

## Stonechat (*Saxicola torquata*) in New Brunswick — first record for North America

*“On the morning of October 1, 1983, we observed and photographed a Stonechat of a Siberian race, either maura or stejnegeri, on Grand Manan Island near the entrance to the Bay of Fundy.”*

James G. Wilson



*Whether this Stonechat came from the east by way of western Europe and the North Atlantic or from the west across the Bering Strait and North America can only be surmised. Photograph/Cecil L. Johnston.*

**W**E ARRIVED AT CASTALIA Marsh at 8:00 a.m. I decided to do some birding for passerines along a fringe of shrubbery near the access road, while my companion Cecil Johnston, proceeded on to the center of the marsh. After approximately five minutes, I noticed a songbird perched on top of a dead alder about 30 meters away. Focusing my binoculars on it, I knew immediately that it was not a bird I had seen before. At first its general appearance suggested that it might be a Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*), but the coloration was wrong. Also, it was perched on a bush, which is rather uncharacteristic for that species.

It appeared to have a dark crown, with a prominent, light-buffy supercilium which faded out toward the rear of the head. The bill was black, similar to that of a large warbler, with a darkish horizontal line running from its base to the eye. The breast and underparts were a uniform tawny brown, with absolutely no streaking. The throat was a lighter shade than the rest of the underparts. It constantly flicked its tail vigorously up and down. It appeared between 12-15 centimeters in length (5-6 inches), short-tailed, and rather plump.

It sat for several moments, quite tamely, then darted out, captured an insect, and returned to its original perch. This

time it turned sideways and away from me, allowing a dorsal view. The tail appeared to be black, and the upper tail-coverts and the entire rump were a beautiful rusty-chestnut. The crown was dark brown, and contrasted noticeably with the medium brown of the back and wings. The nape was a lighter brown, and clearly segregated the head and back shading. The back, nape, and wings were all noticeably darker than the underparts. The wings showed light feather edgings on the primaries and secondaries and a faint whitish-buff wing panel.

After several minutes, during which the bird caught several more insects, I ran to Cecil's position. Returning with his Questar 60X telescope coupled to an Olympus OM-1, 35 mm camera, we located the bird, still perched in the same area, and managed to approach to within 40 meters. However, just as Cecil was setting up his tripod, it took off! It flew past us, pausing momentarily on the tip of some grass before it continued on its way, passing out of sight over nearby sand dunes. We then spent one-half hour searching the entire area, without success.

We returned to the original location with the hope that the bird had decided to do likewise. After several minutes of painstaking scanning with the Questar, Cecil relocated the bird perched on a shrub about 100 meters away.

Fortunately, it soon flew closer, and he was able to obtain two photographs of the back of the bird at a distance of about 30 meters. He then took one more photo of it from the side, a bit further away.

It appeared very nervous and agitated at this stage. It was obviously wary of us, and did not catch insects. In addition to flicking its tail, it flicked its wings frequently as well, revealing the distinctive rump and tail as Cecil took the first two shots.

After perhaps two minutes, during which time it shifted position several times, it took to the air. It rose quickly above the shrubbery and flew off, continuing to gain altitude. We watched it constantly, for about a minute and a half, as it continued to gain height, heading south down the Island, until it faded from sight.

**W**E CONSULTED AVAILABLE FIELD guides, which included standard references to species found in North America, Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, but could find nothing

which matched the characteristics of this mysterious visitor.

For the remaining two days of our stay, we combed the island in vain. The directness of its departure left us both with the impression that it may have left Grand Manan shortly thereafter.

After our return to the mainland, the bird was tentatively identified from the photographs by Stuart Tingley, who was leaving for a birding trip to the Scilly Isle, off the British Coast, the following week. He kindly took copies of the two legible slides with him, and they were viewed by several British authorities, which included Peter Grant, Peter Milford, and Brian Bland. All concurred with the initial identification.

The slides were subsequently reviewed by Iain S. Robertson, of Whalsay, Scotland, the author of a definitive article on the identification of individual races of the species (1977, *Identification and European status of eastern Stonechats*, "Frontiers of Bird Identification," p. 252-259), and by W. Earl Godfrey, Curator Emeritus of Ornithology at the National Museum of Natural Sciences in Ottawa.

Robertson classified the bird as a first autumn female, one of the two Siberian races *maura* or *stejnegeri*. It displayed the characteristics of the classic autumn plumage of eastern Stonechat—clear supercilium, pale wing panel, extensive orange/rufous rump patch, pale upperparts with noticeable streaking, and tawny underparts with contrasting lighter chin and throat.

Racial identity in autumn can be accomplished only with the bird in hand, the distinction between the two subspecies being the amount of white present in the base of the tail feathers.

The interesting question is how this bird may have arrived at the Bay of Fundy. The races *maura* and *stejnegeri* occur throughout most of the northwestern Soviet Union, Mongolia, Northern China, and Japan. Individuals winter in southern portions of this range, as well as in India, Burma and Thailand.

There are twenty-five records of Siberian Stonechats for western Europe between the years 1883 and 1976, sixteen of them during the last ten years of that period (Robertson 1977). All but one of these records were during early September to mid-November. The only previous report from North America is a sight record of a bird which may have been this species on St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, on June 6, 1978 (Roberson 1980, "Rare Birds of the West Coast," p. 481), which established the species on the Hypothetical List of the 1983 A.O.U. Checklist.

Whether our bird came to us from the east, by way of western Europe and the North Atlantic, or from the west *via* the Bering Strait and on across North America, cannot be known. However, it reached us, this occurrence is a most remarkable one.

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