THE YELLOW WAGTAIL IN NORTH AMERICA

A Summary of its Occurrence and Notes on Identification

Matt Heindel

Away from its remote breeding grounds, the Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* is rarely seen in North America, and is therefore a much sought after species by birders on this continent. Unless one travels to the Old World, the chances of seeing any of the wagtails are slim, and the excitement a vagrant wagtail generates is rarely paralleled. This paper will summarize vagrant records of Yellow Wagtail for the continent and discuss taxonomy and identification, both in terms of separating Yellow Wagtail from its congeners as well as looking at plumage variations within the species.

TAXONOMY

The taxonomy of Yellow Wagtail is complex, with 15-20 races generally recognized, depending on the reference one consults. Most of these races breed in Europe and western Asia and are very unlikely to occur in North America. See Cramp (1988) for a good general discussion of the various races. The Yellow Wagtail is quite variable in plumage, with one of the primary differences between races being the colour of the head and the presence or absence and the extent of supercilia. Some races have yellow or green heads (e.g. *lutea, flavissima*), gray heads (e.g. nominate *flava, thunbergi, simillima, tschutschensis*), or black heads (e.g. *feldegg*).

It would not be surprising if more than one species were involved when considering all of these races. If this was the case, the records from North America would pertain to the eastern Eurasian *tschutschensis* and the breeding race for North America would be called the Alaska Yellow Wagtail (American Ornithologists Union (AOU) 1998). Other races, which might possibly occur include *simillima, macronyx, plexa,* and *taivana*, all of which will be covered later.

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*, north of Nome, Alaska, June 7, 1988 (*Jon L. Dunn*).

DISTRIBUTION

Yellow Wagtails breed in tundra across Europe and Asia, barely penetrating into the New World in Alaska and northwest Canada. Their preferred breeding habitat is willow and birch thickets but they are also noted on the tundra away from this thicker vegetation. They winter in rather southerly latitudes from north Africa to southeast Asia south to South Africa, the East Indies and, rarely, Australia. At this season, they are most likely to be encountered in fields, riverbeds, and mudflats.

In our area, breeding *tschutschensis* occurs in north and west Alaska, northern Yukon, and extreme northwest MacKenzie, NWT (AOU 1998, Godfrey 1986). Records of Yellow Wagtail away from these areas are thought to pertain to *tschutschensis*, and indeed any report should be considered to pertain to this race unless proven otherwise. They are casual in the western Aleutians, central and south Alaska, central Yukon, British Columbia, and coastal portions of the Pacific States. Currently, there are six records for British Columbia, one for Washington, one for Oregon, one for Nevada and 11 for California (See Table). There are sight reports from Alabama (AOU 1998) and Manitoba which, if correct, are significant outliers, being far east of all other records, and suggest that future records from the central part of the continent might be expected.

Birds of the race *simillima* breed in northeast Asia and winter in south China. They might be irregular migrants in western Alaska and have occurred as far west as Israel (Shirihai 1996). The other races that might possibly occur in North America, *macronyx, plexa,* and *taivana*, are less understood. Their breeding ranges are south and west of *simillima* and thus would be less likely to appear as vagrants in North America.

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*, Nome, Alaska, June 1998 (© *D. Wechsler / VIREO*).

MIGRATION

Yellow Wagtails leave their breeding grounds from late July (adults) through mid-September. Migrants are encountered in western Alaska (e.g., St. Lawrence Island) in August and most seem to be gone by early September. Using the California records as an example, most come from the first half of September, which implies an early departure from the breeding grounds, given that almost all records pertain to young birds.

The majority of summering birds apparently move west leaving western Alaska for Siberia and then moving south. The *M. f. tschutschensis* group winters in Indonesia and the Philippines and is thought to be the subspecies accounting for the northern Australia records (Pizzey and Doyle 1980). In other words, this race is a very long distance migrant, breeding far to the north and yet being the southernmost wintering race in Asia. It would appear that the fall vagrants found in western North America are mistakenly moving southeast instead of moving towards Siberia. Unlike many vagrants that are found later than a species' "normal" migration period, most records of this species seem to be during its expected migration timeframe.

In spring, migrants are generally expected in Alaska from late May into mid-June. Far less is understood about movements at this season as most records during spring are from breeding areas. There are no confirmed records of Yellow Wagtail in spring away from regular migrant or breeding areas in North America.

MOULT

Almost all moult takes place on the summering grounds. For hatch-year birds (those in their first calendar year), the first prebasic moult takes the bird out of its juvenal plumage. Some of the flight feathers are replaced, primarily wing coverts, but also often some tertials and rectrices. See Pyle (1997) for greater detail. Pyle mentions the possibility of a

supplemental moult in hatch-year birds; this moult may replace feathers in some birds but not in all, meaning young birds may look quite different from each other. (This moult may be better known in buntings with the Painted Bunting *Passerina ciris* being the best example. Some young Painted Buntings migrate looking quite gray and others, after having undergone a supplemental moult, look bright green.)

In after hatch-year birds (those in at least their second calendar year), the prebasic moult takes place primarily on the breeding grounds and is complete, replacing all feathers. A pre-alternate moult might take place but it is, at best, incomplete. This would occur on the wintering grounds from January to April but more work is necessary to understand its extent.

A thorough understanding of moult can be helpful in ageing and sexing birds in the field, even if one is restricted to using optical equipment as opposed to hand-held birds for banding. Although sexing is extremely difficult due to individual variation, a well-studied bird might reveal the different age of feather groups which, in turn, could lead to a confident appraisal of its age. The key feather tracts to look for are the wing coverts, tertials and rectrices. Again, see Pyle to better understand this and the concept of moult limits and its potential use under field conditions.

IDENTIFICATION

Wagtails are readily separable from pipits, the most likely source of confusion, by a variety of characters. Pipits are smaller, with shorter tails and are brown above, usually with apparent streaking on both the upperparts and underparts. Young wagtails may have brownish plumage tones but present no serious differentiation problems.

Identifying wagtails to species is generally straightforward but there are potential pitfalls. White *M. alba* and Black-backed *M. lugens* wagtails, although very similar to each other, pose no problems outside of that complex. Immatures of this species-pair still should not be easily confused with Yellow Wagtail. Gray Wagtail *M. cinerea* is quite distinct, with most races being extremely long-tailed and with different colouration on both the underparts and upperparts. The standard field guides, including the National Geographic Society (1999), cover these issues well.

Citrine Wagtail *M. citreola* is distinctive in adult plumages, but is quite similar to Yellow Wagtail in its first basic plumage. It is crucial that observers consider and eliminate Citrine Wagtail as this species is a definite candidate for vagrancy. In fact, there is one almost unbelievable, but photographed, record from Mississippi in the southeastern United States, January 31 to February 1, 1992 (DeBenedictus 1995). Although one might expect Asian birds to be found on the Pacific Coast, this record is a good example of how unpredictable vagrants can be.

The Yellow Wagtail most likely to occur in North America is *M. f. tschutschensis*. Using an alternate-plumaged male as the example, the crown is completely gray, contrasting with black auriculars. The supercilium is white but rather thin. The upperparts are olive, often with a grayish tone and rather uniform. The wing is olive-gray with a thin wingbar, which usually has some yellow. The underparts are fairly bright yellow from chin to undertail coverts, usually with fairly obvious dusky-olive spots across the breast, sometimes giving the impression of a collar. Adult females have some olive mixed into the crown, and slightly paler underparts, but otherwise look similar to the males. Any evi-

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*, Nome, Alaska, June 1998 (© *D. Wechsler / VIREO*).

dence of brown in the crown of a bird in spring probably indicates a young bird (in its second calendar year).

In fall, the adult male will still be bright, but there may be a brownish tinge to the crown, and the auriculars will be duller. The adult female will show a uniformly olive-brown crown and auriculars with slightly paler underparts. Hatch-year birds can probably not be sexed in the field. They are grayish-brown above, although some look much grayer, with a fairly bold supercilium and dark auriculars. The wingbars are white and rather bold, as are the tertial edges. Below, they are typically dingy white, although some (males?) do have a wash of yellow, particularly on the undertail coverts. They often show some spotting or smudges forming an incomplete extending collar from the sides of the breast. See Cramp (1986), Shirihai (1996), and Pyle (1997) for more details on these plumages.

IDENTIFICATION PROBLEMS

Young White/Black-backed vs. Yellow

Most young Yellow Wagtails look almost entirely devoid of yellow, which might lead unsuspecting birders to think that they are White or Black-backed wagtails. In fact, this identification is quite straightforward. White and Black-backed wagtails have a bold, black line stretching across the upper breast in the form of a 'v', which contrasts strongly with the pale gray back. In Yellow Wagtail, there is often some brownish coming across from the sides of the breast, but it is not black and does not contrast with the colour of the back. Further, many Yellows show hints of a yellow wash on the undertail coverts or elsewhere on the underparts. Additionally, the forehead of the White/Black-backed is extensively pale, whereas that of the Yellow is dark to the bill. Further, the auriculars of the Yellow are dark, whereas only the eyeline is typically dark on the White/Black-backed (or

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*, Nome, Alaska, June 1998 (© *T. Vezo / VIREO*).

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*, Gambell, Alaska, June 6, 1994 (*Andy Kraynik*).
This individual appears to be a *simillima* based on the brighter colors and, although not present in this view, the breast was bright yellow and unmarked. *Simillima* is likely a rare vagrant to western Alaska, but more needs to be learned about its distribution.

in some cases the face is all white). Finally, the calls are quite different. Contrast the hard disyllabic *chiz-zick*, or *ja-dick*, with the calls of Yellow (described below).

Yellow vs. Gray Wagtail

Experienced observers would never confuse these two species, but many birders have not had the pleasure of comparative experience. Structurally, these species are quite different, as Gray Wagtails appear very long-tailed, even for a wagtail. Their call is more similar to White than Yellow and serves as an additional clue. Summer males have a dark throat with primarily yellow underparts, with yellow undertail coverts but often whitish flanks, and thus are easily identifiable. Females and winter birds have a pale throat. Some races of Yellow can vaguely meet this pattern of gray upperparts and yellow underparts, but all Grays have a white wingstripe visible in flight and a yellow rump.

Yellow vs. Citrine Wagtail

This is a serious and perhaps underappreciated problem in North America. As mentioned previously, there is one record for the US, so observers must consider this species. Almost all records of migrant Yellows outside Alaska are young birds. In addition to being the most confusing plumage for this species-pair, this is also the age that would arguably be the most likely for a vagrant Citrine.

Adult Citrine Wagtails are quite distinctive, having a largely unmarked yellow face and gray upperparts, totally unlike any Yellow Wagtail. The problem lies in the separation of young birds. Both species share uniform pale upperparts which vary from pale brown to gray or grayish-brown in Yellow, and usually pale gray in Citrine. Additionally, the crown is set off by a supercilium and the underparts are generally unmarked, although Yellow might show some dark smudges as mentioned above. Although Citrine is grayer and cleaner on average, there is a lot of variation and observers should be careful using this feature in the field identification of a vagrant. A darker brown wagtail with a bold chest mark is almost certainly not a Citrine, but a gray, unmarked bird might pertain to either species.

The key areas that identify Citrine are the lores and auriculars. The lores of Citrine are usually pale; those of the Yellow are uniform with the auriculars typically gray or brown. Both species have a distinct auricular patch. The Citrine usually has an obvious pale area surrounding the rear of the ear coverts, recalling that of a Cape May Warbler *Dendroica tigrina*. In addition, the auriculars of Citrine are pale-centred, whereas those of the Yellow are more uniform. Another mark to consider is the presence of a darker border sometimes visible over the supercilium of Citrine. There might also be a difference at the base of the mandible, as Citrine is typically dark while that of the Yellow is paler than the remainder of the mandible. Lighting may affect how this appears in life, but on average there seems to be a difference. Finally, Citrines average bolder, broader wingbars. See Leader (1995) for more information.

If one is lucky enough to have the bird in the hand, Pyle (1997) has also noted the following measurement differences. Citrine usually has p7-p6 of 1-4 mm vs. 3-7 mm in Yellow. Also, p8 emargination is 18-24 mm from the tip vs. 16-18 mm in Yellow. Finally, p8 is less than or equal to p3 vs. being greater than or equal to p3 in Yellow Wagtail.

The calls of the two species are quite similar, often described as a hard *dzeet*, recalling the call of an Eastern Kingbird *Tyrannus tyrannus*. In general, it would be difficult to base the identification of a vagrant solely on the basis of calls. Citrines always sound harder to my ear, but in addition to the experience necessary to make such a distinction, there is a real problem in being adamant about subtle differences. In addition to some variation in bird vocalizations, birders must factor in the distance to the calling bird, wind, the degree to which the bird is angled away, and a variety of other factors.

If one is lucky enough to encounter a wagtail that appears to be one of these two species, attention to subtle detail is necessary. Focus in on the head, paying close attention to the above-mentioned marks and try to obtain photographs. Identification should be possible given reasonable views and an understanding of the critical features. Many records of Yellow Wagtail from the Pacific States are of calling birds seen only in flight. Due to the similarity between Yellow and Citrine Wagtail, these records are somewhat weak. Once a Citrine is recorded in California, for example, any record of Yellow Wagtail not specifically excluding Citrine will be suspect. I encourage records committees to move cautiously in this regard.

Races of Yellow Wagtail

There has been some interest in trying to identify migrant Yellow Wagtails to race. Are the birds being seen in areas away from the breeding grounds from North American populations, or are any of them vagrants from Asia? At this point, it is likely impossible to say with certainty, but it would make sense to look at the races more closely. However, it is important to remember that differences in plumage due to age and sex (adult males are the boldest and brightest within each race with females being slightly duller) must be considered when trying to determine if a suspected individual is of an unexpected race.

The expected race is *tschutschensis* as discussed earlier. The Siberian race, *simillima*, is a vagrant in spring to western Alaska. In spring, it should stand out as being more colourful than the local breeding race. Males, in particular, are brighter green on the upperparts, lacking any dullness or trace of gray of the local breeding birds. The crown is more likely to have bluish tones, providing greater contrast with the back. In addition to the brighter appearance, the supercilium is bolder and reaches from the bill to the rear of the auriculars (Leader 1995). Often the supercilium decreases anterior to the eye, and can be yellow at this point (Shirihai 1996). Finally, *simillima* are an almost entirely clean and brighter yellow below, lacking the spotted appearance of *tschutschensis*. Differences hold when comparing females or fall birds, but are most safely assessed with spring adult males. This is, unfortunately, of no value when considering young birds in fall, when vagrants may have to be considered of indeterminate race. To date, no proof exists of *simillima* being recorded in North America during fall but the identification criteria between these two races are not yet fully deciphered. Leader (1995) feels that first winter *simillima* is typically very gray, with a rather indistinct supercilium. This sounds a bit paler and less marked than I would interpret for *tschutschensis*, but it is premature to draw conclusions in this regard. Observers should, in the meantime, attempt to get extremely detailed descriptions and photographs of any Yellow Wagtail, as we might find a way to assess these records at some future point.

First winter Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*, Hong Kong, October, 1995 (*R. P. Tipper*).
This Citrine Wagtail shows the classic face pattern, including the pale lores, complete pale surround to the auriculars, and the paler area in the auriculars.

First winter Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*, Hong Kong, October, 1995 (*R. P. Tipper*).
As with the previous photograph, the face pattern is subtly different from that of Yellow Wagtail. Note also the all dark bill, the dark line above the supercilium and the bold wingbars.

First winter Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava simillima*, Hong King, October 10, 1987 (*R. P. Tipper*). Thought to be similar to *tschutschensis*, this first winter *simillima* has a supercilium but it is not very extensive and it lacks the pale rear border to the auriculars, the pale center to the auricular patch and the pale lores of Citrine. Note also the duller wingbars.

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava simillima*, Mai Po, Hong Kong April 12, 1995 (*Jon R. King*).

Other races that might conceivably make it to our continent include *M.f.macronyx*, *M.f.plexa*, and *M.f.taivana*. The race *macronyx* breeds to the south of *simillima* and thus might not be a good candidate for vagrancy, particularly in fall. It differs from *simillima* in being more slate- blue on the crown and, more importantly, lacking all but a trace of a supercilium: if this is present at all, it is an indistinct pale line behind the eye. Again, much needs to be learned about first-winter plumages but *macronyx* seems to

The following table summarizes the records of vagrants away from known (or suspected) breeding areas.

Canada
Burnaby Lake, east of Vancouver, BC, October 6 1985, Campbell et al. 1997
Lulu Island, south of Vancouver, BC, September 20, 1986, Campbell et al. 1997
Sandspit, Queen Charlotte Islands, BC, September 1, 1991, Campbell et al. 1997
Martindale Flats, southern Vancouver Island, BC, September 4-7, 1995, Campbell et al. 1997, Bain and Holder, 1995
Central Saanich, BC, October 5-7, 1995, Bain and Holder 1995
Iona Island, BC, October 18, 1996, Bain and Holder, 1996

Washington
Ocean Shores, July 29, 1992. The following from the "First report of the Washington Bird Records Committee" by B. Tweit and D.R. Paulson in Washington Birds 3:11-41, 1994, says that an adult showed duskiness on the breast, probably indicating the Alaska-breeding *M. l. tschutschensis*. Note the fact it was an adult is stunning as it might be the only adult recorded south of the Arctic, but this does make the early date more understandable.

Oregon
Sight record of an immature at the mouth of the Siltcoos River, August 31, 1997. This would provide a first record for the State pending acceptance by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (FN 52:117)

Nevada
Boulder City, September 11, 1994. Accepted as first state record for Nevada and published in Great Basin Birds 1:66(1998), Initial Report of the Nevada Bird Records Committee: 1994-1996 records.

California
Abbotts Lagoon, Marin Co., September 17, 1978
Bodega Bay, Sonoma Co., September 16, 1979
Cayucos, San Luis Obispo Co., September 7, 1981
Point Pinos, Monterey, Co., September 19, 1982
Younger Lagoon/Wilder Creek, Santa Cruz Co., September 4-6, 1983
Abbotts Lagoon, Marin Co., September 12-13, 1985
Crescent City, Del Norte Co., September 12, 1986
Malibu Lagoon, Los Angeles Co., September 6, 1987
SE Farallon Islands, San Francisco Co., September 21, 1991
San Joaquin Marsh, Orange Co., September 12-20, 1992
Lake Earl, Del Norte Co., August 29, 1995
(on file with the California Bird Records Committee)

have a more uniform gray head with little contrast between the crown and auriculars (Leader 1995). The race *taivana* breeds to the south of *simillima* and is the common winter visitor to Hong Kong. It does not migrate the distances of *tschutschensis* or *simillima* and thus is not a likely candidate for vagrancy. This race is marked by a particularly bold yellow supercilium present from the bill through to the rear auriculars which are more olive than other races mentioned. First winter birds are like adults, but grayer (Leader 1995). The race *plexa* breeds near the Taimyr Peninsula in north central Russia and thus is probably too far west to be a likely candidate. On plumage, *plexa* seems to be most similar to *macronyx*.

Descriptions of these immature plumages are somewhat troubling as they resemble some of the vagrants encountered in North America, which are assumed to be *tschutschensis*. Some of the photographs of these individuals seem to show strong supercilia and this is also how I would describe many of the birds I have studied in western Alaska in late August. Given that adult *simillima* is bolder than adult *tschutschensis*, I would expect that pattern to hold with immatures. Leader (1995) in his excellent article on Hong Kong's Yellow Wagtails, shows this to be the case in the races he discussed. It is

unlikely that our records pertain to *taivana*, the race with the boldest supercilia, for example, and the timing of these records would also argue for *tschutschensis*. So, there is still some work to do here and until we better understand the variation of immature plumages, conclusions should not be too firm. Also, it must be emphasised that any claim of a vagrant race take into consideration intergrades and intraspecific variation. Most sources (e.g. Cramp 1988, Shirihai 1996) caution against claims of vagrant races because of this, and only the most extreme cases should be given serious consideration. Until these issues are resolved, attention to subtle details, particularly the head pattern, should be noted for possible future identification purposes.

SUMMARY

This article discusses the Yellow Wagtail in North America. In addition to a brief discussion of taxonomy and distribution, the breeding range and vagrant records are summarised. Identification criteria from other wagtails are detailed, with the most realistic problem being the separation of young Yellow Wagtails in fall from the very similar Citrine Wagtail. There is also a summary of the races that might account for these vagrants. To date, there is no firm evidence that any race other than breeding *tschutschensis* has occurred away from western Alaska, but the poor understanding of how to distinguish amongst the races of young birds, which account for almost all vagrant records, makes assessing this a very difficult task. All reports of Yellow Wagtail should be closely scrutinized to determine the fine detail that may one day prove from which populations North American vagrants originate.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I benefited greatly from numerous wagtail conversations over the years with Michael Patten, Paul Lehman, Jon Dunn, Paul Leader, and Geoff Carey. Steven Mlodinow, Tom and Jo Heindel, Michael Patten, Rudolf Koes, Jon Dunn and Matt Holder all helped me find records of vagrant wagtails.

REFERENCES

AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION. 1998. The A.O.U. Check-List of North American Birds. 7th Edition.

BADYAEV, A. V., B. KESSEL, and D. D. GIBSON. 1998. Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*). In the Birds of North America, No. 382 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.) The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA.

BAIN, M. AND M. HOLDER. 1995. Birders Journal 4:212.

CAMPBELL, R. W., N. K. DAWE, I. MCTAGGART-COWAN, J. M. COOPER, G. W. KAISER, M. C.E. MCNALLAND G.E. J. SMITH. 1997. The Birds of British Columbia, volume 3.

DEBENEDICTUS, P.A. 1995. 1994 ABA Checklist Report. Birding 27:367.

CRAMP, S. ed. 1988. The Birds of the Western Palearctic. Vol. 5. Oxford University Press, Oxford, U.K.

GODFREY, W. E. 1986. The Birds of Canada, 2nd Ed. National Museum of Natural Sciences, Ottawa.

LEADER, P. J. 1995. Field Identification of Citrine Wagtail and races of Yellow Wagtail in Hong Kong. Hong Kong Bird Report 1995.

PIZZEY, G. and R. DOYLE. 1980. A Field Guide to the Birds of Australia. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

PYLE, P. 1997. Identification Guide to North American Birds, Part 1. Slate Creek Press. Bolinas, CA

SHIRIHAI, H. 1996. The Birds of Israel. Academic Press Limited. London, U.K.

Matt Heindel, 4891 Royce Road, Irvine, California 92612.