

# letterine warbler

## Numbers

*I have now been birding for over 30 years and I am beginning to realize that, at the wrong side of 50, time is slowly but inexorably running out. Just the other day I sat counting my WP-list and the tally stopped well short of 450. The result was a sleepless night.*

*This will not do, of course, but how on earth (I mean: how in the Western Palearctic) am I going to find the time and the means to tick the remaining 450 or so species? Just imagine what it would take.*

*I would have to visit Kurdish Turkey, which would be do-able in itself, but for the two snowcocks, the Eastern Rock Nuthatches and the Great Rosefinches I would have to climb some formidable mountains, which is considerably less do-able for someone of my age and weight. I would have to trek all the way up to Northern Scandinavia for Steller's Eider and so on, and I hate Scandinavia and not just because the beer is too expensive. Iceland costs a fortune to get to and it would yield just the trio of Harlequin Duck, Barrow's Goldeneye and Black Guillemot. Then there is Morocco ... well okay, Morocco does not sound too bad. I hear that in spite of all that funny religious stuff they do sell beer there and the climate is nice. Algeria for that endemic nuthatch: not bloody likely, I am not getting arrested by fundamentalists, not me. Sardinia for two species only, albeit endemics, too. Siberia, Oman, Kazakhstan, Holterberg. Pff, listing it like this it looks like a lot of hardship and financial outlay. I hate Nunspeet and, moreover, I do not believe those Black Grouse are really wild.*

*It is not as if there have not been some successes over the past year or two. One success in particular is finally finding the Orphean Warbler after having tried for it a hundred times in the last two decades. Fifty times, certainly. Okay, ten times, definitely. I had missed it in France, Spain, Italy, mainland Greece and Croatia but on the island of Lesbos it promised to be a dead cert and, moreover, I was there in early spring, the best time of the year. I got out of bed at ungodly early hours, birded high and low all across the island, found thousands of birds ranging from Avocets to Sombre Tits, but no Orphean Warblers. Just one day before our flight home*

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my wife and I hired mountain bikes and went for a ride in the interior. It was hot and we were resting by the side of the track, when I heard a bird singing from the top of an olive tree. I was sure it was a song I had never heard before and that could only mean one species. I left my wife (just for the time being, of course) and chased the songster across a dry river bed. Finally I nailed it: full view of adult male, high up in some bush. This bird turned out to be my WP-number 429. Lesvos (I think they now call it that rather than the otherwise perfectly acceptable 'Lesbos' because of sexual connotations and American sensitivities) had already yielded numbers 426, 427 and 428. Krüper's Nuthatch turned out to be ridiculously easy. Just drive up to the tree as described in the book by Steve Dudley and Bob's your uncle. All those cars parked around it, bristling with telephoto lenses, are a great help, too. The lenses point right at the nesting hole of number 426. You might want to remember this for your visit to the island.

The next one, 427, also turned out to be much easier than I had expected. While my wife was admiring a petrified tree I was enjoying great views of the male Cinereous Bunting that was singing its lungs out on top of it. After long years of honing it to perfection my kids' mum and I now have this flawless symbiosis, each of us acting as the other's epiphyte. What a shame this will not last forever. But I must not turn maudlin here.

The next one was a bird like 429, a bundle of feathers chased high and low from Spain to Greece to Macedonia to Israel and never found. At one point I had become convinced that it was a hoax devised by the likes of Larsses Jonsson and Svensson to pad their identification guides and increase sales. But Lesvos proved me wrong. I had cleverly spotted my next-door neighbour in the resort as a birdwatcher (well, the binoculars around his neck, the fieldguide in his pocket and his ceaseless scanning of the skies were, I do admit, a bit of a giveaway) and we decided to combine forces. We got up much too early, left our wives (just for the time being, of course) and hit the saltpans, which in Lesvos means loads of Greater Flamingos and Black-winged Stilts, but also the chance of just about anything else that flies in the Western Palearctic. Ignoring the throngs of birders who were shown myriads of Wing-winged Black Terns and Glossy Ibis by someone who looked uncannily like Emo Klunder we pushed on right up to the seashore, for here it was that we hoped to find out target bird, the elusive Rufous Bush Robin.

*And on that bottle-strewn beach I experienced something of an anticlimax, because after all those years of exasperation my phantom bogey bird just sat there, up in a scraggy bush, blaring out to the females that he, and he only, was the perfect fertilizer of eggs and what not. I hope you enjoy my companion's great photograph of this bird.*

*So much for the bagging of WP-428. The one after 429, Olive-tree Warbler WP-430, which I had managed to miss in Lesvos, turned up on an island off the Croatian mainland as the fortunate spinoff of an unfortunate basketball tournament and 431 just fell into my hands during a non-birding cycle tour of Vlieland. Some members of the much-maligned Dutch Birding Association had found the bird in a village garden and all I had to do was pedal up and there it was, a Siberian Stonechat, looking for all the world like a small female Wheatear.*

*But there you are, you see. Just six new birds in the entire year of our Lord 2010, which in actual fact was quite a good year. I have had much worse, probably on account of not visiting islands. At this rate I will have to live to a very ripe 127 to clock up all the breeding birds of the Western Palearctic, but I fear my number will be up long before then.*

**Rufous Bush Robin – Lesvos – May 2010**



PHOTO: ROB SCHOEMAKER