

# Plumages of Common Stonechats in Sicily, and comparison with vagrant 'Siberian Stonechats'

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In 1949, Common Stonechats *Saxicola torquata* breeding in Sicily were described as a separate race, different from both *S. t. rubicola*, found throughout much of mainland Europe, and *S. t. bibernans* of westernmost Europe. The Sicilian population was given the name *S. t. archimedes* (Clancey 1949). Clancey reported that this race was 'confined to the island of Sicily, where it abounds in a variety of habitats'; the type specimen was described from 'near Siracusa'. Vaurie (1959) considered *archimedes* to be synonymous with *rubicola*, and this view has been adopted by Iapichino & Massa (1989), and is

followed by the official Italian List, although without further study. New research into this taxon is currently in progress (Corso in prep.). Nevertheless, it remains unquestionable that, whether or not the Sicilian stonechats are confirmed as a separate race, the plumage of these birds, at any age, is often quite different from that of typical *rubicola*.

Many illustrations of *rubicola* in popular field guides, and also in *BWP* (Cramp 1988), which contains very detailed illustrations of all the Western Palearctic races of Common Stonechat, show that race as having a warm brown, evenly dark-streaked rump and



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191. Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*, Vendicari, Siracusa, Sicily, December 1999. This photo shows a typical *rubicola* in winter plumage.



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192. Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*, Italy (location and date unknown). This photo shows a *rubicola* with white admixed in the rump.

uppertail-coverts. This is in contrast to 'Siberian Stonechat' (Common Stonechat of the eastern races *maura/stejnegeri*), which is depicted with a wide, unmarked, pale band across the rump and uppertail-coverts. Only in Barthel (1992) and Stoddart (1992), and more recently in Walker (2001), are there photographs and illustrations of *rubicola* showing some white feathers on a brown rump, or with sparse black streaking over a whitish rump and uppertail-coverts.

For some time, foreign birdwatchers visiting southern Italy, and in particular Sicily, have occasionally reported birds that they have identified as 'Siberian Stonechats'. During both spring and autumn migrations, the Common Stonechat is an abundant species throughout Sicily, and it is possible to see a wide variety of plumages here during these periods. For example, in spring, there are some very dark, warm-coloured individuals with a dark rump and evenly rufous underparts, as well as more typical *rubicola*, which are paler overall, with a dark-streaked brown rump and dark throat, and others with white admixed in the rump (plate 192). Among all these, however, there are always stonechats which are slightly bigger, with darker upperparts in summer and paler upperparts in winter, and, most importantly, a wide area of unmarked white on the rump.

It is these which are almost invariably identified by visiting birders as 'Siberian Stonechats'; they belong, however, to the resident breeding population of Common Stonechats in Sicily.

### *Description of Sicilian Common Stonechats*

**Male summer** Typical Sicilian males appear very similar to *maura* in summer. They show a wide, unmarked white rump; a conspicuous, broad white semi-collar (sometimes almost a complete collar); black upperparts; a broad white wing patch; pale underparts which are of a warmer, richer shade of rufous on the breast; and relatively long wings (plate 193).

**Male winter** In winter, males become a great deal paler and colder in colour, with the rump being much duller and washed with brown, but still forming a distinctly pale (sometimes white) panel which shows a strong contrast with the rest of the upperparts. The white on the collar and the wings becomes narrower and more limited at this season.

**Female summer** In contrast to males, females are more like *rubicola* in summer, being only a shade paler than the latter, with a paler throat and a hint of a pale super-



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193. Adult male Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata* at breeding site near Siracusa, Sicily, April 1997. This individual is superficially very similar to *S. t. maura*. Note, however, that the flanks are washed orange-rufous.



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194. Female Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*, Siracusa, Sicily, March 1996. This individual, still in winter plumage, appears very similar to *S. t. maura*.

cilium. The rump tends to be cleaner and less dark-streaked.

**Female winter** In winter, females become paler, and consequently more like *maura*. In fact, some individuals are extremely similar to *maura*, showing a completely pale throat, a pale supercilium, and cold, pale upperparts (plate 194).

**First-year First-winter** Sicilian stonechats are typically more similar to *maura* than to *rubicola* and *hibernans*. They are, generally, paler than a typical *rubicola*, having a paler throat, often a pale supercilium, a less patterned rump with fewer, or narrower, streaks, and paler wings. They differ from typical first-winter *maura* in that they never have a completely unmarked pale or orangish-buff rump, and they show warmer upperparts and underparts, and duller dark underwings.

### *Separation from 'Siberian Stonechat'*

The underwings of male Sicilian stonechats are slightly paler and duller than those of a typical *maura*, being blackish with pale, whitish or greyish, fringes, mostly on the axillaries; but darker than on a typical *rubicola*. The underparts are warmer, with the flanks washed orange or pale rufous, never completely white as on a typical *maura*. In winter, the upperparts are always warmer than those of *maura*, as are the underparts, but they are colder in colour than those of a typical *rubicola*. The rump in winter is never unmarked, uniform orange or orange-buff, as it is on some *maura*.

Females in summer are rather easy to separate from *maura*. Females in winter, however, may present the biggest problem of all. At this time of year, the underwing is perhaps duller and paler, while the rump is warmer with more patterning, as are the rest of the upperparts.

### *Discussion*

Common Stonechats from Sicily, which may resemble 'Siberian Stonechats' of the race *maura*, have been observed on migration at the Strait of Messina (Cardelli *in litt.*; pers. obs.), and have also been recorded in southern and central Italy (plate 195). Furthermore, there have been records of similar

individuals elsewhere in southern Europe (see below). This should be borne in mind by all those European Rarities Committees dealing with claimed records of 'Siberian Stonechats' in southern Europe. The possibility that such records may in fact refer to Common Stonechats of the type found in Sicily, rather than to *maura* or *stejnegeri*, has never been highlighted before, but should be considered before such records are accepted.

The 'Siberian Stonechat' is, in fact, very rare in the Mediterranean region. So far, there is only one published record for Italy, a first-winter in Lazio, central Italy, on 1st October 1988, although this taxon was not considered by the Italian Rarities Committee (COI) at the time (Fraticeilli *et al.* 1989); other reports are unconfirmed. There are no accepted records for Malta (R. Galea & J.A. Montalto *in litt.*), and very few from other Mediterranean countries. These are as follows: a first-winter female in Camargue, France, on 4th November 1996 (M. Duquet *in litt.*); three accepted records for Cyprus, in December 1971, January 1991 and September 2000, with details of sex available for only one of these, reported as a male (J. Gordon *in litt.*); and four accepted records for Spain, in Tarragona on 2nd March 1997, in Coruna on 6th April 1997, in Coruna on 13th September 1997 and in Barcelona on 30th-31st March 1998 (R. Gutiérrez *in litt.*).

While this paper discusses the Sicilian Common Stonechat, this being the population most studied by the author, it should be borne in mind that stonechats with white on the rump are often observed elsewhere in Italy, where a possible cline exists: such individuals become more frequent, and the pale area becomes wider, as one moves from north to south. It is also important to note that similarly marked Common Stonechats, with wide areas of white on the rump/uppertail-coverts and on the wing, have been observed in many Mediterranean countries, particularly in mainland Spain and Mallorca (R. Gutiérrez *in litt.*; C. Cederroth & C. Johansson *in litt.*), Morocco (T. Conzemius *in litt.*; see plate 196) and Tunisia (pers. obs.).

A full review of the characters of the races *rubicola* and *hibernans*, and the extent of variation within each, would seem advisable.

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195. Two male Common Stonechats *Saxicola torquata*, central Italy, spring 1996. The individual on the right is somewhat like *S. t. maura* in appearance.

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196. Male Common Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*, Oued Massa, Morocco, April 2001.

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This paper is particularly timely, as the British Birds Rarities Committee is about to undertake a review of all spring records of 'Siberian Stonechat' in Britain. Eds.