

Calandra Lark (Part 1)

A new species for Kent

Gary Howard

For over 20 years a group of my birding mates and I have booked the bird observatory at Dungeness for the first Bank Holiday weekend in May. Over the years the cast has changed a bit but Marcus Lawson, Mike Buckland and I have done the majority of them, and Dave Walker the DBO warden has usually been there too. A lot of good birds have been found over those weekends by those present, including several firsts for Kent including Black-throated Thrush, Black-browed Albatross and Audouin's Gull – the latter a first for Britain. I've not seen them all, and it's not always been great birding, but it's always been a laugh. It's a chance to relax, catch up, and enjoy a few beers, a curry, and hopefully a few good birds.

On Saturday 5th May I was up around 05:00 and soon out with Mike and Sam Bayley. A quick look at the moat revealed there were plenty of birds about and we wasted no time driving the Heligoland traps. The moat was alive with Whitethroats, perhaps 100 birds, and they flew from every tangle as we slowly pushed the flocks into the traps. Most escaped but we trapped around a dozen and carried them back for Sam to process.

Mike, Sam and I walked to the beach seeing a few Redstarts and Whitethroat. We learnt that the sea was rather poor for passage and so instead swung around to bird the Gorse near the RHDR station and into the trapping area. Spreading out we combed the area. I flushed a bird and immediately thought it might be a Wryneck. The three of us approached the Brambles and Elders it had disappeared into and sure enough out flew a Wryneck – I was very pleased and certain that it would be my best find of the weekend.

We carried on birding the trapping area and found pockets birds – plenty of Whitethroat, a scattering of Blackcap and a few Garden Warbler – but it was obvious that many of the previous days' fall of birds had moved on.

As we returned to the Obs, the pager reported that that a Little Bunting was still at Sandwich Bay. Having been trapped a week before, it had then gone missing, before showing again on Friday after being re-trapped. Despite being an annual vagrant in small numbers to the UK, it remains very rare in Kent, and neither Marcus, Mark, nor I had it on our Kent Lists so we decided to twitch Sandwich.

We arrived at Sandwich Bay around 10:00, having approached deal, along the Ancient Highway. A pair of Grey Partridge was the only birds of note being seen along that stretch. We negotiated the toll road then parked at the Observatory, and walked into the trapping area – a small wood with lots of net rides.

Several hours of mildly frustrating birding ensued. The Little Bunting was very elusive and yet called fairly regularly. However, there was rather too much playing of tapes which resulted in people rushing from one side of the small wood to the other, and some birders had the odd fleeting glimpse, though I'd seen nothing by 13:00. Eventually it did calm down and Marcus, Mike and I all got a good look at the Little Bunting as it perched in a Willow calling. John Brighton, Steve Broyd, and Frank Cackett and his son Tom were also with us as we walked out of the wood feeling euphoric.

What happened next was as unexpected as it was amazing.

I started to put my camera gear away, when Frank said something like "What's that?" Almost instantly Mike was on it, and I could tell that they were both bemused and excited, so I quickly jumped up and straight away got on the bird. By now it was going away from us heading north-east. My first thought was that it was a lark, and a big one at that! A white trailing edge to the wing, white outer-tail feathers, broad wings, and what looked like a notable contrast between the upperwing and the underwing. It was now undulating away towards the golf course and I blurted out "It's a lark..." and a few seconds later, with my brain having processed the picture I was seeing, I shouted "It's a bloody Calandra!!" I stayed intently on the bird, it had passed over c20m off the ground and by the time it reached the edge of the golf course it appeared to veer slightly left and lose height, but then it disappeared from view behind trees.

Within a few seconds of the bird disappearing Marcus and Steve Broyd ran up shouting "Did you see the Calandra?" to which the only reply was "Of course we did!" I don't think there was a shred of doubt in our minds and we started to walk, in fact almost run, towards the spot where we hoped it had landed. Mike Puxley and John Brighton had also seen the bird, and very soon the eight of us were on the edge of the golf course 'scoping the area, including the huge sheep field opposite the observatory. Whilst doing all this, hurried calls were going out to mates and the information services – surely we'd relocate it!

Sadly we never did. Perhaps it had carried on flying north-east into the steady 12mph wind and who knows where it landed? Perhaps it did land in one of the many hollows - I was going to say dips! – on the golf course.

We crossed the golf course, walked to the clubhouse searching beside the beach road, before re-crossing the golf course at another point, and even did a little sneaking about on the course itself. Others joined us from the Obs and further afield, but alas it was not seen again.

It was the big one! No twitchable mainland records, as yet, and a potential first for Kent, if accepted. Over breakfast on the Sunday morning it was interesting to read about the previous sixteen accepted British records; 14 have been in April or May, and date-wise ours sits plumb in the middle.

Calandra Lark at Sandwich Bay (Part 2)

A new species for Kent

Steve Broyd

Sometimes you get lucky. I was in Scotland when news of a Little Bunting at Sandwich Bay broke. Reconciling myself to another missed Kent species I travelled back on 4 May as planned. The next morning news that the bunting was still present offered some hope that I might actually see the species in Kent after all. I duly set off for Sandwich and after a frustrating wait I finally saw the bird well in the Sandwich Bay Bird "Haven" area. At around 13:30, satisfied with my views, I set off back to my car with Marcus Lawson. For some reason I decided to glance back. As I did I noticed a medium sized bird flying at a height of 30 foot or so over the road towards a small group of birders still stood in the Haven (including Mike Buckland and Gary Howard). I was momentarily perplexed about its identity. Rapidly dismissing starling, thrush and woodpecker, I quickly realised that it was a lark – but a very large and stocky one, with a big stubby bill, big head, broad rounded wings and a short tail. Indeed it looked predominately wings as it flew across. It also had a black underwing. In size it was noticeably larger than Skylark being much bulkier and because of its short tail and broad wings looking distinctly heavy. I watched dumbfounded, realising it was a Calandra Lark. There were plenty of other species in the area including Skylarks and Corn Buntings, which I had been watching on and off during the day, to provide an estimate of size. The bird was flying deliberately and directly into the ENE wind but with some determination – dipping from time to time as if it might be mindful to land. From my slightly raised position and because I had picked the bird up as it approached, I had good viewing conditions. The good light was in my favour. It was clearly going to cross the Haven over the heads of the other group of birders but they were a little too far away to hear me shout against a wind that would carry my alert away from them. After what seemed like an age but what was really only seconds I hastened Marcus, who was now just ahead of me, to look at the bird. I think he had wondered why I had stopped and had already picked it up. As the bird progressed it banked allowing the obvious black underwing, contrasting with a white trailing edge and body, to be seen. It was clearly a Calandra. A bold dark smudge of feathers was noted at the side of the breast as were the white outer tail feathers (contrasting with darker inner feathers). The mantle looked grey/brown with detectable streaking. The upper side of the primaries and secondary's were dark showing contrast with the white trailing edge.

As the bird flew past the trapping area it started lose height, looking as if it might land on St George's Golf Course but it was eventually lost to sight, not relocated and presumably continued northwards.

As it disappeared from my view I noticed that the group by the trapping area were also watching it fly away. I ran back towards them shouting, "Did you see the Calandra?" they saw me and shouted the same, confirming that they had independently picked up and identified the bird.

The bird was only on view for a short time as it crossed the area but was distinctive enough to allow positive identification. The bird appeared to have flown from the direction of Deal taking a route just inland from the coast. Given that the bird failed to land it was not possible to take a more detailed description, nevertheless that chance glance back paid off.

