



## Moussier's Redstart: new to Britain and Ireland

*Mike Barrett*

On 24th April 1988, I was one of a party of five following the Pembrokeshire Coast Path northwards at Dinas Head in Dyfed, southwest Wales. Also known as Dinas Island, although it is actually joined to the coast by a low-lying stretch of land, Dinas Head is a high, rocky promontory which separates Fishguard and Newport Bays. Our leader was Graham Walker, the day was fine with some distant haze, and there was a cool but intermittent easterly wind.

By the early part of the afternoon, we were halfway around the headland, not far past the stone triangulation pillar. I had been watching a male Stonechat *Saxicola torquata* darting backwards and forwards across the gorse *Ulex* in what seemed to be some agitation; the other members of the group had moved on, and I was about to follow after a final sweep of the area with my binoculars. The Stonechat again drew my attention with his behaviour, and it was then that I noticed another small bird which had appeared on a rock nearby. My instinctive reaction—that it was a male Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*—was almost immediately revised when I saw that the bird's crown and upperparts were completely black, with a pronounced white eyebrow extending across the forehead, and down the side of its 'face' to its neck, and that there was also a vivid white wing-patch. The body and tail were orange, the wings black, and the general impression was strongly that of a redstart of some sort. The bird was visible for less than two minutes before the Stonechat—accompanied by his mate—put it to flight. By now, I had called the other members of the party back, but only two of them had seen the bird. After what seemed an interminable few minutes, however, it obligingly reappeared and we were all then able to obtain fine views for much of the next hour, during which time I obtained a series of photographs (plates 46-49). Although there was some uncertainty as to identification—a tentative assessment as a male Moussier's Redstart *P. moussieri* was not confirmed until later, with the help of field guides—there was no uncertainty at all that this handsome




46-49. Male Moussier's Redstart *Phoenicurus moussieri*, Dyfed, April 1988 (Mike Barrett)

bird was something very special indeed. These details were noted:

SHAPE AND SIZE Structure recalled short-tailed Redstart (see plates). Compact, about same size as Stonechat, determined in close,

direct comparisons, highlighting that it was slightly smaller than Redstart.

GENERAL IMPRESSION Redstart-like; strikingly

 The inclusion of plates 46-50 in colour has been subsidised by a donation from Carl Zeiss—Germany.



50. Male Moussier's Redstart *Phoenicurus moussieri*, Morocco, December 1987 (Arnoud B. van den Berg)

black, white and orange; particularly attractive and distinctive.

**PLUMAGE** Head black, with white supercilia which extended across forehead (see plates) and continued down and around nape, widening to form partial collar; as with many male Redstarts, white on head more prominent in field than is suggested by many field guides. Underparts orange. Up-

perparts and wings black, with conspicuous white wing-patch (see plates). Tail orange, medium-length, and notched; no Redstart-like shivering noted.

**BARE PARTS** Bill, eyes, legs and feet dark.

**BEHAVIOUR** Active and lively; alert and wary of any close approach; flight low and direct; no call heard.

The bird was quite agile, moving quickly between the ground, rocks and gorse, and often perching. In the hour or so that it was observed, it did not move far from the place where I had first seen it, and, although it did sometimes fly from view, its uniquely contrasting colours enabled us to relocate it fairly easily. It was harassed periodically by the two Stonechats, which were almost certainly nesting in the gorse and which much resented the presence of the intruder, but it showed a marked reluctance to stray any great distance, favouring the rocks as perching places. Our last view of the bird was just before 15.00 GMT, and, despite extensive searches by others later that afternoon and again during the following day, it was not seen again. The news was not immediately broadcast, as it was clear that the bird was no longer present, and the initial reports that the sighting had been at Strumble Head, Dyfed, on 27th April (*Brit. Birds* 81: 298, 411) were incorrect, the result of a misunderstanding. The one and only observation was at Dinas Head on 24th April.

Moussier's Redstart is a Northwest African resident, although *Birds of the Western Palearctic* (vol. 5, 1988) does state that it is 'perhaps migratory over relatively short distances, normally staying within North Africa.' Reports of the species in Europe are few and far between, the only recent

records being in Malta (the seventh record was of three together in April 1982), Italy (the second record was in Sicily in February 1987), and Greece (the first record was on 30th March 1988) (*Brit. Birds* 76: 275; 82: 21, 349). This Welsh record is the first away from the Mediterranean area.

Interestingly, while we did not see any Redstarts on 24th April, we had seen several on the previous day, and there were good numbers on 25th in the same general area. The fact that there had been southerly winds for the week up to 22nd April, coupled with what may have been a minor Redstart fall, could suggest that the Moussier's Redstart had somehow got itself involved with a migrating flock crossing its home territory. Whatever the reasons for its unexpected appearance in Dyfed on that Sunday afternoon, it made five people very happy.

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Peter Lansdown (Chairman, British Birds Rarities Committee) and Dr Alan Knox (Chairman, British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee) have commented as follows: 'The unanimous acceptance of the identification by the BBRC and the BOURC on a single circulation of each Committee was made straightforward by the individual being a male in spring, and by the series of photographs which accompanied the written record submission. The BOURC considered that the combination of Moussier's Redstart's restricted world range, the lack of any regular bird trade from North Africa and the species' several previous extralimital records from the Mediterranean made the task of categorisation a simple one, and Moussier's Redstart was accepted onto Category A of the British and Irish list (*Brit. Birds* 82: 540; 83: 475; *Ibis* 133: 218-222).'

Late April is not usually an especially good time for rarities in Britain and Ireland, but the second half of April 1988 produced not only this Moussier's Redstart, but also two Red-rumped Swallows *Hirundo daurica* (Kent and Dorset), a Rock Thrush *Monticola saxatilis* (Dorset), no fewer than eight Subalpine Warblers *Sylvia cantillans* (Devon, Merseyside, Suffolk, Cornwall, Scilly, Shetland, Kent and Norfolk), a Sardinian Warbler *S. melanocephala* (Orkney) and two Woodchat Shrikes *Lanius senator* (Scilly and Lancashire) (*Brit. Birds* 82: 505-563; 83: 439-496). Eds