

Status and Occurrence of Gray Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin.

Introduction and Distribution

The Gray Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*) is a small species of passerine found year round in most of Western Europe from Great Britain to Greece (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom and Mild 2003). It is a migratory breeding species from Norway, southern Sweden, locally in Finland, from Poland south through Romania, and is a year round resident throughout the Mediterranean Sea region (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The Gray Wagtail is also a migratory breeding species on the Crimean Peninsula, Turkey, and parts of northwestern Iran (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The Gray Wagtail is also found year round in North Africa in Morocco, Azores, Madeira and Canary Islands (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The Gray Wagtail is absent as a breeder in western European Russia, but is found as a year round resident in area of the western Black Sea in southern Russia, Georgia, into Northern Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan north to southern Kazakhstan (Alstrom and Mild 2003). There are migratory breeding populations across northern India into the Himalayas (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The Gray Wagtail is a migratory breeding species in Central Russia around the Ural Mountains east to Kamchatka Peninsula, south to Sakhalin Island, and northern China (Alstrom and Mild 2003, Brazil 2009). It is a year round resident in southern Japan (Alstrom and Mild 2003, Brazil 2009). Throughout the Gray Wagtails breeding range, the species is found in some areas throughout the year, while other populations are migratory (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom and Mild 2003, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The Gray Wagtail winters from North Africa, parts of East Africa, Israel, the Middle East, the Arabian Peninsula, southern Iran, India east throughout southeast Asia, and across Indonesia (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The Gray Wagtail is accidental in Iceland, the Faroes and Lithuania as well as many African countries south to South Africa (Alstrom and Mild 2003).

In Alaska, the Gray Wagtail is a casual migrant to the Western and Central Aleutian Islands with most records occurring in the spring, and is accidental on St. Lawrence and the Pribilof Islands (West 2008). South of Alaska, the Gray Wagtail is an accidental species with only a few records. California has only one accepted State record by the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In British Columbia, the Gray Wagtail is accidental with only two records for the Province (Etzkorn and Etzkorn 2004, Toochin *et al.* 2014).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Gray Wagtail is covered in most North American field guides. This species is the largest of the 4 wagtail species that have occurred in North America at 20 cm in length (Jonsson 1992, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Gray Wagtail likes streams and fast moving waterways (Alstrom and Mild 2003).

The adult male has a gray crown, nape and auricular patch (Jonsson 1992). There is a white line that runs from the base of the black bill over and past the black eye (Alstrom and Mild 2003). There is a white eye arc below the eye (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). Below this is a black line that runs from the base of the bill to the eye (Alstrom and Mild 2003). Below this is a thick white submoustachial stripe that borders a black throat (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The gray of the neck extends down onto the back and upper wings (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The breast is yellow and extends down to the undertail coverts (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The legs are fleshy coloured (Jonsson 1992). The wings are black and the tertail feathers have black centers with white edges (Alstrom and Mild 2003). In flight, this species shows a distinct white wing stripe that is visible from both above and below (Jonsson 1992). The rump is a greenish-yellow white with a black tail that has extensive white outer tail feathers (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

The adult female has a gray crown, nape and auricular patch (Jonsson 1992). There is a white stripe that runs from the black bill and over the eye (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There is a white eye ring around the dark eye (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The throat is white and borders the auricular patch (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The chest is pale with the lower breast and belly yellow down to the undertail coverts (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The gray extends down the back to the upper wings (Jonsson 1992). The rest of the wing is black except for the dark-centered tertail feathers that are edged in white (Alstrom and Mild 2003). In flight, this species shows a distinct white wing stripe that is visible from both above and below (Jonsson 1992). The rump is greenish-yellow with a long black tail that has extensive white outer tail feathers (Jonsson 1992). The legs are fleshy-coloured (Alstrom and Mild 2003).

First winter birds are very similar to adult female birds, but show a fleshy base to the bill (Alstrom and Mild 2003).

The Gray Wagtail gives a loud “*chink-chink*” call that is similar to the White Wagtail, but is more explosive and sharper in pitch (Alstrom and Mild 2003, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Gray Wagtail is one of the less likely Asian vagrants to have been found in the Province. This species is often found near creeks, rivers and streams (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom and Mild 2003). It is not surprising that all records south of Alaska have been found near this habitat. There have only been two records for British Columbia (Toochin *et al.* 2014). The first record was found by the late Glenn Ryder on November 8, 1991, sitting at the edge of the road on a water culvert along 40th Ave. near Lefevre Road, Abbotsford (Dorsey 1996, Toochin *et al.* 2014). Though he didn't have a camera, Glenn Ryder drew a detailed painting that left no doubt of what he had recorded (Dorsey 1996, Toochin *et al.* 2014). This bird was looked for the next

day in the stream in which it was originally found with no luck (R. Toochin pers. Obs.). It may well have been in the area as access was limited (R. Toochin pers. Obs.). The second record was found by Jerry Etzkorn and his wife on October 26, 2004, near the Carmanah Lighthouse along the west coast trail of Vancouver Island (Etzkorn and Etzkorn 2004). The bird was present for long enough that clear full frame colour photographs were obtained and were published in the magazine Wildlife Afield (Etzkorn and Etzkorn 2004). This represented the second record for British Columbia and Canada, but the first photographic record (Etzkorn and Etzkorn 2004, Toochin *et al.* 2014). The only other west coast record south of Alaska was found in California at the Salinas River mouth on October 9-10, 1988, and was photographed and accepted by the California Bird Records Committee (Pyle and McCaskie 1992, Hamilton *et al.* 2007). All three records have been from the late fall period of October to early November. These birds are most likely to have been displaced on their fall migration in Asia by huge rapidly moving Low Pressure Systems out of Russia and eastern Asia that sweep across the Aleutians and move quickly down the west coast depositing Asian vagrants (M. Meredith pers. Comm.). It seems likely that given the number of other Asian strays that have been recorded along the west coast of North America in the fall that this species might well be found again. Observers should watch carefully outer coastal river and estuary areas in the future.



Figure 1: Record #2: Gray Wagtail at Carmannah Lighthouse on October 26, 2004.
Photo © Jerry Etzkorn.

Table 1: Records of Gray Wagtail for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) fall male November 8, 1991: Glen R. Ryder: 40th Ave. near Lefeuvre Road, Abbotsford (Dorsey 1996, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 2.(1) fall female October 26, 2004: Jerry Etzkorn (photo) Carmanah Lighthouse, West Coast Vancouver Island (Etzkorn and Etzkorn 2004)

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