Two Western Bonelli’s Warblers Phylloscopus bonelli from Christiansø, Denmark, confirmed by DNA

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Two Western Bonelli's Warblers *Phylloscopus bonelli* from Christiansø, Denmark, confirmed by DNA

**Kasper Thorup, Troels Eske Ortvad and Knud A. Jønsson**

Western *Phylloscopus bonelli* and Eastern Bonelli's Warblers *P. orientalis* occur as vagrants in northwest Europe. Up until 2006, a total of ten Western and five Eastern Bonelli's warblers were recorded in Norway, Sweden and Finland. Only recently have the two taxa attained full species rank, primarily based on differences in DNA, but also in differences in vocalization and minor differences in morphology (BOU 1997).

The two Bonelli's warblers are very similar and identification in the field and even in the hand can prove very difficult. Consequently, many records of vagrants have not been assigned to species, thus obscuring the occurrence pattern of the two species. The Danish Ornithological Society's Rarities Committee is currently reconsidering all records of Bonelli's warblers.

The best way to tell the two species apart in the field is by the contact- and alarm calls, which are strikingly different between the species. The song, on the contrary, are very similar but can perhaps be separated based on sonograms (Helb et al. 1982, Snow & Perrins 1998). Identification based on plumage characters alone is generally considered very difficult, although – at least in spring – there appear to be minor but consistent differences in the coloration of the upper body and the fringes of the greater wing-coverts (Occhiato 2007). The two species also show minor differences in wing length and wing formula, Western Bonelli's Warbler having a shorter wing (57-68 mm), compared to 63.5-73 mm for Eastern Bonelli's Warbler (Svensson 1992). However, the two species differ by 8% in the cytochrome-b gene region – a substantial difference, equivalent to the difference between either species and the Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix* (Hellbig et al. 1995). A difference of this magnitude makes identification based on DNA straightforward and reliable.

To this day, the Danish Rarities Committee has accepted 14 Danish records of Bonelli's warblers, comprising nine individuals caught at ringing stations and five field observations. Four of the ringed birds had wing lengths below the range of Eastern Bonelli's Warbler, four had intermediate wing lengths, while no measurements were taken from the last bird. Only one of the birds observed in the field has been identified to species: a singing male Western Bonelli's Warbler at Dollerup Bakker 23/5-5/6 1990, which was also heard calling.

Here we consider the identification of two Bonelli's warblers trapped on the island of Christiansø in eastern Denmark on 25/8 1990 and 17/10 1991, respectively (the

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latter (Fig. 1) also seen on 18/10). For both the wing length indicated Western Bonelli’s Warbler. DNA from blood samples from the two birds was sequenced and compared to DNA sequences from Genbank. Fragments (375 and 380 base pairs) of the mitochondrial gene cytochrome-b clearly demonstrate that both individuals were Western Bonelli’s Warblers (Table 1).

Thus, until now only Western Bonelli’s Warbler has been recorded with certainty in Denmark. Eastern Bonelli’s Warbler remains a great rarity in Northwest Europe, whereas the western species is more common and in addition seems to be expanding its range northwards (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997).

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Occhiato, D. 2007: Western and Eastern Bonelli’s Warblers in the field. – Birding World 20: 303-308.

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