

Small Hippolais-warblers

revisited – Booted and Sykes's Warblers



Fig 1. An adult Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata*, with the flanks and 'trousers' brown-toned despite wear. The wear identifies the bird as an adult. © Annika Forsten, Kurgalzhino, Kazakstan, 3 July 2005.

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Booted Warbler *Hippolais caligata* is an example of a species we have only got to know during the past two decades. Many Finnish birder can still remember Waterloo at Asikkala where a very strangely singing Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin* moved around in the foliage. It was identified and ticked by many as a Booted Warbler. Nowadays a birder armed with up-to-date identification information probably would have already suspected the identification based on the habitat, as Booted Warbler territories are usually found in low bushland. The song has also become familiar to many, and since 2000 the species has bred annually in Finland. The development has not stopped there. According to TAC, the taxonomic committee of the AERC,

the former rama-subspecies of Booted Warbler is now listed as a species in its own right, Sykes's Warbler *Hippolais rama*. Those interested in rarities have to watch, listen to and practice identifying their small Hippolais warblers all over again. But the separating features are now becoming clearer thanks mainly to the studies and articles by Lars Svensson (Svensson 2001, 2003, Svensson & Millington 2002).

In Booted Warbler country in Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan

We had a chance to see, photograph and record both species in July 2005 in their breeding habitat in Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan. The time of the year was interesting as we saw both worn adults and fresh

juveniles. In early July the Booted Warbler young were already in the field in northern Kazakstan, and in mid July the young Sykes's Warblers moved around looking fully grown in the breeding grounds in southern Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan. As an interesting addition to the distribution map by Svensson (fig. 1) we found a breeding Sykes's Warbler pair, with at least one young in the field, at the Kurgalzhino reserve in Northern Kazakstan (c. 150 km southwest of the capital Astana). According to the distribution map the border of the breeding range is 400 km further south. The difference between the habitat of this Sykes's Warbler pair and the Booted Warblers in the area matched Svensson's description of the differences very well. The Sykes's Warbler site had some bushes and trees, a few metres tall,



Fig 2. This shows the breeding grounds of Booted and Sykes's Warblers according to Svensson (2001) and the locations of the birds in the photographs. The pink area denotes the breeding grounds of Booted Warbler and the red border those of Sykes's Warbler. The photographs were taken at Kurgalzhino and Karoy in Kazakhstan and at 'Salt Lake' southwest of Issyk-Kul in Kyrgyzstan and at Värtsilä in Finland. The map is by Eila Lehti.

while the Booted Warblers typically bred in low, less than 2m high, bushes and scrub.

Voice differences

There are differences between the voice of Sykes's Warbler and Booted Warbler, and the song has been given as the best separating feature between the species (Svensson 2001, 2003). The differences in the song are not portrayed in Finnish articles and books, and there are very few voice recordings of Sykes's Warbler available. The singing period was almost over by the time of our visit, and we did not get to hear the song of Sykes's Warbler properly. We still managed to hear a few short phrases. Of the authors TA has experience and recordings of Finnish Booted Warblers. Usually the song starts with a rising and repetitious series 'dye-dye-dye-dye', and thereafter opens up to a Garden Warbler type trill.* This beginning phrase was missing from the few Sykes's Warbler songs we heard on the trip. Svensson (2001) describes how Sykes's Warbler song is similar to that of Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* with its harsh

Fig 3. An adult Booted Warbler, which shows a typically round-headed and short-billed appearance, as the birds in fig. 1 and 4. © Tom Lindroos, Kurgalzhino, Kazakhstan, 3 July 2005.



repetitions and whistles, which seem to match the birds we heard and a couple of recordings we found.

In identifying potential vagrants the song is of little help however, as most of the one dozen Sykes's Warbler records from Europe were in autumn. Jännes (2003) has presented the call as a good separating feature and we found this to be very true in the field. The Booted Warbler call is a slightly loose rasping 'dsrak', while in Sykes's Warbler the corresponding call is a shorter 'zak', which is difficult to separate from the 'tak' call used by many warblers (eg. Lindholm & Aalto 2005).

A variety of details

Identifying the unstreaked and uniform-looking small *Hippolais* warblers based on plumage and structural differences is difficult. The differences are small, and the features are difficult to distinguish whilst

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Fig 4. A distinct dark tip to the lower mandible is a good field mark for Booted Warbler. There can be a faint dark smudge just inside the tip to the lower mandible in Sykes's Warbler, but in practice the whole lower mandible usually looks quite uniformly pale in the field. A pale lower mandible is not a certain character for Sykes's Warbler however, as the lower mandible sometimes is as pale in Booted Warbler. © Soili Leveelahti, Värtsilä, Finland, 18 June 2004.

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Fig 5. An adult Booted Warbler, a long-billed individual. The tip of the lower mandible is typically dark and the breast-sides are tinged brownish. © Pauli Dernjatin, Kurgalzhino, Kazakstan, early July 2005.

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Figs 6., 7. and 8. Adult Sykes's Warblers *Hippolais rama* in worn plumage. The typically long-billed and slope-headed appearance of an *Acrocephalus* warbler with an all-pale lower mandible. The underparts also look very pale, but in worn Booted Warblers the underparts can also be very pale. It can be difficult to assess the paleness from a single photograph. © Tom Lindroos, Karaoy, Kazakstan, 8 July 2005.

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Fig 9. An adult Sykes's Warbler. The appearance is similar to that of an *Acrocephalus* warbler and the primary projection is short compared to most Booted Warblers, but the projection length overlaps between the species. The distinct pale outer web to the outermost tail feather and the short (although worn) central tail feathers still separate the bird from *Acrocephalus* warblers (cf. fig. 19). ©Tom Lindroos, Kurgalzhino, Kazakstan, 3 July 2005.

the bird moves in the shaded bushes. This was no surprise, but made it easy to foresee difficulties when encountering one of these two species as a vagrant.

The species have been regarded as having a different jizz. Sykes's Warbler has been described as having a sloping forehead, a long bill and tail – more *Acrocephalus* warbler-like, while Booted Warbler is more like a *Phylloscopus* warbler in jizz. It has a rounder head, a shorter bill and tail. The long-tailedness of Sykes's Warbler is enhanced by the tail being longer

in comparison with the wing than in Booted Warbler. In measured birds the proportion of tail and wing length is a good character but not definite. There is no single certain separating measurement between the two species, they all more or less overlap. Some of the important measurements are difficult to measure correctly without plenty of practice and experience.

The Sykes's Warblers we saw matched the descriptions well, usually looking clearly long-billed and long-tailed. The

tail also often looked quite broad. The juvenile Booted Warblers looked quite round-headed, with a shorter bill. Wear may affect the jizz and the bill may not be fully grown in juveniles, even without showing any other clear indication of the chick stage. A corresponding difference in expression and structure can be seen in late summer and autumn in juvenile and adult *Acrocephalus* warblers.

When watching Sykes's their paleness, especially below, was very obvious. But adult Booted Warblers can also be quite



Figs 10., 11. and 12. Juvenile Booted Warblers. A brownish tinge to the flanks and/or breast-sides is visible. The upperparts are also more brownish tinged compared to a juvenile Sykes's Warbler. 10. © Pauli Dernjatin, Kurgalzhino, Kazakstan, early July 2005. 11. and 12. © Annika Forsten, Kurgalzhino, Kazakstan 3 July 2005.



Fig. 13. A juvenile Booted Warbler. Booted Warbler is supposed to show more distinct dark centres and shafts to the tertials, but in the field this is difficult to discern. © Tom Lindroos, Kurgalzhino, Kazakstan, 3 July 2005.



Figs 14. and 15. A juvenile Sykes's Warbler. The colour tones of the underparts easily burn through. The flanks and breast in these photographs can still be seen to be very pale in comparison with Booted Warbler. The colour tone to the upperparts is pale grey and the lower mandible lacks the dark tip of Booted Warbler. © Annika Forsten, Karaoy, Kazakstan, 8 July 2005.



Fig 16., 17. and 18. Juvenile Sykes's Warblers. The jizz of the head and bill are not as distinctive in juveniles as they usually are in adults. The birds in figs 16 & 18 show Booted Warbler type head patterns: a distinct supercilium, continuing beyond the eye and a hint of a lateral crown stripe. In July the legs of the juveniles of both species were still very dark. 16. and 17. © Tom Lindroos, Karaoy, Kazakstan, 8 July 2005. 18. © Tom Lindroos, 'Salt Lake', Kyrgyztan, 18 July 2005.

pale below because of wear. Fresh juvenile Sykes's Warblers were generally very pale. The breast and flanks sometimes showed an indistinct cream-yellow or

slightly buffish tone, but usually they seemed almost white below in the field. We only saw a few juvenile Booted Warblers, but their flanks and tibial feather-

ing, as well as the vent, seemed more distinctly brownish, in our photos as well, therefore being darker than in Sykes's Warbler. This difference in underpart



Fig 19. A juvenile Sykes's Warbler, the same as in figs 14 & 15. The tertials look quite uniform without distinct shaft streaks and dark centres, which has been presented as a field mark for Sykes's. When identifying unstreaked songbirds please remember that it is easy to also confuse other than closely related species. Especially in juvenile *Hippolais* the outer web to the outermost tail feathers does not show as distinctly white as in *Acrocephalus* Warblers. The shorter central tail feathers are a better separating field mark, because in *Acrocephalus* the central tail feathers are longer than the others. ©Tom Lindroos, Karaoy, Kazakstan, 8 July 2005.

colour is also described in Svensson's articles. On the other hand, the underparts often seem quite pale in many fresh Booted Warblers photographed in Europe in autumn. But that could be a light effect and the small differences in colour may easily burn through in photographs.

The prominence and length of the supercilium has also been regarded as a distinguishing field mark between the two species, with the supercilium of Booted Warbler being more distinct and longer, continuing beyond the eye. In Sykes's Warbler the supercilium does not continue beyond the eye and is less distinct. The short supercilium together with the sloping forehead gives Sykes's Warbler more of a Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* expression. Svensson (eg. 2003) has encouraged care in using and interpreting this field mark, and also in our experience Sykes's Warblers sometimes easily shows a long supercilium, continuing beyond the eye. The length of the supercilium is therefore no certain or definite field mark.

We did not notice any difference in habits or movements. We did not see

any Sykes's Warblers dropping their tails as Olivaceous Warbler *Hippolais pallida elaeica*. This trait has been described as a good field mark in separating Olivaceous from Booted and Sykes's Warblers.

Some other small plumage differences have been presented between the two, for instance the colour of the lower mandible. Anyone hoping to find a Sykes's Warbler should practice their unstreaked songbirds with care. Start with these photographs!

References

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