



SHORT NOTE

## Two cases of Whitethroats *Sylvia communis* with extra wing feathers among the secondaries

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Despite the large number of moult studies published, little has been written on abnormal numbers of flight feathers (eg Stresemann 1963, Melville 1985, Copete *et al* 1992). Most commonly reported are cases of extra tail feathers (anisorectricity; eg Snow 1967, Melville 1985), but reports of birds with extra wing feathers are less frequent (Stresemann 1963, Melville 1985, Copete *et al* 1992). During a study of moult strategies in the Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* conducted in NE Nigeria (Waldenström & Ottosson 2002), we found two individuals, out of the 491 investigated, which had abnormal numbers of secondaries. The first case was a second-year male, trapped 22 April 1999, which had single extra feathers among the secondaries, symmetrically expressed in both wings, thus having seven secondaries in each wing instead of the normal six. The extra secondary was fully grown and could not be distinguished from other feathers in the same tract. One striking characteristic of the bird was its large wingspan, which was due to elongation of the radius and ulna. Unfortunately, only the standard wing length measurement was used (max chord; Svensson 1992), which measures the length of the primaries. A longer forearm does not affect this measure, and the obtained result (77 mm) was within the normal range for the species. The other case was a second year bird, trapped 22 April 2000, where the extra feather was positioned as the innermost secondary, close to the tertials, and only in the left wing. The feather was clearly shorter than the other secondaries and a bit tilted.

The number of wing feathers and rectrices are rather fixed in Passeriformes: ten primaries, six secondaries, three tertials and twelve rectrices (Snow 1967, Jenni & Winkler 1994). Among non-passeriformes, the number of secondaries varies between genera and species, partly depending on length of the ulna (Ginn & Melville 1983). Irregularities in the numbers of flight feathers could be due to an old feather not being shed before a

new one is fully grown during moult. In our case, however, we concluded that the extra secondaries represented true extra feathers, since in the first case all feathers were normally positioned approximately 3-5 mm apart, and in the second case the extra secondary was set within a series of moulted feathers, not at the moult limit between juvenile and pre-breeding feathers. An extremely long greater covert could potentially be mistaken for a secondary, but in both our cases the birds had ten normal coverts. The good physical status of the two individuals, and the fact that they were trapped south of the Sahara, show that birds can cope with these types of anomaly.

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