

Sandwich Tern mimicry in a singing Whitethroat

Whilst out surveying for Lesser Whitethroat breeding territories on 3 June 2013 at Boydeston Braes, near Seamill, North Ayrshire at around 13:35 hrs, I came across a male Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* perched and singing on a low-level power line near some Hawthorn and Blackthorn scrub. Walking away, I heard the distinctive flight call of a Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis* overhead and looked around, trying to locate it. I then quickly realised that there was no Sandwich Tern around at all. The Whitethroat sang again, but right at the very end of the phrase, the male gave four separate Sandwich Tern 'kier-rik' flight calls. The mimicry was so good, that it had me completely fooled. The Whitethroat then proceeded to sing another three full song phrases, each with four renditions of Sandwich Tern flight calls, again right at the end of each sequence, lasting around 5–6 seconds in duration. The Whitethroat then flew upwards from the power line and sang normally during the short flight downwards into the scrub – this time without the tern mimicry. The location of the singing Whitethroat was

only 200 m away from the high tide line, so hearing passing Sandwich Terns was probably a common event to this territorial male.

I have heard Whitethroats briefly mimic the trilling song phrase of Lesser Whitethroats in Ayrshire and Whitethroats can also mimic other *Sylvia* species such as Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* and Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin* (Cramp 1992). However, there is no mention of Sandwich Tern mimicry in the UK literature (Cramp 1992, BTO pers. comm.), so this appears to be the first UK observation of such mimicry in this species. However, on contacting German ornithologists, I was informed that although uncommon, this behaviour has been observed before and Sandwich Tern mimicry is mentioned in Bergmann *et al.* (2008).

My thanks go to Dr Hans-Gunther Bauer who provided valuable information on Sandwich Tern mimicry, Peter Suedbeck for translating German text and Dr Peter Lack for advice and encouragement.

References

- Cramp, S. (ed.) 1992. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Volume 6. Oxford University Press, Oxford [pp. 459–479]
- Bergmann, H.-H., Helb, H.-W., & Baumann, S. 2008. *Die Stimmen der Vögel Europas*. Aula Publishers, Wiebelsheim.

Tom Byars, 81 Sharphill Road, Saltcoats

KA21 5QU.

Email: tombyars@btinternet.com

Revised ms accepted October 2013