

Chinese Pond Heron *Ardeola bacchus* - A New Bird for Kent

Ian Roberts et al.

On Tuesday, 21st January 2014 Michael Dawson, a non-birdwatcher, noticed an unusual bird on the lily pads on the pond within the shared grounds of his block of flats. The flats are set in large wooded grounds with a pond with a surface area of some 100+ square metres and a depth at maximum of about 1.8m. It contains a large area of water lilies covering about 20% of its surface area and has a significant area of reeds in one corner. It also contains many small fish and had recently had the water level reduced for cleaning purposes.

Michael considered the bird to be “of a nervous disposition and flew away into nearby trees, we think, as soon as it saw movement or heard noise. It has been difficult to photograph because of its nervousness and it flies when flash photography is used”. He continued to state that he had “tried to take more pictures without upsetting it but with little success as I cannot get close”.

The bird made regular visits to the lily pads that day and most of the next few days to the 24th January. It was first thought to be a Bittern but seemed different, being “pure white in flight” whereas on the ground it blended in with the foliage. Despite looking in his bird books he was unable to identify it and sent two photographs to the RSPB on the 27th January. It was strongly suggested by the RSPB that it was a Squacco heron and Michael was asked to pass the information on to Barry Wright, the county recorder, which he did.

Barry suggested that Michael should contact me which he did on the evening of the 3rd February. I rang Michael to discuss the sighting and it was confirmed that there had been no further sightings since the 24th January. It was also ascertained that there was no possibility of viewing the pond from outside of the property. Whilst the most likely prospect, even despite any winter records in the county, was that it was a Squacco Heron, it was clear that the possibility of one of the other pond herons needed to be considered.

On the same evening, 3rd February, David Walker, warden of Dungeness Bird Observatory, received an email from Mike Kirk of Saltwood stating that he had seen a Squacco Heron recently in his garden. David forwarded the email to me, and a quick check showed that Mike actually lived very close to the original location.

The following morning, 4th February, I decided to drive up and see what viewing/access might be like at this new location. Almost as soon as I parked up at the side of the property a Squacco-type heron flew across the road and dropped into the garden! Unfortunately, it was not possible to see into the garden from the road. As it was still quite early in the day and I had not noted down Mike’s phone number, I returned home and called him a short while later. Mike stated that he had noticed the heron in his garden but it had already flown off. He further stated that it had made a couple of visits to his pond earlier that week but appeared to flush as soon as it noticed movement at the windows. Mike agreed to let me know if it reappeared but was understandably reluctant to allow general access to his property and, given the bird’s infrequent, brief visits and wariness, a twitch would not have been viable.

Mike was able to provide a photo taken on 3rd February which was particularly interesting as it appeared to show a dark ‘curtain’ across the lower breast and possibly some maroon colouration to the breast sides, though was unfortunately of poor quality.

On the 4th February Barry Wright forwarded me another photo of the heron, of even poorer quality, which had been taken recently, perhaps on the 2nd, by Nigel Baker, when it was perched on a trampoline in a garden, again in a similar area.

Over the next few days some local birders began to search the surrounding area and on the afternoon of the 11th February Steve Broyd located it in a publicly-accessible area by Turnpike Hill in Hythe, whereupon the news was broadcast more widely.

Over the next four weeks it was regularly seen at Turnpike Hill and at other locations in the Hythe and Saltwood area, as far west as Green Lane, near Hythe Roughs, and north to the centre of Saltwood, with the gardens at the end of Redbrooks Way becoming a favoured site. However, it could be frustratingly elusive at times, going missing for entire days, and remained rather flighty and wary, and never allowing close approach.

Now that there was a chance to study the bird and obtain better photographs the identification could be properly tested. Chinese Pond Heron fairly quickly emerged as the likely candidate and this was confirmed through further research, with particular help from Martin Garner, with a couple of excellent series of photographs in support of this, Paul Rowe’s being particularly instructive.

The bird was last reported alive on the 13th March and was sadly found freshly dead (in various parts) at Orchard Valley, Hythe on the 25th March by Gill and Mike Badcock. The head was photographed but this had disappeared a day or so later and by the time I was informed of the find, 3rd April, just a few wing and body feathers remained. These were collected and a sample sent to Martin Collinson at the University of Aberdeen for DNA analysis which confirmed the identification as Chinese Pond Heron (pers. comm.):

“it is 100% identical to the four database sequences of Chinese Pond heron for the COI gene [mitochondrial gene cytochrome oxidase I, the most commonly used gene for DNA barcoding]. There’s one Squacco Heron and one Indian Pond heron in the database, and it is 4-5% different from them, i.e. quite a difference. Unfortunately, there is no Javan Pond Heron DNA sequenced at all, so unless we can find a sample I cannot include that in the analysis however ... it is inconceivable really that Javan would show an identical DNA sequence”.

Thus, the identity of the bird was beyond doubt, based on field characters and confirmed by DNA analysis. The species has a record of vagrancy based on accepted records as widespread as Alaska, Australia and Oman, and has a similar distribution to several far-eastern species which have occurred in Britain and Europe in recent years. There are also five previous records from Europe, including one from Britain, though these were not accepted due to the possibility of captive origin. Prior to the ban on the importation of wild birds into the European Union in 2005 Chinese Pond Heron was present, though apparently rare, in captivity.

The species is not currently known in any European zoos and other public collections, though the possibility of birds being held in private collections or continuing to be illegally imported cannot be dismissed. Breeding success in captivity appears to be very limited and the bird was considered to be a first-winter.

The condition of the plumage was consistent with a typical first-winter at the time sighting, both in terms of progression of moult and wear. The bird showed no obvious signs of being of captive origin, being un-ringed, with bill and feet in good condition, and wary in behaviour.

NOTE: This article is a selected extract from the original published in Folkestone & Hythe 2014 bird report – eds.