

The calls of Sykes's and Booted Warblers

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Understanding of the identification, distribution and taxonomy of Sykes's Warbler *Hippolais rama* and Booted Warbler *H. caligata* has increased greatly in recent times, mostly thanks to a series of articles by Lars Svensson (eg Svensson 2001, 2003). We now know that the song is one of the most important differences between these two species. There are, however, still some uncertainties regarding their calls (see Rasmussen & Anderton 2005, Svensson 2003), although Jännes (2003) and Svensson (2003) have proposed differences.

During July 2005, we visited several places in Kazakhstan and Kyrgystan, where we saw both species. We found one breeding pair of Sykes's Warblers with young and numerous pairs of Booted Warblers in the Kurgaldzino nature reserve area, c.150km southwest of Astana in northeast Kazakhstan. In southern Kazakhstan and Kyrgystan, we found only Sykes's Warblers, but both adults and juveniles. We heard hundreds of calls and sound-recorded some of them. In Kazakhstan, we were also able to trap some birds to confirm their identification by measurements. We have also heard and sound-recorded some Booted Warblers at Finnish breeding sites.

It seems evident to us that there are significant differences in the calls of the two species and that these are indeed useful for field identification. Indeed, Booted and Sykes's Warblers appear to be easier to differentiate by calls than

many other problematical warbler species pairs, such as Blyth's Reed and Marsh Warblers.

The most common call of Sykes's Warbler (very similar in both juveniles and adults) is a short "zak", quite similar to that of the European populations of Lesser Whitethroat, but even shorter. See fig. 1. This call is very 'neutral' and difficult to separate from the "tak" calls of several other warbler species. It is very short (0.0084 - 0.0141 sec.; average 0.0111 sec; six individuals; average of several calls used for each individual).

Figure 1. The "zak" call of a Sykes's Warbler, Karaoy, south of Lake Balkhas, Kazakhstan, 8th July 2005. A very short call lasting only one-hundredth of a second. Most of the energy is at about 4,000Hz.

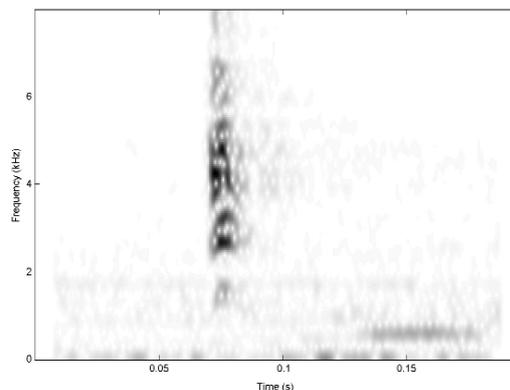


Plate 1. Adult Sykes's Warbler *Hippolais rama*, ????????, Kazakhstan, ??????? (Tom Lindroos).



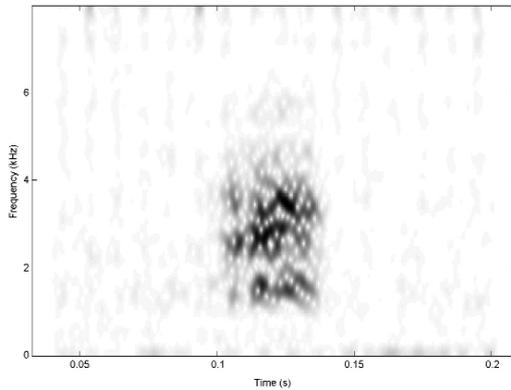


Figure 2. The "dsrak" call of a Booted Warbler, Kurgaldzino, near Astana, Kazakhstan, 3rd July 2005. There is a weak pre-syllable, while the main syllable is longer than the "zak" of Sykes's Warbler. Most of the energy is concentrated below 4,000Hz.

The corresponding call of Booted Warbler is more complicated and more structured. It is almost two-syllabled; normally there is a weaker syllable before the main syllable. This structure is audible to the human ear as a distinct rasping sound. The call can be transcribed as "dsrak". The call lasts twice as long as the Sykes's Warbler call (0.0164 - 0.0253 sec.; average 0.0216; nine individuals; average of several calls used for each individual; the partly separate pre-syllable not counted). The Booted Warbler call is also sometimes, but not always, lower pitched. Again, the calls of both juveniles and adults are similar. See fig. 2. When alarmed, Booted Warbler may utter its call more hurriedly and the rasping element may be less distinct.

Our observations on these calls seem to match those of Jännes (2003) and support his contention that these two calls are very useful identification characters.

Both species also use a longer, rattling call, like that of many *Acrocephalus* warblers. We heard Booted Warbler rattle only a couple of times at Kazakhstan nesting sites and did not manage to record the sound. Sykes's Warbler used this call more frequently.

Elsewhere, it may be the case that Booted Warbler utters a rattling call more often, and it may be related to a particular stage of the breeding cycle (Magnus Robb pers. comm.). The call we heard was somewhat reminiscent of the call of Red-breasted Flycatcher: dryer and faster than the rattle of, for example, Blyth's Reed Warbler or Marsh Warbler. See fig. 3. Adults used this call, but we cannot be sure whether juveniles did too.

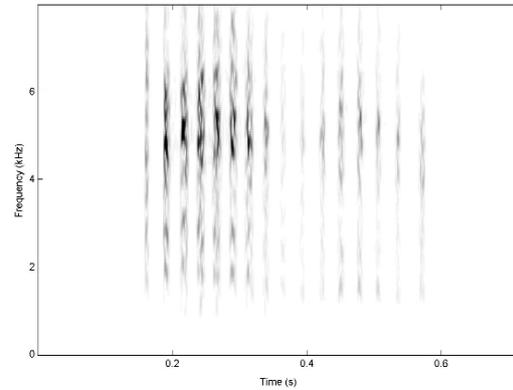


Figure 3. The rattle of a Sykes's Warbler, Kurgaldzino, near Astana, Kazakhstan, 3rd July 2005. A quite high-pitched and fast rattle.

References

- Jännes, H. 2003. *Calls of Eastern Vagrants*. Helsinki.
 Rasmussen, P. & Anderton, J. 2005. *Birds of South Asia. The Ripley Guide*. Barcelona.
 Svensson, L. 2001. Identification of Western and Eastern Olivaceous, Booted and Sykes's Warblers. *Birding World* 14: 192-219.
 Svensson, L. 2003. *Hippolais* update: identification of Booted and Sykes's Warbler. *Birding World* 16: 470-474.

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The sounds featured in Figures 1-3 can be heard via the Stop Press page of the *Birding World* website, www.birdingworld.co.uk. Magnus Robb has confirmed that his own recordings of Booted and Sykes's Warbler calls also demonstrate this difference in the length of the calls. Some Booted Warbler calls are even longer than the maximum of 0.0253 seconds given by the authors. Magnus also comments that Sykes's Warbler actually has a 'pre-syllable' too, detectable only in the cleanest of recordings and not apparent to the ear without slowing the calls down. It is much weaker compared to the main syllable, and much closer to it than in Booted Warbler. Thus it may seem to be absent to the ear in the field. In fact, nearly all *Acrocephalus* warblers have some kind of, more or less detectable, pre-syllable. Also, it seems to be unwise to attach any importance to the frequency of the rattle call as an identification character. Hannu Jännes also agrees that the conclusions reached here by Antero and Tapio support his notes on the separation by call of wintering birds and migrants published on his *Calls of Eastern Vagrants* CD (2003). Lars Svensson has noted the call of Booted to be often more 'electric' and more complex than that of Sykes's, which usually sounds rather more dry and simple. He agrees that the calls of the two species do differ, yet obviously they are still quite similar, so it will be interesting to see how useful voice will be in clinching a positive identification for a straggler to Britain. *Eds.*

Lindholm, A. & Aalto, T. 2005 Article Title.
Birding World 18 (????): ????????

