

Trumpeter Finch at Tankerton

A new species for Kent

Geoffrey Burton

Seemingly trivial decisions sometimes have unexpected consequences. Spring on the county's north coast can be a quiet time and, by late May, very quiet. A few of these quiet days at Swalecliffe and I was ready for a change. In this case a very modest one as I visited the Tankerton slopes just a mile or so to the west. It was no surprise that the sea was devoid of birds and no migrants could be found on the slopes or in the castle grounds. After little more than an hour at about 7 a.m., I was ready to move on. However, as I walked across the buttercup and daisy strewn slope, I flushed a couple of Linnets and a third bird with them that seemed slightly bigger, longer winged and an overall sandy colour. Fortunately, it landed on the roof of one of the beach huts and my 'scope was soon trained upon Kent's first Trumpeter Finch! I quickly noted its overall sandy plumage, a very heavy pinky-red bill that was dark towards the tip, the long projection of the blackish primaries with a shortish tail and short fleshy-red legs and then began the task of alerting the slumbering masses of Kent birders. The bird fed on the grassy slopes and in the weedy areas between the beach huts. It would regularly perch on the roofs of these huts and even on top of the large houses behind the slopes.

This was only the ninth record for Britain and came only three days after the eighth, at Landguard in Suffolk, which was still present when this bird was found. However, as this is not a regularly watched site, the Tankerton bird could have arrived earlier. The residents of Tankerton were taken aback by the numbers who came to see the bird (several hundreds at least) but what would they have made of the numbers who would have turned up if it had been found before the Suffolk bird which had an estimated 5,000 admirers during its stay? Two more birds were found in Kent, by Francis Solly at North Foreland, briefly on 9th June and by Simon Davies at Dungeness from 11th-13th June. Detailed descriptions and photographs confirm that these were three different birds.

The four birds were the first in Britain for 13 years and were part of a wider influx into Europe, which included six in France and four in Sweden, between late April and mid June. This desert species is found on the Canary Islands, in North Africa and the Middle East into Central Asia with, recently, a small population in Southern Spain.