

Crag Martin

Kingsdown, Kent

21 November – 4 December 2020

On the afternoon of Saturday 21 November 2020, Heather Chantler and I were standing outside Kingsdown Post Office waiting to post a parcel, when I received a call from John Cantelo, who had just spoken with a friend of his Alan Cooke. Alan had been walking on the old Rifle Butts at the base of the chalk cliffs at the bottom of the village about an hour before and had seen a hirundine that he described as dark brown above, paler below, but without the breast band of a Sand Martin. He wasn't absolutely positive but wondered if it could be a Crag Martin and wanted someone to check it out. John rang me as we live in the village.

We quickly made our way to The Rifle Butts, or undercliff as we generally call it, and walked south along the 700 metres of the old shooting range, all the time checking for anything amongst the returning Fulmars. We got to the end of the wall and continued further along the beach as far as the incoming tide would allow. Nothing.

We turned around and headed back. We had walked almost back to the start I saw a hirundine come out from the cliff face, circle round and disappear over the top. A few seconds later it reappeared and we were able to confirm it was a Crag Martin! The first for Kent. Panic set in as the mobile phone signal can be intermittent at best and sure enough, dead. To make matters worse, someone started to fly a drone along the cliff, exactly where the bird was. Heather ran off to a) stop the drone and b) get a signal to get the news out. Fortunately, she managed to do both.

I stayed to keep the bird in view, whilst trying to get some photos. Shortly afterwards, Brendan Ryan, John Cantelo, Richard Heading, Gerald Segelbacher and Jack Chantler arrived and were all soaking up the bird as it continued to feed actively in front of us, frequently perching on the flint nodules, where it could 'scope. As the afternoon progressed, more birders arrived, many having been watching the Eastern Yellow Wagtail at Worth. The bird spent more time resting on the flint, obviously looking for a suitable place to roost, which it did as darkness fell.

The bird was still present the next morning to the assembled crowd and after a brief flight along the cliff, headed off south at 0730 and was lost to view. It was not relocated. Richard Heading and I walked the clifftop to St Margaret's Bay, but with no success.

However, mid-morning on Monday 23 November, the bird reappeared on the same area of chalk cliff and performed well for the rest of the day.

The question is....where did it go for a day?

On 28 November, after flying south, it was relocated at Samphire Hoe, before heading back to Kingsdown to roost. This then became the routine for the next few days.

The bird continued to show to 4 December.

There was quite a lot of online chatter about it being the Orkney bird, but analysis of photos of both has shown them to be different individuals, on shape of tail spots and primary wear.

Alan Cooke – original finder, but agreed that we should submit the record.

Nigel L Jarman & Heather E Chantler

07866 833968

jarman.nigel@btinternet.com

Kingsdown

Description

Very good views in flight and sitting on flints in the cliff face.

A robust-looking hirundine with a heavy body and broad-based, pointed wings. Dark, sandy-brown head, mantle, rump and upperwings. Darker tail with obvious white spots in tail feathers, when tail spread. Pale, sandy underparts, becoming darker towards vent. Very obvious dark underwing coverts, contrasting with the rest of the wing.

The light on the first afternoon was not very bright, so certain features could not be seen; but on subsequent days it was possible to see dark throat streaks and pale fringes to the tertials and uppertail coverts as well as the very dark undertail, also pale-fringed. In bright sunshine, the primaries appeared translucent and the underwing coverts deep black

In flight, the bird was extremely agile, hugging the cliff face and then turning with amazing speed. It was often difficult the bird in the bins.

I heard the bird call on 2 occasions, both times early in the morning, when I was the only observer present – a single chirpy “trrp” call.

My images, taken with Canon SX50:

There are lots of superb images available from many photographers.

Saturday 21 Nov - the first image of the bird, on its favourite flint – time 1552:



25 Nov 2020 – showing the tail spots



25 Nov 2020 – a typical flight view, showing pale underwing, dark underwing coverts and white tail spots.