

Twenty Years On - The Dartford Warbler by Keith Moir

It would be nice to report that Sunday the 23rd of April, 1989 dawned bright and clear. But it didn't. It was grey and dull, and unseasonably cool. Not, then, ideal conditions for the stroll up the Washburn Valley I'd promised my brother, Les, who was over from Canada.

My birding expectations were far from high as we left Lindley Bridge for the Timble Inn, but within ten minutes the situation had completely changed as a small warbler, long-tailed and apparently all-dark, flitted across the path just below the reservoir dam, and dived into gorse bushes. Unlikely as it was, the bird had to be a Dartford Warbler, or, even more improbably, perhaps a Marmora's Warbler, knowing that one had turned up on the South Yorkshire moors seven years earlier.

Thankfully, after a few minutes the bird showed well, the dark plummy underparts confirming my initial identification. Managing to stay relatively calm, I took in all I could of the warbler, and scribbled down some notes to support the record. Les was singularly unimpressed by the excitement generated by what, to him, was a dowdy little bird. This was perhaps understandable, as his house is situated on the shores of Lake Huron on a migration flyway, and in and around his garden I'd recorded nearly 70 species in the space of a few days, including 12 of the much more showy North American warblers.



He was even less impressed when I despatched him to Norwood Bottom to wait for me, as I realised I had to put the news out. I was at a disadvantage as I wasn't then a BOG member, didn't have any contact numbers, and (being an unreconstructed Luddite) didn't possess one of those newfangled mobile phones. So I drove down to Knotford Nook, then the Mecca for local bird-watchers (alas no longer), expecting to find someone. Nobody. The immediate area around Otley Gravel Pits was similarly deserted, so a call to Birdline North East was clearly necessary, but, as unvandalised phone boxes were even scarcer than the warbler, I had to dash back home to Guiseley to ring in the glad tidings. This was followed by a further rush to Norwood Bottom to pick up an increasingly cold and fed up brother.

We continued our walk to Timble, and on the drive back I could see birders peering intently around the area where the bird had been, so I knew word had got through. I later discovered, such was the confidence in my find, that the information released referred only to a 'report' of a Dartford Warbler, which soon learned was a euphemism for "this sounds a bit stringy to us; probably a Long-tailed Tit, but if you've nothing better to do, it might be worth checking out!"

The bird was identified in detail by those more analytical and competent than I as probably a first-summer individual of the Continental race *S.u.undata*, and was at the time understood to be the most northerly record of the species. Most who saw it probably thought there wouldn't be another, but, remarkably, the Group's recording area has since produced at least one more, a bird on Rombold's Moor in June 2005, and another claimed bird, on Denton Moor in 2006, is likely to be reconsidered by the YNU Records Committee if and when further details are produced.

Given the general northward spread of the UK sub-species, and other Yorkshire records, there is every chance of further sightings of this attractive warbler, so members should be on the lookout. A walk on a rotten day with a transatlantic relative might help!

The drawing, by Mick Cunningham, appeared on the front cover of the 1989 Annual Report.