

## Status and Occurrence of White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin and Don Cecile.

### Introduction and Distribution

The White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*) is a small passerine species that is found throughout the Old World: breeding from the southeastern tip of Greenland, and Iceland; from Great Britain, south to Morocco, across all of Europe; throughout western Russia, all of Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, along the Himalayas east into southern China, Mongolia, all of eastern Russia, and into western coastal areas of Alaska (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The White Wagtail winters from Great Britain, south throughout western Europe from Germany to Spain, east through Italy, Greece, into Turkey and the Middle East, south into the northern countries of Africa, east to Saudi Arabia, throughout Iraq, Iran, into India, east throughout south east Asia north through southern China, the northern Philippines, Taiwan and Japan (Alstrom and Mild 2003). There are 9 recognized subspecies found throughout the range of the White Wagtail with only 3 having been recorded in North America (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The nominate subspecies of White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba alba*) has occurred accidentally along the east coast of North America (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In western North America, the White Wagtails that occur are from the subspecies that make up the (*Motacilla alba ocularis/lugens*) complex (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). These two subspecies were once separate species with one called White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba ocularis*) and the other called Black-backed Wagtail (*Motacilla alba lugens*) (Alstrom and Mild 2003). In 2005, the AOU officially lumped Black-backed Wagtail back with White Wagtail and now the Black-backed Wagtail is considered a subspecies of the White Wagtail (Banks *et al.* 2005). As a result, all previous separated records are now placed under the category of White Wagtail records. The more widespread subspecies of White Wagtail (*M. a. ocularis*) breeds from Yenisei River in central Russia east to Siberia, south to areas around the Sea of Okhotsk, the northern end of the Kamchatka Peninsula and sparingly into western coastal regions of Alaska, but is a rare vagrant anywhere in the state away from the Bering Sea region (Alstrom and Mild 2003, Brazil 2009). The other subspecies of White Wagtail (*M. a. lugens*) is more restricted in its breeding range, and is found on the Kamchatka Peninsula, Kuril Islands, most of Japan, southern coastal regions of Russia around the Sea of Okhotsk, northeastern Korean Islands to the Amur Estuary, Sakhalin Island and northern China (Alstrom and Mild 2003, Brazil 2009). This subspecies is a casual vagrant in North America, but has bred in Alaska on occasion, and even with birds of the (*M. a. ocularis*) subspecies (Kessel 1989, Lehman 2005, Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). For purposes of simplicity, the rest of the section discussing range and occurrence will not separate the occurrence of the two subspecies of White Wagtail. South of Alaska, the White Wagtail is a casually occurring vagrant along the entire western coast of North America. In Washington State, there are 9 accepted records (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2013). In Oregon, there are 7

accepted records (OFO 2012). In California, there are 29 accepted records (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). There are 2 records for Mexico, both from the southern end of the Baja Peninsula (Morlan 1981, Howell and Webb 2010). There is also an accepted October record for Arizona (Rosenburg and Witzeman 1999) In British Columbia, there are 12 Provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1).

### **Identification and Similar Species**

For most observers in British Columbia, a Wagtail would likely stand out and be identified as such, but determining species/age/subspecies is a much more complex task. The lumping of Black-backed Wagtail back into the White Wagtail complex, has simplified the task somewhat. Since both subspecies have occurred in the province we will describe them here In overall size, the White Wagtail and the Black-backed Wagtail are 18cm in length (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This makes them a bit larger than an American Pipit which is 17cm in length (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

The adult male and female White Wagtails (*M. a. ocularis*) are strikingly black and white coloured, often referred to in field guides as “pied” in colour (Alstrom and Mild 2003). On the adult males, the forehead and face is white with a distinct black line the runs from the base of the black bill through the eye, and connects to the black that runs from the crown to the back of the neck (Alstrom and Mild 2003, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The back right down to the rump is a pearly gray color (Sibley 2003, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This sharply contrasts with the black on the head helping to distinguish this subspecies from Black-backed Wagtail (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The adult female is pretty much identical to the male, but the head pattern is less contrasting (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The chin, throat, sides of the neck and upper chest are black (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The belly, flanks and undertail coverts are white (Sibley 2003). The legs are black (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The folded wings on the adults show a white panel on the medium and greater coverts (Alstrom and Mild 2003). Adult females have less of a white patch in the wing and have white wing bars (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The tertials are long with thin dark black centers with broad white edges (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In flight, the primaries and secondaries are dark with a limited white wing patch (Sibley 2003). The axillaries are white with dark primaries that continue along the trailing edge of the open wing (Sibley 2003). The tail is long and pumped while the bird is on the ground or in flight (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The central tail feathers are black with bold white outer tail feathers (Sibley 2003).

In first winter plumage, the White Wagtail (*M. a. ocularis*) has a clean gray crown from in front of the eye that extends over the crown, down the back of the neck and down the back towards the rump which becomes black near the beginning of the tail (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The face

is white with a thin dark black line that goes from the base of the bill and extends through the eye towards the neck (Alstrom and Mild 2003). There is a dirty ear patch (Sibley 2003). The chin and upper throat are white (Sibley 2003). From the lower sides of the neck and across the chest is a black broad breast band (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The belly, flanks and undertail coverts are white (Sibley 2003). The legs are grayish-black (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The tail is long and pumped both in flight and while birds are on the ground (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The central tail feathers are black with bold white outer tail feathers (Sibley 2003). Birds at this age show dark medium coverts and 2 distinct white wing bars (Alstrom and Mild 2003).

Distinguishing between subspecies of first winter birds is notoriously difficult because there is some hybridization between White Wagtail (*M. a. ocularis*) and Black-backed Wagtail (*M. a. lugens*) (Alstrom and Mild 2003). Good photographs are a must if attempting to identify the subspecies of young birds, and some cannot be identified with 100% confidence, even by experts (Alstrom and Mild 2003).

Adult males of the former species called Black-backed Wagtail (*M. a. lugens*) have black that starts on the forehead above the eye and extends onto the crown, down the back of the neck, and down the entire back to the rump, though some individuals can show limited gray (Alstrom and Mild 2003, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The adult females have the same head and facial markings, but the back is a dark grayish black with black blotches (Alstrom and Mild 2003). An important marking found on both adult males and females is the white chin under the black bill (Alstrom and Mild 2003, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Below the white, the rest of the throat and upper chest is black (Sibley 2003). The side of the neck, belly and undertail coverts are white (Sibley 2003). The legs are black (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The tail is long and is pumped both in flight and when birds are on the ground (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The central tail feathers are black with broad white outer tail feathers (Sibley 2003). On adult males, the folded wing from the medium coverts, across the greater coverts down the primaries is white (Alstrom and Mild 2003). This makes almost the entire wing look white (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The tertials are long and mostly black with very thin edges to the feathers (Alstrom and Mild 2003). In flight, the primary tips are black with variable light black edges to the secondaries (Alstrom and Mild 2003). Some birds lack these black edges altogether on the secondary edge (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The axillaries are white and the primaries are dark with the same variable light black edges along the secondaries (Sibley 2003). This makes the wings look very white because there are limited black feathers confined to the primary tips (Alstrom and Mild 2003). On the adult females, there is a small amount of black on the alula, but otherwise the rest of the folded wing is similar to the adult male (Alstrom and Mild 2003). In flight, however, adult females have a distinct black edge to the secondaries that extend up to the primary tips (Alstrom and Mild 2003).

First winter birds are very similar to White Wagtail (*M. a. ocularis*), but normally Black-backed Wagtail (*M. a. lugens*) has broad white medium and lesser coverts and a dark rump (Alstrom and Mild 2003). Caution should be used when trying to identify the 2 subspecies as first winter birds, and potential hybrids only complicates certain subspecies identification in many cases (Alstrom and Mild 2003).

The calls of both subspecies of the White Wagtail are very similar to each other (Sibley 2003). The call is a finch-like “*dildeer*” (Sibley 2003) or “chee-wee” often given from a perch (Dunn and Alderfer 2011) whereas the flight call is a two-note “*chizzik*” (Dunn and Alderfer 2011) that can also be interpreted as a loud staccato “*jijik*” (Sibley 2003).

Identifying adult Wagtails can be fairly straightforward (on the species level), but the identification of juveniles requires more careful attention. Observers should note that Citrine and Yellow Wagtails have also occurred in the province so identification of young wagtails requires some experience and research.

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

The White Wagtail is an accidental vagrant to British Columbia with 12 Provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). Incredibly, three records of White Wagtail were recorded in British Columbia during the fall of 2014 with an incredible photographed record from Salmon Arm which is the first record for the interior of the Province (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). There are 5 fall records for the Province: 3 in the month of September and 2 in the month of November (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). This pattern of vagrancy mirrors California where there are 19 accepted fall records that have been found from the latter half of July through late November, with the peak numbers occurring from September through November (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In Washington, there are 2 fall records both of which are from the month of November (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2013). In Oregon, there are also 2 fall records both from the month of November (OFO 2012). In California, there are at least 10 winter records, sometimes involving returning birds that successfully wintered for a couple of years in a row (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). This pattern is repeated in Oregon where there are an incredible 3 accepted winter records (OFO 2012). In Washington State, there is 1 accepted record of a wintering bird (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WRBC 2013). In British Columbia, there is a record from the month of March of an individual that was present for an extended period of time which likely refers to a wintering bird (Shepard and Weber 1975). Incredibly, even Alaska has had a White Wagtail successfully winter on 2 known occasions with 1 found on the Alaska Peninsula at King Cove December 16, 2000 – March 7, 2001 (Tobish 2001), and in Ketchikan from November 2005 – March 1, 2006 (Heinl and Piston 2009). The White Wagtail is an odd vagrant species along the west coast of North America, south of Alaska because there are many

records for the spring migration period from California to British Columbia (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Many birds must come down the coast in the fall and winter successfully somewhere in the south, maybe in Mexico which does have 2 records, for there to be so many spring records (Howell and Webb 2010). It is not likely these birds overshoot from Asia at this time of year, resulting in the only logical explanation: the arrival in the fall and successfully winter in the New World. The large number of winter records from California would tend to back up this idea, but only over time, as more records are accumulated, will a definitive pattern develop. In British Columbia there are 3 records for the month of April and 3 records for the month of May (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). All these records come from coastal locations (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). This pattern is mirrored by California where there are 4 accepted spring records for the State with 1 April record and 3 May records (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). There are no spring records for Oregon, but there is an amazing record for the month of June (OFO 2012). In Washington State, there are 6 spring records with 2 occurring in the month of April and 4 occurring in the month of May (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2013). These records make up the majority of the state's records, and incredibly out number fall records which is when species would be more expected to be found (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2013).

There have been 2 subspecies of White Wagtail that have been confirmed along the West Coast south of Alaska (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). These are (*M. a. ocularis*) and (*M. a. lugens*) (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There are 2 photographed records of White Wagtail for Oregon that claim to be of the subspecies (*Motacilla alba leucopsis*) which occur in southeastern Russia, eastern China, Korea, Southeast Asia and small areas of Japan (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, OFO 2012), but re-examination of these records has questioned the validity of this subspecies being involved, and it has been argued that both birds were actually Black-backed Wagtail (*M. a. lugens*) (Mashall *et al.* 2003).

In British Columbia, White Wagtails have been found both alone and in the company of migrating American Pipits (*Anthus rubescens*)(Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The habitat preferences of vagrant birds have varied from agricultural areas, to rocky shorelines, mudflats, sewage ponds and fresh water river outlets (Toochin *et al.* 2014). Now that White Wagtail and the former species, Black-backed Wagtail are lumped, all birds found, no matter the time of year, can be recorded as a White Wagtail, which has greatly simplified both the identification and listing of records across North America. It is highly likely more White Wagtails will be found along the west coast of British Columbia in the future. The recent Salmon Arm record has set the precedent that the White Wagtail could show up anywhere in the province and interior birders should keep a close eye on migrating flocks of American Pipits for this little Asian gem.



Figure 1: Record #:10: White Wagtail immature at Salmon Arm on September 21, 2014.  
Photo © Don Cecile.





Figure 2: Record #:10: White Wagtail immature at Salmon Arm on September 21, 2014.  
Photo © Don Cecile.



Figure 3: Record #:11: White Wagtail immature at Brunswick Point on November 5, 2014.  
Photo © Peter Candido.



Figure 4: Record #:11: White Wagtail immature at Brunswick Point on November 5, 2014.  
Photo © Peter Candido.

**Table 1: Records of White Wagtail for British Columbia:**

- 1.(1) adult winter plumage March 2-21, 1973: G. Arnold, mobs (photo) mouth of Coquitlam River (*ocularis*)(Crowell and Nehls 1973, Jerema 1973, Weber and Shepard 1975, Morlan 1981)
- 2.(1) adult breeding plumage male May 24, 1977: Pacific Rim National Park south of Tofino (*ocularis*) (Godfrey 1986)
- 3.(1) adult May 19, 1980: Joy & Ron Satterfield: Whiffin Spit, Sooke (Anonymous 1980, Hunn and Mattocks 1980)
- 4.(1) adult breeding plumage male April 18, 1982: Glen Thomson, GAP: Ambleside Park, North Vancouver (*lugens*)(Mattocks and Hunn 1982, Weber 1985)
- 5.(1) juvenile September 8, 1985: Brian M. Kautesk, WCW: Iona Island Sewage Ponds, Richmond (Toochin 2012)
- 6.(1) adult breeding plumage male May 13, 1988: Mike Bentley: Iona Island Sewage Ponds, Richmond (*ocularis*)(Toochin 2012)
- 7.(1) juvenile September 11, 1988: Keith Taylor: Jordan River (Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 8.(1) adult breeding plumage male April 30 - May 7, 1996: A. E. Burger (photo) Triangle Island (*lugens*)(Burger and Knechtel 1996)
- 9.(1) adult breeding plumage male April 21, 2003: Rick Toochin, Guy Monty: 33A Ave, Brunswick Pt., Ladner (Cecile 2003, Toochin 2012a)  
(1) adult breeding plumage male April 25, 2003: Kiyoshi Takahashi: Iona Island, Richmond (*lugens*) (Cecile 2003, Toochin 2012)
- 10.(1) juvenile September 21, 2014: Don Cecile (photo) Salmon Arm Bay, Salmon Arm (D. Cecile Pers. Obs.)
- 11.(1) immature November 4-6, 2014: Mark Wynja, mobs (photo) 33A Ave, Brunswick Pt., Ladner (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.)



12.(1) immature November 15 & 22, 2014: Rick Toochin, Al Russell: Fadden Road & Vye Road near Kenny Road [both times seen in telescope in flight with 100+ American Pipits] (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.)

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