GAMBELL, ALASKA, AUTUMN 2002:

First North American Records of Willow Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*), Lesser Whitethroat (*Sylvia curruca*), and Spotted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa striata*)

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ABSTRACT

This article summarizes records of single individuals of Willow Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*), Lesser Whitethroat (*Sylvia curruca*), and Spotted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa striata*) at Gambell, Saint Lawrence Island, Alaska, all of which represent first records for North America. An overview of field conditions, migrant passerine assemblages, and meteorological context at Gambell is provided, along with brief discussions of identification, taxonomy, distribution, and vagrancy of the three new species found here. More extensive notes, physical documentation, and discussions are archived with the Alaska Checklist Committee at the University of Alaska Museum.

OVERVIEW

The Bering Sea region in western Alaska is well known to most North American birders as the place to go to find Asian migrants and vagrants, Alaska specialties, and spectacular seabird concentrations. Most observers who have visited the renowned birding destinations of Attu Island (western Aleutian Islands), Saint Paul Island (Pribilof Islands), and Gambell (northwest corner of Saint Lawrence Island) have done so between mid-May and early June. In spring, there is a concentrated "pulse" of arriving birds. As an additional incentive, the spring vagrant seasons for waterfowl, shorebirds, and passerines substantially overlap. So it is not surprising that many birders have visited these islands each spring since about the mid-1970s, and that these visits have produced many first records of Asian species for North America. At Gambell, the number of observers in spring has increased, with many visiting the village area as participants on scheduled birding tours that generally last about a week. Extensive data now exist on the spring migration there. Coverage at Gambell later in June—after most of the northbound migrants have passed through—has been very poor, however, despite good potential for unusual species to occur late in the season.

In contrast, this region's birding outposts have received scant attention from birders or ornithologists in fall. Southbound bird migration through the Bering Sea region stretches out over a more protracted period than does the spring passage. The peak of southbound shorebird migration (between July and early September) is largely over before most vagrant passerines occur (late August to mid-October). Thus, to be assured of seeing a good cross-section of transients and a number of Asian strays during a single visit, a birder typically must make a longer time commitment in the autumn. The chances of finding a vagrant on any *given day* are typically greater in late May and early-to-middle June than in August, September, or October. Another factor is the increased difficulty in finding low-density migrants and vagrants in the relatively lush vegetation of early fall. In spring, there is only sparse cover provided by dead plants, and the remaining snow further concentrates migrants to those open patches that have thawed.

Despite these drawbacks, fall birding in much of coastal Alaska can be thrilling. In addition to the potentially large number of regular migrants, the composition of Old World species in fall is different from that of spring. For example, such species as Middendorff's Grasshopper-Warbler (*Locustella ochotensis*), Siberian Accentor (*Prunella montanella*), and Little Bunting (*Emberiza pusilla*) are more likely to occur in Alaska during the fall than in spring. The only two North American records of Yellow-browed Warbler (*Phylloscopus inornatus*) come from Gambell in autumn 1999 and 2002 (Lehman 2000a, 2000c, Tobish 2000a, 2003). A substantially greater number of mainland North American breeding species wander west or northwest out to the offshore islands in fall than in spring. These birds include a number of species never reported in Asia. At Gambell in just the past five years, examples include Least Flycatcher (*Empidonax minimus*), Pacific-slope/Cordilleran ("Western") Flycatcher (*E. difficilis/occidentalis*), Warbling Vireo (*Vireo gilvus*), Tennessee Warbler (*Vermivora peregrina*), Magnolia Warbler (*Dendroica magnolia*), MacGillivray's Warbler (*Oporornis tolmiei*), and Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) (Tobish 1999, 2000a, 2002, 2003). Further, a good understanding of the sizable fall seabird movements through the Bering Sea is still in its fledgling stage. Finally, autumn visits to western Alaska provide the opportunity to study and photograph a number of species in juvenal and fresh fall plumages not normally seen by many North American birders.

Fall Migration at Gambell

Gambell, Alaska, is a Siberian Yupik village on Saint Lawrence Island and is home to some 700 people. It lies approximately 300 km (190 mi) west-southwest of Nome, and only 65 km (40 mi) from the closest point on the Chukotsk Peninsula on the Siberian mainland (Figure 1). Within and bordering the village are three major midden sites (known by both the local residents and visiting birders as "the boneyards"), as well as several other areas

of disturbed ground (Figure 2). These areas are characterized by relatively lush vegetation dominated by Northern Wormwood/Tall Wormwood (*Artemisia tilesii*) and Arctic Sage/Arctic Wormwood (*A. arctica*), which are mint-like plants that by late summer grow to a height of up to a half-meter. This growth is a magnet to passerines in autumn, particularly to such regular migrants as Arctic Warbler (*Phylloscopus borealis*), Bluethroat (*Luscinia svecica*), Gray-cheeked Thrush (*Catharus minimus*), and Red-throated (*Anthus cervinus*) and American (*A. rubescens*) Pipits, as well as to most of the vagrant landbirds from both Asia and mainland North America. Many of these birds are shy and difficult to see easily in this cover. Two of the three boneyards are located near the base of 187-meter (614-foot) Sevuokuk Mountain, which may act as a barrier to some landbirds that might otherwise continue moving farther east. Other migrants that arrive elsewhere on the island may work their way to the northwest tip at Gambell.

Following some limited autumn fieldwork on Saint Lawrence Island through 1969, summarized by Fay and Cade (1959) and Sealy et al. (1971), several observers visited Gambell for less than a week in late August or early September 1975, 1989, 1992, 1993, 1994, and 1996. I have led birding tours there, each lasting up to a week, in late August 1992 and annually from 1997 through 2002. In 1998, I remained at Gambell after the tour concluded, through 8 September. In 1999, I remained a total of 45 days, until 3 October. Gary Rosenberg, Scott Terrill, and others filled in for me after the tour in 2000, remaining until 15 September. In 2001, I returned for an extended stay, from 23 August through 1 October, and was joined for part of that time by Nelson Dobbs, Steve Mlodinow, and others. In 2002, I remained from 23 August until 2 October, and was joined for short periods by George L. Armistead, Dona Coates, Bob Dodelson, and David Sonneborn. In addition, bird photographer Don Cunningham has visited Gambell between early August and early October in six separate years between 1993 and 2001 and has documented a number of important records. This relatively recent autumn coverage at Gambell has not begun in earnest earlier than 20 August, however. Thus, the early fall migration period is still poorly known.

A number of landbird species with primarily Old World distributions nest in mainland Alaska—a few also do so in small numbers on Saint Lawrence Island—but then return west in late summer and early fall to winter in Southeast Asia or Africa. These birds, known as "trans-Beringian" migrants, include such species as Arctic Warbler, Bluethroat, Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*), Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*), and Red-throated Pipit. Their peak numbers occur at Gambell between early August and early September. Another trans-Beringian migrant, the Gray-cheeked Thrush, has nesting populations in northeastern Siberia that head eastward in fall, back into North America.

Most of the Old World vagrant passerines found at Gambell breed no farther north than Russia's western Anadyr River basin and Koryak Highlands, located about 800 km (500 mi) west-southwest and 950+ km (600+ mi) southwest of Saint Lawrence Island, respectively. Very few of these species breed as far north as the Chukotsk Peninsula, where several species of Asian waterbirds that have occurred at Gambell undoubtedly do originate.

The number and variety of migrant shorebirds and landbirds present at Gambell, as well as the numbers of seabirds visible off the tip of Northwest Cape ("the Point"), are highly dependent upon weather conditions. Local weather data covering wind speed and direction, temperature, and cloud cover were collected by the author and others on a daily basis during autumn visits between 1999 and 2002. Low overcast and rain tend to ground shorebirds and trans-Beringian migrants. Rain occurring in the late-night and early-morning hours appears to increase the chances for good landbird counts and the appearance of vagrants. North and northeast winds often produce the largest numbers of seabirds close to

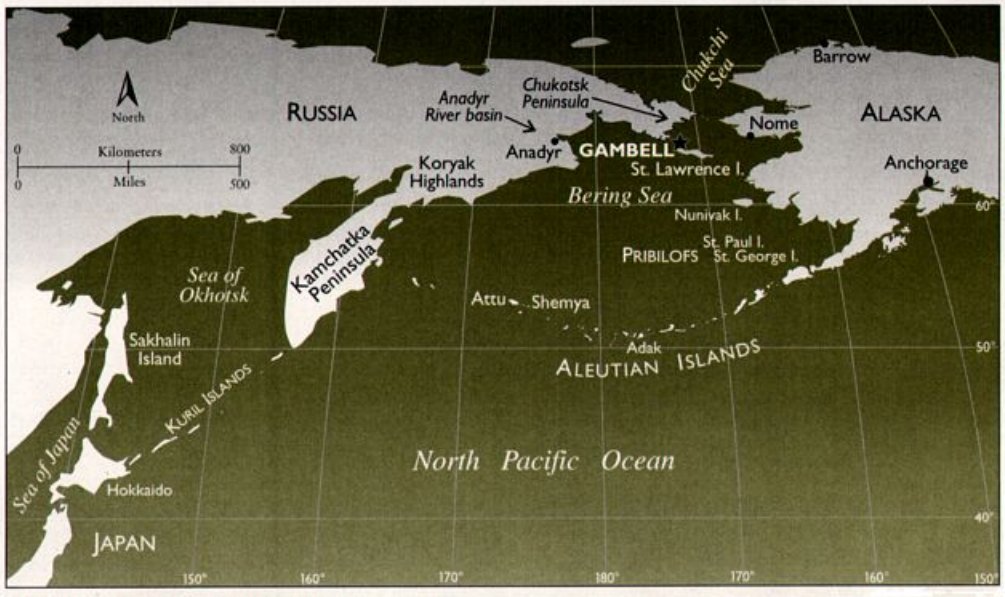


Figure 1. Map showing the Bering Sea region, western Alaska, and the Russian Far East. Gambell is located at the northwestern tip of Saint Lawrence Island and is only some 65 kilometers (40 miles) from the Chukotsk Peninsula in Siberia. Most of the Asian landbird vagrants that have been found in spring and fall at Gambell and elsewhere in the central and northern Bering Sea nest as far north as the Koryak Highlands or Anadyr River basin, but not on the Chukotsk. *Map by Virginia Maynard.*

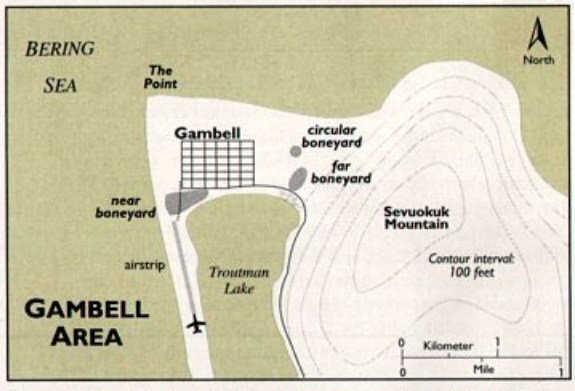
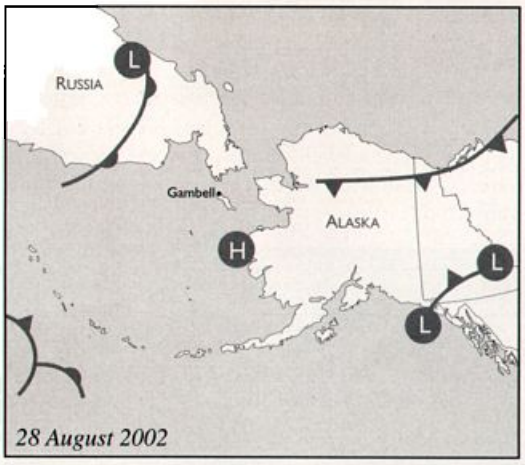
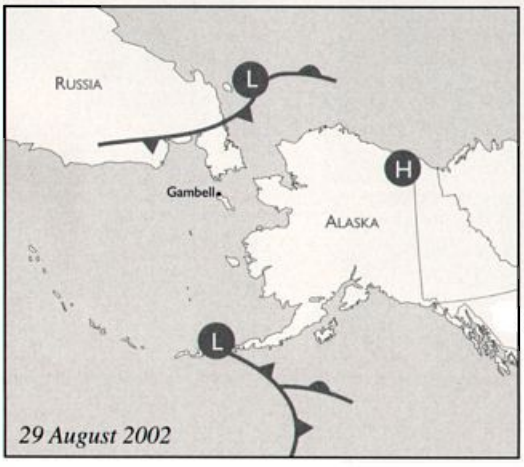


Figure 2. Map of the Gambell village area, showing three of the principal sites for migrant passerines: the "near," "far" and "circular" boneyards (middens). Most seabird watching takes place from "the Point," the tip of Saint Lawrence Island's Northwest Cape. Sevuokuk Mountain, lying immediately to the east, may act to impede the dispersal of some landbird transients. This barrier, combined with the otherwise sparse vegetation and extensive gravel that characterizes the village area, helps to further concentrate migrants and vagrants in the boneyards. *Adapted from a map by Cindy Lippincott.*





Figures 3 & 4. Weather maps for 28 August (top) and 29 August (bottom) 2002. On the 28th, Saint Lawrence Island was dominated by high-pressure centered immediately to the south. The area enjoyed a relatively rare calm, sunny day with gentle westerly breezes developing. That evening saw the appearance of a Reed Bunting *(Emberiza schoeniclus)*, the first U.S. record north of the Aleutians and the first for autumn in the state. On the 29th, the high had moved to the northeast and low-pressure areas were centered over the base of the Aleutians and over the Chukchi Sea, as a trailing cold front from the latter approached. The clockwise circulation around the high and southwesterly flow ahead of the cold front combined to produce moderate southwesterly winds at Gambell of up to 40 kph (25 mph) all day, and with a lowering deck of stratus clouds. By late in the day, the continuing Reed Bunting had been joined by a Dusky Warbler *(Phylloscopus fuscatus)* and a record-early Siberian Accentor *(Prunella montanella)*. All three birds—as well as the Willow Warbler present since 25 August—remained the morning of the 30th, when there were light southwesterly winds and a low ceiling, and were joined by North America's second Yellow-browed Warbler *(P. inornatus)*, which could conceivably have arrived on the 29th as well.

shore. But those same winds tend to suppress the occurrence of most Asian strays.

My visit during the autumn of 1999, for example, saw 29 of 45 days characterized by north and northeast winds, and only four Asian landbirds were found: Oriental Cuckoo (*Cuculus saturatus*), Siberian Accentor, and Little Bunting, along with the first North American record of Yellow-browed Warbler (Lehman 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, Tobish 2000a). In contrast, westerly-to-southerly winds prevailed on 21 of 42 days in the fall of 2002 (e.g., Figures 3 & 4), and that year produced an exceptional number and variety of Asian landbird strays: three first records for North America—Willow Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, and Spotted Flycatcher—as well as Oriental Cuckoo, Sky Lark (*Alauda arvensis*), four Dusky Warblers (*Phylloscopus fuscatus*), Yellow-browed Warbler, three Siberian Accentors, Tree Pipit (*Anthus trivialis*), Reed Bunting (*Emberiza schoeniclus*), and two Little Buntings (Tobish 2003). These same winds probably also played a role, however, in a below-average season for seabirds and shorebirds.

Many North American mainland strays are probably most likely to arrive on winds from between the south and northeast. But some rarities turn up in just about any weather, with a number of Asian birds having been found on days with light easterly winds, and some North American strays turning up on days with westerly or northerly winds. There are, of course, factors other than the weather at work that shape a given year's migration. These include the timing and success of the nesting season, which can vary greatly from year to year in the Arctic, and such intangibles as chance and observer luck.

THREE NORTH AMERICAN FIRSTS

The autumn of 2002 at Gambell was exceptional for both Asian and North American landbird strays. Three first records for North America were discovered: Willow Warbler (25-30 August), Lesser Whitethroat (8-9 September), and Spotted Flycatcher (14 September). All three were extensively videotaped by the author; photographs of the first and last were also taken: by George L. Armistead and Stavros Christodoulides (Willow Warbler) and by David Sonneborn (Spotted Flycatcher). Documentation and discussion for each of these three birds follows.

WILLOW WARBLER
(Phylloscopus trochilus)
25-30 August 2002

Details

The following account was taken from my notes written on 26 August 2002.

"I first saw this bird for about five seconds on 25 August in the 'near boneyard but it could not be relocated despite much searching. My first impression was of a Chiffchaff-type *Phylloscopus*: a bird with dark legs, no wingbars, and dull upperparts, with the only green color obvious in some of the flight feathers, a pale supercilium, dark eyeline, and a grayish wash to the crown and nape. At this point all I knew is that a great bird had gotten away and we figured that was the end of that...

But on 26 August I miraculously refound the bird (or perhaps a new bird?) over a mile and a half away along the east shore of Troutman Lake, where the bird remained from mid-afternoon until dark and afforded all in the group excellent, point-blank, extended views, and where it was videotaped and photographed (front cover, Figures 5-7) by myself, George L. Armistead, and Stavros Christodoulides.

A *Phylloscopus* that appeared just slightly larger/longer than an Arctic Warbler. Actively feeding on the ground and in very low vegetation. A very distinct off-whitish supercilium extended, depending on the angle and how the feathers were held, to just behind the eye or to farther behind the eye; this pale color met over the top of the bill in a thin line. Distinct dark eyeline from lores to behind eye, and usually a somewhat distinct pale crescent under eye. Pale-ish lower auriculars below the crescent. Chin and upper throat whitish, center and lower throat and upper breast washed with a pale, clear yellow (more or less obvious depending on the lighting, whether the bird was in the open or amongst vegetation, etc.), which combined with the face pattern to sometimes impart the look of a spring Philadelphia Vireo when the bird was facing head on. Remainder of the underparts whitish except for a light dusky wash of variable intensity that extended from the sides of the upper breast out on to the breast just below the yellow wash (sometimes quite apparent, sometimes hard to see) and for a light buffy-yellow wash around the leg region extending across the lower vent; but the more distal undertail coverts were, again, whitish. Crown a dull, pale brown-gray, slightly grayer nape, but back and rump clearly tinged with dull green. Wings showed dull greenish to flight feathers, one very faint wingbar, and a blackish alula. Unmarked tertials slightly darker [than most of the wing], and the primaries were darker, with pale tips to each individual exposed primary. The primary extension was substantial, equal to the length of the tertials or at least about 90 percent of the tertial length, which gave

the primaries a long, pointed shape; they extended down part of the length of the tail. Outer two *visible* primary tips followed inward by a sizeable gap, then at least five exposed inner primary tips beyond the longest tertial, perhaps six. Central rectrices showed pointed tips, indicative of a young bird (?). The bill was dark except for a pale base to the lower mandible, usually noticeable only when one could see up under the bill. Legs were dark, a brownish-gray [not truly blackish]—thus my initial thought the first day and early on the second that the bird was probably a Chiffchaff *[P. collybita]*—with paler, more brownish-horn feet, and even paler soles to the feet; this pale color extended upwards slightly on the back of the lower leg, just above the 'heel.' Darkish eye. Upon alighting, the bird would often pump its tail downward once or twice. Most of the remainder of the time it would not pump its tail except a few times when particularly active or unsteady. Silent."

The bird [or another?] was seen again by Armistead on 29 August, now in the 'circular boneyard,' one and a half miles back to the north from where it was on the 26th, and almost a mile to the east from where it was on the 25th. It was seen well again in the circular boneyard by both of us on 30 August [when we saw it sometimes very close to a Yellow-browed Warbler!]. Exactly how many Willow Warblers were involved? Taking the conservative approach, I assume that just one bird was present 25-30 August; but conceivably there may have been as many as three birds involved (25 August, 26 August, and 29-30 August)." [A few fall rarities at Gambell over the years have moved between the various boneyards, although this bird's traveling well down the shore of the lake makes it even a much greater wanderer.]

Discussion

Plumage characters narrow the choices down to Willow Warbler and Chiffchaff. The identification as Willow Warbler is based on a number of characters, the most important of which is the primary extension and spacing, which is diagnostic (Svensson 1992, Baker 1997, Mullarney et al. 1999). In Willow Warbler, the primary extension is at least three-quarters that of tertial length, whereas in Chiffchaff this extension is only half that of the tertials. There tends to be a noticeable gap in the spacing in the primaries (between P7 and P6 and especially P6 and P5, when the primaries are numbered ascendently) in Willow Warbler (Svensson 1992), not so in Chiffchaff, and Willow Warbler has fewer emarginations to the individual primaries, such as P6 (C. Kehoe, pers. comm). These differences may be difficult or impossible to see in the field, and initially the primary projection and spacing were difficult to ascertain on the Gambell bird. But given the bird's cooperative behavior on 26 August, these characters were easily captured on video and in photographs. We were able to study slow-motion, close-up video of the bird that same day, while the bird was present, and determine with certainty that its primaries matched those of Willow Warbler. The greenish tones above, pale lower auriculars, and the light yellow wash below also strongly favor Willow Warbler over Chiffchaff—particularly the eastern population of the latter, "Siberian Chiffchaff" (*P. c. tristis*), which lacks these green and yellow tones.

Comments on the identification of this bird as a Willow Warbler, based on videotape, photos, and written details I supplied, were received from experts here in North America and in Europe, including Lars Svensson and Per Alström in Sweden and Colin Bradshaw and Chris Kehoe in the U.K., and all concurred with the species identification. There is some uncertainty, however, concerning the *sub*species involved. The most likely subspecies to occur based on distributional ground—*P. t. yakutensis*—typically is slightly duller than this bird appeared, lacking almost any greenish tones above (except to the flight feathers) and any yellowish tones below. The next most likely subspecies based on distribution, *P. t. acredula,* may be a closer fit, but even it is not a perfect match. The Gambell bird may best fit within populations of easterly *acredula* or in the borderland between *acredula* and *yakutensis* (L. Svensson, pers. comm.). Plumage and bare-part color variation in the eastern forms of this species is not well known (C. Bradshaw, C. Kehoe, L. Svensson, pers. comm.).

The bird's darkish legs initially confused us. Almost all nominate Willow Warblers in Europe have pale legs and feet, whereas

Figures 5-7. This Willow Warbler *(Phylloscopus trochilus)* was found at Gambell, Saint Lawrence Island, Alaska 25-30 August 2002 (photographed here 26 August), establishing the first record for North America. Note the plain upperparts with limited dull greenish tones, the distinct pale supercilium extending somewhat behind the eye, pale lower auriculars, single very faint wingbar, and pale yellow wash to the lower throat and upper breast. The most important character visible here that can be used to separate this species from the similar-looking Chiffchaff *(P. collybita)* is the long primary extension (almost as long as the length of the tertials) and the noticeable gap in the spacing of the primaries. The dark-looking legs are unusual for Willow Warbler, but this is a character that may be more prevalent in the eastern populations of this species. See also the cover photograph. *Photographs by George L. Armistead and from videotape by Paul E. Lehman.*

Figures 8 & 9. Lesser Whitethroat *(Sylvia curruca)* is a distinctive species. This individual established the first North American record not only of the species but also of the genus. It was present at Gambell 8-9 September 2002. Lesser Whitethroat taxonomy has been the subject of debate for many years; some authorities split the complex into three separate species groups. *Photographs from videotape by Paul E. Lehman.*

Chiffchaffs and only very rarely a nominate Willow Warbler have dark legs and feet (C. Bradshaw, pers. comm.). It appears, however, that a larger, though still unknown, percent of Asian birds—races *acredula* and *yakutensis*—may show dark legs, and such birds have been banded and photographed at the Pechora River delta in Russia (N. D. van Swelm, pers. comm.) and in Japan (Maki and Onishi 2000; M. A. Brazil, pers. comm.; N. Lethaby, pers. comm.).

Willow Warbler is a long-distance migrant that breeds as far east in Russia as the western Anadyr River basin (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1954, Vaurie 1959, Cramp et al. 1992, Baker 1997), only about 650 km (400 mi) from the Bering Strait (Figure 12). The race *acredula* breeds east approximately to the Lena basin, where it intergrades with *yakutensis*, which breeds farther northeast, as far as the Kolyma and Anadyr rivers (Baker 1997). As such, Willow Warbler shares an eastern breeding range with the Yellow-browed Warbler and a number of other species that have been found in western Alaska. This species had been anticipated in Alaska by some authorities (e.g., Tobish 2000b). Most of the Asian-breeding population winters far to the west, in eastern and southern Africa. This strong east-west component to the migration may help to bring a late-spring overshoot or an autumn reverse migrant to Saint Lawrence Island and points north (Tobish 2000b). Vagrant Willow Warblers have been recorded in fall in Japan (O.S.J. 2000; M. A. Brazil, pers. comm.; N. Lethaby, pers. comm.), mostly from Hegura Island. The first record for the country, from Kyushu in October 1981, involved a bird of the subspecies *P. t. yakutensis* (O.S.J. 2000).

For many years, Willow Warbler was on the North American list, with a specimen reported taken at Barrow, Alaska, on 10 June 1952 (Pitelka 1974). This specimen was subsequently re-identified, however, as an Arctic Warbler (Roberson and Pitelka 1983, A.O.U. 1998).

LESSER WHITETHROAT
(Sylvia curruca)
8-9 September 2002

Details

This bird was found in the "far boneyard" during the early afternoon of 8 September 2002. I saw the bird repeatedly over 8 and 9 September. No other birders were present at Gambell during the bird's two-day stay, so I was the sole observer. But I was able to obtain good videotape of the bird on 8 September (Figures 8 & 9). The identification of the bird as a Lesser Whitethroat is straightforward. However, a number of taxonomists and others have recently split the Lesser Whitethroat into three separate species, so determining the subspecies/species group involved may be important (see discussion below). Field notes follow.

"A *Sylvia*-type warbler, with a slightly longer, narrower tail than a typical *Phylloscopus*. Small dark bill. Dark legs. I first flushed it up out of far boneyard, where it perched on a boulder, at which time I immediately identified it as a Lesser Whitethroat, having seen many previously in Israel and a smaller number in Europe. Most distinctive was the very dark gray face—giving the bird a masked look, and which curved down slightly in the rear auricular region. Crown a distinct pale-to-medium gray (unmarked), which contrasted somewhat (depending on lighting and distance) with a slightly browner-gray unmarked back, rump, and warm-brownish wings. The tail, in turn, contrasted appreciably darker, and in flight it showed extensive white to the outer rectrices. The effect of tail shape and general color (darkness with extensive white) combined with general upperpart color imparted a somewhat gnatcatcher-like look when the bird was seen flying away and about to land. Clean white throat and center of underparts. Flanks showed light tan-brownish wash, which in turn contrasted with clean white undertail coverts. An active feeder, keeping mostly out of view, and making only relatively brief appearances in the open. Called a few times and gave a single-syllable hard call (*tic* or *tit*) that was slightly softer (though still a hard note) and quieter than the hard call-note being given occasionally by the nearby Dusky Warbler. Videotaped on 8 September."

Discussion

As stated above, the identification of this bird as a Lesser Whitethroat in the broad sense is straightforward. All experts who viewed the video of the bird agreed with the identification. Determining the *sub*species is much more difficult, however. The taxonomy of the Lesser Whitethroat complex has been the subject of debate for many years. Most authorities recognize nine or ten subspecies (Baker 1997, Clements 2000, Shirihai et al. 2001), although that number ranges from five to twelve (King 1998). These forms can be placed into approximately three groups, but the distributions of the various subspecies are complex and incompletely known (King 1998, Money 2000). Lesser Whitethroats (in the broad sense) winter from central Africa east to India and Sri Lanka (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1954 Vaurie 1959, Cramp et al. 1992, Baker 1997). The race *blythi* breeds east to just east of Lake Baikal and is thought to winter primarily in India and Pakistan (Baker 1997). It is the most likely form to occur

Figures 10 & 11. Spotted Flycatcher *(Muscicapa striata)* photographed at Gambell on 14 September 2002. Like the Lesser Whitethroat, it was a total surprise when it was found at Gambell. It can be separated from other *Muscicapa* flycatchers by the distinct, sharp dark streaks on the forehead and forecrown, the plain-looking face with a weak pale eyering and no pale loral stripe, and the proportionately large, entirely dark bill. *Photographs from videotape by Paul E. Lehman.*

in Alaska based on distribution, although the closest breeding sites are still at least 4000 km (2500 mi) away (Figure 13). This was not a species that had been predicted to occur in North America.

The *curruca* or "taiga" group, including nominate *curruca* and Siberian *blythi*, are colloquially known as "Northern Lesser Whitethroat" or just "Lesser Whitethroat." This group contains the northernmost breeders, which tend to show distinctive dark masks and warm-brownish wings. When the Gambell bird was in subdued light, the strong, warm-brown tones to the wing, and the size and darkness of the mask, strongly suggest *blythi/curruca*. In bright light, however, the bird appeared a bit more washed out. This variation can be seen easily when viewing the complete videotape footage. I believe the Gambell bird is a good match for the illustration of *blythi* found in Porter et al. (1996). Call-notes also match, and such vocalizations may help to separate some of the races (Money 2000).

The *minula* group of Lesser Whitethroats, colloquially known as "Desert Lesser Whitethroat" or "Small Whitethroat," is made up of several southerly-breeding subspecies that breed north to northern China. Compared to the first group, they tend to be slightly smaller overall, paler (sandier) above and creamier below, with a weaker mask, and a slightly different call (Svensson 1992, Porter et al. 1996, Baker 1997, Money 2000, Pettersson 2001, Shirihai et al. 2001). Vagrants have been reported in Western Europe. The *althaea* group, known as "Hume's [Lesser] Whitethroat," is restricted to mountains from Iran to India. "Hume's" is extremely unlikely to occur in North America based on distributional grounds and is eliminated on the basis of its larger size, much grayer (slate-gray) plumage, and more obvious pale edges to the coverts and tertials (Porter et al. 1996, Baker 1997, Shirihai et al. 2001).

Several authorities (e.g., Sibley 1996, Clements 2000) have already acted to split Lesser Whitethroat into these three separate groups. Others (e.g., Cramp et al. 1992, Shirihai et al. 2001) believe such a split to be premature until several intermediate races (e.g., *halimodendri*) between the *curruca* and *minula* groups can be properly assigned. On the subspecies level, some authorities lump *blythi* in with nominate *curruca*, others believe it is at least a weakly differentiated race that is marginally browner above; all keep these two forms together in the same subspecies group, even if there is a three-way taxonomic split in the species overall.

One of the foremost experts on this species complex, Lars Svensson (pers. comm.), believes the Gambell bird to be *blythi* or nominate *curruca*, or possibly *halimodendri/telengitica*, but not *minula* or *althaea*. Colin Bradshaw (pers. comm.), Chair of the British Birds Rarities Committee, believes the bird looks like *curruca* or *blythi*, but he also states that the British committee will likely require that birds reported as "Desert Lesser Whitethroats" in the U.K. be trapped and full biometrics be obtained.

There are at least two records of Lesser Whitethroat from Japan—in October 1994 and February 1998 (Maki and Onishi 2000), one for Korea (Lee et al. 2000), and five or six records from Thailand as well (G. L. Armistead, pers. comm.). The subspecies group or groups involved, if known, were not specified.

SPOTTED FLYCATCHER
(Muscicapa striata)
14 September 2002

Details

I first spotted this bird in the circular boneyard during the mid-afternoon of 14 September 2002, immediately identified the bird as a *Muscicapa* flycatcher of some sort, and quickly called to David Sonneborn (the only other birder with me at Gambell that day), who was some 50 feet away, to come over and see it. The bird remained at this site for the remainder of the day, allowing us repeated fine views and the opportunity for videography (Lehman; Figures 10 & 11) and photography (Sonneborn).

At first, we were not sure which species of *Muscicapa* it was. Most views initially were either relatively brief or at a moderate distance. (Later on, the bird would provide us with close-up, extended views.) We first considered the three species of Asian *Muscicapa* that had been recorded in Alaska previously: Siberian Flycatcher (*M. sibirica*), Gray-spotted Flycatcher (*M. griseisticta*), and Asian Brown Flycatcher (*M. dauurica*). There is one previous record of Asian Brown Flycatcher at Gambell—in June 1994—but there are no other *Muscicapa* records there, or from anywhere north of Saint Paul Island in the central Bering Sea. Initially, we tried to pigeonhole the bird into one of these three species. But it showed conflicting field characters. After obtaining some videotape, I returned to my room at the lodge where I had several important references

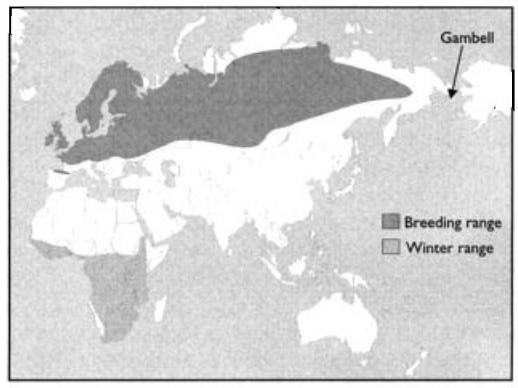


Figure 12: Breeding and winter ranges of Willow Warbler. The former extends eastward to the western Anadyr River basin, only some 650 km (400 mi) from the Bering Strait. The entire population of this species is thought to winter in sub-Saharan Africa. The substantial east-west component to the migration of this species' Asian populations would allow for a mirror-image vagrant to occur in western Alaska in fall, or for an overshoot to occur in spring. *Map by Virginia Maynard.*

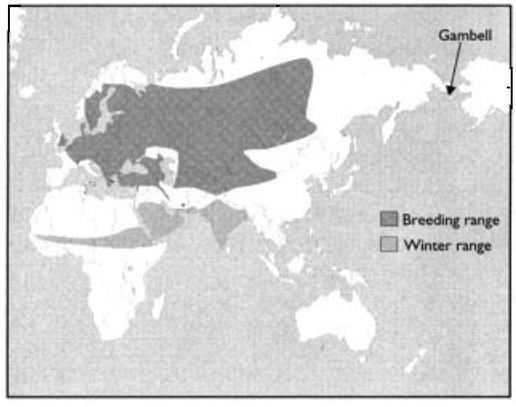


Figure 13. Breeding and winter ranges of the Lesser Whitethroat. This species breeds no closer to Gambell than just east of Lake Baikal, some 4000 km (2500 mi) away. *Map by Virginia Maynard.*

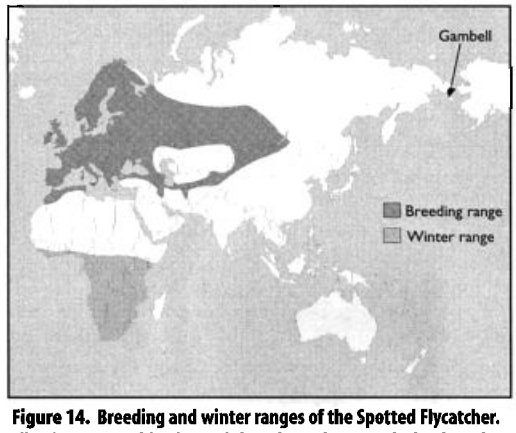


Figure 14. Breeding and winter ranges of the Spotted Flycatcher. Like the Lesser Whitethroat, it breeds no closer to Alaska than the Lake Baikal region. And like the Willow Warbler, it is known to winter only in tropical Africa, and thus shares a strong east-west component to its migration. Mirror-image vagrancy might explain its remarkable occurrence in the northern Bering Sea region in autumn. *Map by Virginia Maynard.*

(e.g., Alström and Hirschfeld 1991, Mullarney et al. 1999). At this point, the idea that the bird better fit Spotted Flycatcher entered my mind (I had seen this species previously in Europe and Israel), so I returned to the bird a bit wiser. It did not take long for us to obtain our best views yet. We confirmed all of the characters stated below; and, now for the first time, looked for and clearly observed the distinct dark streaks present on the bird's forehead and forecrown. Field notes on the Spotted Flycatcher follow, written 14 September 2002.

"A *Muscicapa* flycatcher found in the p.m. in the circular boneyard. Excellent views were obtained repeatedly over a period of a couple hours, as the bird was relatively easy to follow and watched perched and feeding. It would regularly hover and glean food from plants, and it would also fly up to three or four feet off the ground and hover in the air, looking side to side, for a couple or so seconds—behaving much in this regard like a Mountain Bluebird [*Sialia currucoides*]. At rest, it fairly regularly flicked its tail up and then back down, but it only rarely flicked its wings. Pale, unmarked dirty grayish above, except for *distinct dark, well-defined (not blurry or faint) dark streaks (visible at close to medium range) on forehead and forecrown.* Crown feathers often held flat, sometimes peaked upwards slightly. Nape and back were a plain, dull, pale gray. Wings showed a very distinct narrow whitish wingbar at tips of greater coverts and distinct whitish edgings to tertials and *all* the secondaries, especially. Tail a bit darker, with outer pale web occasionally visible when bird in flight. Face had a distinct dark eye with *dull* pale, narrow, circular eyering (*not* whitish) and absolutely *no* suggestion of a pale spot or line in loral area—all of which imparted a plain-faced look to the bird (except for the dark eye). Bill appeared proportionately large and long and entirely blackish, with no pale color apparent on the lower mandible. Throat whitish with dusky malar (submoustachial) line. The pale color of the lower throat extended slightly back below auriculars, a pattern somewhat as in Myrtle Warbler, but was shorter and narrower. The upper breast was crossed by rather faint but clearly visible dusky vertical streaks and mixed with a dull wash of dirty light tan-gray. Remainder of the underparts unmarked and whiter, with the flanks being unmarked as well but with a small wash of dull buff on the inner flank that was often concealed by the leading edge of the folded wing. Primary extension appeared to be about one-quarter of the way down the tail. Legs and feet blackish. Silent."

Discussion

Spotted Flycatchers breed east only as far as the Lake Baikal area (western "Transbaykalia"), and they winter in sub-Saharan Africa (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1954, Vaurie 1959, Cramp and Perrins 1993; Figure 14). This species, like the Lesser Whitethroat, was not expected to occur in North America. Unlike Lesser Whitethroat and Willow Warbler, there are as yet no records from Japan (M. A. Brazil, pers. comm.). The easternmost, Siberian race of Spotted Flycatcher is *M. s. neumanni,* which Cramp and Perrins (1993) describes as slightly paler gray above and whiter below than nominate *striata* of Europe. Videotape of the Gambell bird matches this paler coloration overall. Upon viewing the videotape, Colin Bradshaw and Will Russell (pers. comm.) thought the bird was paler (more gray and less brown) than typical European birds, and perhaps with a bolder pale wing panel than European birds, but still within the variation possible in the latter.

As stated above, the plain face with very weak pale eye-ring and lack of a pale loral stripe, proportionately long bill lacking any noticeable pale color to the lower mandible, distinct pale edgings to the wing, lack of streaking on the flanks, and especially the distinct dark streaks to the forehead and forecrown combine to eliminate the other three species of *Muscicapa* flycatchers.

Despite the great distances (at least 4000 km [2500 mi]) from Gambell to the closest point in the breeding range—in the Lake Baikal region—this species, like the Willow Warbler, is a long-distance migrant that winters in tropical Africa. Thus, birds breeding in Asia show a strong initial movement to the west in their fall migration. This might allow for mirror-image vagrancy to explain such an occurrence in western Alaska.

Postscript

Following the receipt of videotape, photographs, written documentation, and written comments I had solicited from a number of experts, the Alaska Checklist Committee in November 2002 voted unanimously to accept the Willow Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, and Spotted Flycatcher to the Alaska List. These three species became numbers 467, 468, and 469 on this list (D. D. Gibson, pers. comm.). The Committee accepted these birds at the species level only, however. "At the same time we recognize real limitations in identifying to subspecies with certainty—even in hand—vagrant individuals of many polytypic species, and we are therefore unwilling to attempt to pursue these identifications to the subspecies level based on the photographs. If in the future *Sylvia curruca* is to be divided into multiple species, we would refer to this sight and photograph record as one of '*Sylvia curruca sensu lato*' or of '*Sylvia curruca* (*sensu* Vaurie 1959)'." These three records are still pending in the ABA Checklist Committee.

Acknowledgments

Comments on the identification of one or more of these records were provided by Per Alström, George L. Armistead, Colin Bradshaw, Darrell Clegg, Alan Dean, Julian Hough, Chris Kehoe, Nick Lethaby, Steve Madge, Will Russell, David Sonneborn, Lars Svensson, and Norman van Swelm. References and other information were furnished by Mark Brazil, Don Cunningham, and Thede Tobish. Additional photographs of the Gambell Willow Warbler were provided by George L. Armistead and Stavros Christodoulides. Troy and Kathie Klunder of Gambell assisted with the copying of important autumn 2002 videotape while I was on the island Laurie Larson provided invaluable computer help in downloading images. Comments on earlier drafts of the manuscript were given by Colin Bradshaw, Mark Brazil, Don Cunningham, Robb Hamilton, Steve Heinl, Chris Kehoe, Gary Rosenberg, Brad Schram, and Thede Tobish.

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