

## Zitting Cisticola at Bockhill

### A new species for Kent

#### Richard Heading



*Zitting Cisticola – Norman McCanch*

Buoyed by the rare time of year and by the rarest of all winds, a light northwesterly, I arranged to meet Phil Chantler at the Bockhill Monument at 06:00. Phil was already birding when I arrived and noticing some swifts feeding around the cliff top we ventured in that direction with Phil looking to get some photographs for an up and coming article of his. After about 15 minutes I noticed a small bird dropping into the long grass on the cliff top. The small size, short blunt rounded wings, and tiny tail were hugely reminiscent of something I had been watching only two weeks previously in northern Spain. Excitedly I declared to Phil that we needed to check the bird out. As we approached, it flew out of the grass at fairly close range uttering a couple of sharp *tsip* notes and flew away from us towards the Monument. The white tips to all but the central tail feathers and the streaking on the upperparts added to what I had seen earlier and I realised what we were looking at. “It’s a Fan-tailed” I cried with a mixture of disbelief and sheer exhilaration. Any birder regularly watching a patch can empathise with the feeling. The birdless days (and at Bockhill that *really* means *birdless*) are forgotten and instantly it becomes a reward for your tenacity, good fortune and the sheer optimism that keeps you going day after day. You don’t get many moments like this but when they do happen it all seems worthwhile.

Rushing over to the Monument, Phil with Canon in hand, we stood either side of the bush where the bird had landed. We didn’t get too close before it flew again calling much more this time, appearing to land in bushes on the seaward side of the Monument car park. Our view was obscured by a French motorhome and as we approached we noticed a bird sitting up in a bush just in front of the vehicle. Phil didn’t wait to see what it was but started clicking away, steadying himself against the passenger door, whilst I focussed my binoculars. “That’s it” we both exclaimed. Revealed before us were the long thin bill and the super-distinctive face pattern (no supercilium and rather plain head-sides contrasting with a thinly streaked crown). The underparts appeared white with a slightly buff wash on the breast-sides and flanks. It didn’t stay for long and again flew off calling. It was time to get the news out - never easy at Bockhill. The mobile phone signal fluctuates between a weak UK signal, a slightly stronger French signal or (most likely) nothing at all! So I stood by the Monument and I did my best, it is amazing how many people are not awake at 06:50 in the morning! Fortunately Jack Chantler and Nigel Jarman were due to arrive at the site in any

case and I hurried them along with my phone call. Meanwhile Phil had been tracking the bird's progress and it was pretty obvious to him that it was becoming more flighty, moving from bush to bush and calling frequently. He called me back down and the breathless Jack and Nigel joined us. We could hear the bird calling and after a few minutes it flew up and started flying away south west towards the South Foreland Valley at St. Margaret's. Briefly, tantalizingly, it turned back towards us, but it then turned again and kept going this time finally disappearing in the distance.

Suddenly the enormity of what had just transpired dawned on us – a first for Kent and as we discovered a fifth for Britain. After a brief moment of celebration, an update to Birdline South East of the current regrettable status of the bird and then a review of Phil's photos, we headed out again into the field.