heard singing through the summer at a suitable breeding site and a pair were present at another site where breeding was suspected (Fife Bird Report 1998). A bird was found dead at St Margaret's Marsh, Rosyth, on 31st May 1993 where a bird was heard singing repeatedly in 1999 (Dewick pers comm.). A bird was heard singing at the same site in 2000 (own observations). In 1999 a breeding record was reported from yet another site in Fife where a used nest, thought to be of this species, was located. (Shuttleworth 2000).

Breeding in the Tay Reedbeds

Eurasian Reed Warblers have been caught in the Tay Reedbeds, at least since 1981 (Lynch in litt.) and, since then, a minimum of 21 have been ringed there (see table 1). Birds have been heard singing during (and in some cases, throughout) the breeding season (June, July and early August) in 1987 (own observations), 1990, 1995 and 1996. Males with developed cloacal protrusions, and presumably in breeding condition, were caught in 1987 (Moyes in litt.), 1990, and 1991. A female with a well-developed brood patch was caught in 1987 (Moyes in litt.) and, in 1988, a juvenile, with primaries still in pin and growing, was trapped and rung (own observations).

These details confirm that Eurasian Reed Warblers bred in the Tay Reedbeds in 1987 and 1988 and breeding possibly occurred in four other years. These are the earliest records of Eurasian Reed Warblers breeding in mainland Scotland.

Seasonal Distribution

The species is probably under recorded in Scotland. It is a bird that is difficult to see in breeding habitat, especially if observers are not actively searching for it. Its song may be difficult to separate from that of Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* and can be difficult to hear in extensive reedbeds; just the sort of habitat that colonising birds would favour. It might also be noted that thinly dispersed, colonising birds are far less likely to sing where there is little competition from neighbouring pairs. It is no accident that the recent, confirmed breeding records in Scotland refer to ringing sites and particularly Constant Effort Sites where ringing takes place throughout the breeding season. Consequently, it seems quite likely that a number of breeding sites have been overlooked.

The presence of breeding birds in the Tay Reedbeds would be easy to miss as few parts of this extensive area are visited by birdwatchers. However, the precise locations where breeding has been confirmed and suspected are characterised by the presence of mature reeds in standing water. This kind of habitat is relatively scarce in the Tay Reedbeds so potential breeding sites would be restricted. Despite this, it seems likely that other breeding attempts have gone un-noticed.

Peak passage along the Fife coast appears to be in October, both at Fife Ness (J. Cobb in litt.) and the Isle of May (Isle of May Computerised Logs). Records from all the Scottish bird observatories show very few “summer” records before the end of the first week in August whereas an unusually high number of birds in the Tay Reedbeds (and inland Fife) are caught in late July and early August. The Isle of May has just two records of Reed Warblers in this “summer” period: one in 1982 and another in 1994. Of some 10 caught by D. Arthur at Drum, near Montrose, none have been trapped earlier than mid-August. At Fife Ness, there is just one record of a bird caught in early August but birds have recently begun to appear at this site when there were no signs of drift migration. (Cobb pers comm.).

This pattern of occurrence could suggest that birds caught in late July, and the first week of August, are Scottish-breeding birds, perhaps local breeders. Some 13 birds have been caught in the Tay Reedbeds during this “early” period (see table 2) and the first one of these was trapped in 1986. This may, in fact, be the earliest indication of probable breeding in mainland Scotland.

There seem to be very few records of birds from other parts of Scotland during this “summer” period. Potential breeding habitats such as the Inch Marshes in Highland and the reedbeds at Loch of Strathbeg in Aberdeenshire have no records of birds in the breeding season (RSPB pers. comm.) The exception to this seems to be Fife where, in addition to the sightings mentioned at the beginning of this paper, birds have been caught in the first week of August in suitable habitat at St Margaret’s Marsh (Ian Darling pers comm.) and Loch Gelly (B Little in litt.).

Table 1. Ages and Year of Capture of Eurasian Reed Warblers in the Tay Reedbeds.

Retraps are not included. The single control is included.

Year	Juvenile	Adult	Age unknown
1981			1
1982			2
1983		1	
1984			
1984			
1986			1
1987		2	
1988	2		
1989		1	
1990		1	
1991		1	
1992			
1993			
1994			
1995	3	2	
1996		1	
1997	3		

Table 2: Age and Year of Capture of Eurasian Reed Warblers caught in the Tay Reedbeds in July and the first week of August.

Retraps are not included.

Year	Juvenile	Adult
1986		1
1987		2
1988	2	
1989		1
1990	1	
1991	1	
1992		
1993		
1994		
1995	1	3
1996		1
1997		

Discussion

The colonisation of Scotland may be attributed to the northward expansion of birds from England, but ringing recoveries indicate that a proportion of Scandinavian birds pass through Britain (Toms & Clark 1998). Two Norwegian-ringed birds have been recovered in the Tayside area (1992 & 1998), one of these controlled in the Tay Reedbeds. In light of this, the distribution of breeding records on the east coast of Scotland could be linked to expansion of the breeding population in Scandinavia. It might be better to think of the expansion of range in Scotland as an extension of the breeding population in northwest Europe as a whole, possibly involving birds from both the UK and Scandinavia and, perhaps, reflecting a change in climatic conditions brought about by global warming.

Tay R. G. Report 1998 – 2000 Reed Warblers In The Tay Reedbeds

Despite under-recording, this species is best described as a sporadic breeding bird in Scotland generally, although it has established itself at a handful of sites. It will be interesting to see if the tentative extension of its breeding range continues.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all of the following;- Dave Arthur, Ken Bruce, Jim Cobb, Ian Darling, Tom Dewick, Les Hatton, Brian Little, Stephanie Little, Shirley Millar, Steve Moyes, Mark Oksien, Kevin Rideout, RSPB Edinburgh, Isle of May Bird Observatory, Fife Bird Report.

References

- Bruce, K. (1997) Scottish Birds. Reed Warblers breeding in south west Scotland. Vol. 19 No.2; 119-120.
- Fife Bird Report (1997 & 1998). Fotheringham D. (Ed.) Fife Bird Club.
- Isle of May Log Computerised Summaries (1986-1997). Isle of May Bird Observatory Trust/Fife Nature. Glenrothes.
- Kelsey, M. (1993) in The New Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland. T. & A.D. Poyser. Calton.
- Sharrock J.T.R. (1976) (Ed.) The Atlas of Birds in Britain and Ireland. T. & A.D. Poyser. Calton.
- Shuttleworth, A. (2000). Eurasian Reed Warbler, First Probable Breeding in Fife. Fife Bird Report 1999: 154.
- Toms M.P. and Clark J.A. (1998). Ringing Report. Ringing and Migration. Vol 19 no. 2. BTO. Thetford.
- Tay Ringing Group Reports (1973-1997)