
ORIENTAL TURTLE DOVE AT OTFORD, KENT, FEBRUARY 8TH 2016 - THE FIRST FOR LONDON

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This is the one that almost got away. March 22nd 2016: I received a note from the post office indicating receipt of a letter to sign for and to rearrange for it to be re-delivered. I arranged this but it wasn't there to collect on the said date, so fast forward to April 1st, a late night celebrating my 50th birthday including attempts by me at belly dancing, but that's another story. Next day the postman appeared with a letter to sign for, presumably a late birthday card, but it was addressed to me, the County Recorder. Opening the envelope, I was greeted with a nice letter plus 20 photos of a 'Turtle Dove' taken by John Waterman. Reading the letter, the photos were taken in February in a garden in Otford, Kent and sent to Les Edwins, an expert at the RSPB on Turtle Doves, who identified it as an Oriental Turtle Dove, of the *meena* subspecies. Fortunately one of my birthday presents by my side was *Birds of Central Asia* and sure enough there it was staring me in the face: a mega in Kent.

Some photos with a Woodpigeon illustrated just how small the bird was. It was in what appeared to be quite dull winter plumage and the very small size was nearer to European Turtle Dove. It had darker plumage, dull greyish-pink undertail coverts and lower belly, greyish rump and lower back, and extensively whitish-fringed tertials and greater coverts. The neck barring was grey-white, as opposed to black-white in European Turtle Dove. Not an easy identification, but the photos matched *meena* as opposed to *orientalis*.

I suddenly felt ill, cursing the post office and at the same time aware of the enormity of the record and the interest it would have from birders far and wide, but where was it?

I phoned John Waterman immediately, but his wife indicated he was working and not back until that evening. With Otford as my only clue at the time and my lack of skills in googling the garden from aerial images, I spent about six hours wandering around Otford and even parked opposite the bird's as-yet-unknown locality!

Having spoken to John in the evening it transpired that he was certain the bird was present the previous week but the house owner, Tony Rose, was away on holiday and didn't want news of the bird's presence to be released. I did manage to ascertain it was on the estate behind the VW garage but not the exact house and garden. That evening I tweeted out the photos of the bird that John took and within minutes got a call from Chris Batty at Rare Bird Alert (RBA) confirming what we already suspected: that it was the real deal.

Sunday April 3rd, dawn till dusk, I checked the area along with a few hardy souls, but no sign. Daily visits by Martin Warburton and his dog Xanthe failed to locate it; nor did the efforts of Andy Appleton, Chris Gibbard, Terry Laws and Steve Broyd among others.

We assumed the bird had departed and, even knowing the rough area now from googling the home owner's name, failed to turn up the bird.



The trail went cold, Xanthe returned to her normal route with Martin for her walks, then fast forward to Wednesday April 27th when I phoned John to establish the final day the bird had been seen so I could forward the record to BBRC. He indicated it was still present a few days before. Once again I experienced that same cold feeling as if I had lost my bins, and I asked if he could forward my mobile number on to Tony Rose, whose garden it was visiting, in case the bird was still present. Xanthe and Martin returned to the area for their walks but failed to even find the grain that Chris had put down nearby. Things weren't looking good.

Late on Friday April 29th (but seen early the next day), a message from Tony indicated the bird was present in the morning and evening that day and gave me rough times it appeared, the direction it flew in from and even the road he lived in. I along with a few others and especially Andy Appleton, my companion for the day, established that an area along the end of The Butts Road would be ideal to view the trees in the back gardens. In position from about 4pm, a few of the Otford scouting party assembled - even Steve Broyd, having stopped off on route back home from Scotland that morning - and sure enough at 17:03pm Andy Lawson, fresh in from Dungeness, saw the bird fly in from the south into the trees... and the rest is history, as they say.

The bird developed a pattern at dawn for a few hours and from roughly 4pm for a few hours, of flying to the trees before dropping into the garden out of view, before flying off south again to where, nobody knows. Speaking to Tony, it was evident that the bird was best viewed from within the house as it was easily spooked if anyone went in the



Left: *The Oriental Turtle Dove at 08:27 on May 1st 2016. (Andrew Moon)*

Above: *Birders in Otford on May 5th - a week before the bird finally departed. (Barry Wright)*

garden, but this was not a practical arrangement for the family - hence the reluctance to publicise the exact location. How we had missed it before could have been due to our positioning, the lack of food in the garden to entice it down whilst Tony was away, or simply the speed at which it shot in overhead and the route it had taken. The residents embraced the bird's presence, I spoke to Tony a few times and thanked him on behalf of everyone for tolerating our presence on this quiet Otford estate, a few young boys on the estate took orders for tea and coffee which was a great gesture, and who knows how long the bird will stay. Housing estate birds are never easy twitches - and this was no exception - but the behaviour of the birders visiting was impeccably good.

It was my worst case scenario so far as being Kent County Recorder, but all turned out well in the end. My 22 hours looking for the bird was at times frustrating, but I do know Otford pretty well now plus lots of the residents. The bird's full dates of stay were February 18th to May 12th 2016.

Streptopelia orientalis meena represents the first record for the London Area (the LNHS recording area) as well as for Kent; it was accepted by BBRC; and it mirrors the occurrence of a bird in Oxford in gardens a few years before.

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