

TWO YELLOW-HEADED WAGTAILS AT FAIR ISLE: A NEW BRITISH BIRD

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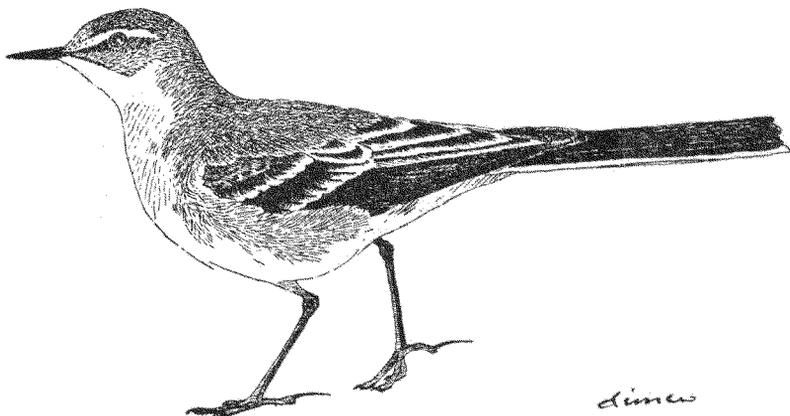
Two 1st-winter examples of the Yellow-headed Wagtail (*Motacilla citreola*), a Siberian species not previously recorded in the British Isles, were captured at Fair Isle on 20th September and 1st October 1954.

The first, ringed B 88594, was caught in the Gully Trap at 1745 hours and was examined in the laboratory in a failing light by H. G. Alexander, Miss M. Haydock, H. Mayer-Gross, Mrs. A. W. Thom, Miss V. Thom and myself. It appeared to be a young *flava* wagtail, but atypical in that the mantle was apparently pure grey. However, the light was so poor that I decided to postpone a detailed examination until the following day, so the bird was put into one of the roosting-boxes in the laboratory.

Next morning the impression gained the previous evening was confirmed: the mantle was altogether too grey for *M. f. flava* or the British *flavissima*, and this and other features of the plumage suggested *M. citreola*. Since the comparable plumage of the Grey-headed Wagtail (*M. f. thunbergi*) is not described in *The Handbook*, this identification could only be regarded as provisional, despite the general agreement of our bird with descriptions of 1st-winter *citreola* in Hartert (1910), Dresser (1871-81) and Gätke (1895). A detailed note on the plumage (see below) was made after the bird had been re-weighed, and it was then released.

It was not seen again on the 21st, but early on September 22nd H. G. Alexander found it on Bunes, within 200 yards of the Observatory, and was able to study it closely in the field. He later told me, "Had I seen the bird in India, I should have had no hesitation in calling it *citreola*." Later, returning disconsolate from an hour's fruitless quest on Bunes, I found the bird feeding on the grass immediately behind the laboratory. I had it under observation in bright sunlight, at a range of down to 20 yards, for a long time, and wrote down: "*Flava* wagtail from in front, *alba* wagtail from behind. The blue-grey of back uniform and pure, contrasting with darker rump and black tail-feathers. The bird often carried the wing-tips below the level of the tail, showing the rump well. More sedate than an *alba* wagtail, with less tail-flicking and head-movement. Considerable white showed in the outer tail-feathers and secondary wing-feathers; the tips of greater and median wing-coverts made a striking double white wing-bar. The breast was distinctly buff and a buffish wash was noticeable on face and superciliary stripe. The fore-part of the

crown and forehead appeared brownish. There was a noticeable grey wash along the sides of the underparts from breast to flanks."



YELLOW-HEADED WAGTAIL (*Motacilla citreola*), IN FIRST WINTER PLUMAGE, AT FAIR ISLE, 20TH-25TH SEPTEMBER 1954

(Drawn by D. I. M. Wallace)

That night a new party arrived on "The Good Shepherd", consisting of W. Conn, W. J. Eggeling, I. J. Ferguson-Lees, G. Mountfort, D. I. M. Wallace and W. J. Wallace. They were all out searching for the bird early next morning, but were unable to find it because one of the hostel staff had caught it in the Observatory "Heligoland" and put it in the laboratory pending my return from the traps! All were able to examine the bird, and after it had been photographed (plate 8) by Guy Mountfort it was set free. It was seen on several occasions later that day and on the 24th, and the excellent sketch reproduced here was made by D. I. M. Wallace.

The laboratory description which had been taken down on the 21st was discussed and slightly modified, so that there was unanimity of opinion on exact shades of colour, at the evening conference on the 24th. The revised version reads as follows:

Nape and mantle slate-grey with a few warm brown feathers remaining from the juvenile plumage. Upper tail-coverts blackish. Crown and forehead grey tinged brownish, becoming yellowish-brown above the bill. Short black streak above the superciliary stripe, and a thin black malar stripe from gape to ear-coverts. The long white superciliary stripe was broadest behind the eye, and tinged with buff above the eye. Chin white, ear-coverts greyish flecked with white. Breast pale buff with greyish markings especially at the sides of neck. Belly whitish with a faint yellowish-buff wash, vent and under tail-coverts white. Sides of breast down to flanks greyish with a few warm brown feathers. Tail black, the outermost pair of feathers white, the penultimate pair with long white wedges. (The tail

showed irregular moult). Wing-feathers brownish-black with clear white margins to inner secondaries and broad white tips to median and greater coverts, these forming a prominent double wing-bar. Legs blackish-brown, bill blackish, gape orange-yellow with pink centre, iris brownish-black.

Structural details are given in Table I. It was noted that the hind claw was straighter than in specimens of *M. flava* (including *thunbergi*) kept in the laboratory. When captured on 20th the bird's weight was 18.09 gm., and this had dropped to 16.76 gm. at 0540 hours on the 21st. When re-captured at 0700 hours on 23rd it showed a good gain to 18.78 gm.

The second bird was first seen on the afternoon of 1st October feeding on a beach at the south end of the isle, and occasionally hawking flies above the wrack. The observers who gathered to watch it were H. A. Craw, W. Craw, W. J. Eggeling, I. J. Ferguson-Lees and myself. As we tried to get closer views the bird left the shore for a grassy field behind, and very soon flew to a marshy area beyond. This ground seemed much to its liking, and on a number of occasions when we disturbed it the bird took shelter in drainage ditches, remaining in them to continue feeding. As there seemed a good chance of catching it in one or other of these ditches the Yeoman apparatus was erected over the deepest drain, and within a few minutes we had walked the bird into the trap.

The chief differences from wagtail B 88594 were a less strongly marked superciliary stripe, a suggestion of greenish-brown in the mantle, and a less pure grey wash on sides of breast and belly. The plumage of upper- and under-parts was not so contrasting in the field, and the eye-stripe was only obvious at a moderate distance as a pale mark behind the eye. The bird's manner when on open ground was very similar, and again we had the impression that there was less movement of the tail than with other wagtails. The following description was made in the laboratory.

Mantle grey, but with a greenish-brown wash. Rump purer grey, and upper tail-coverts blackish edged with grey. Central tail-feathers black with a faint brownish tinge. Outer tail-feathers mostly white and penultimate pair with a broad white wedge extending to about half-way down the inner web. Head and nape as mantle, former becoming more brownish-olive towards the forehead. Ill-defined buffish superciliary stripe, narrow and incomplete in front of the eye, not reaching the base of the bill, and broader but short behind the eye. Lores greyish-white, ear-coverts grey with blackish streaks, and bordered posteriorly with whitish feathers extending downwards in the form of an ill-defined half-collar to meet the white chin. Breast pale buff with a pectoral band of grey clouding. Belly and under tail-coverts white, vent suffused with pale buff. Flanks greyish, washed at sides of breast with some buff. Distinct double wing-bar formed by prominent white tips to the median and greater coverts; outer edges of greater coverts brownish-white, and edges of the white-tipped inner secondaries also whitish.

When the underwing was examined it was seen that the basal half of the 5th to 10th primaries and all the secondaries had a

white wedge extending from the base to approximately half the length of each feather. This feature was not apparent from above, and unfortunately it was overlooked in examination of the first bird, although it is well shown in the photograph (plate 8, lower). Measurements and wing-formula are given in the table, under its ring-number B 88633. Its weight was only 15.35 gm.

From each of these birds a single flat-fly was taken during examination with chloroform vapour for ectoparasites. Gordon Corbet has kindly confirmed the identity of these flies as ♂♂ *Ornithomyia fringillina* Curt. and reports that both specimens show abnormality in the form of the large thoracic bristles. B 88633 was also seen by K. Allsop and J. Chillingworth, the last occasion being on 5th October.

The call-note, often heard, struck us as being different from that of the *flava* wagtails: there was general agreement that it was a slurred monosyllabic note best expressed as a high-pitched "sweep".

TABLE I—STRUCTURAL DETAILS OF YELLOW-HEADED WAGTAILS (*Motacilla citreola*) TRAPPED AT FAIR ISLE.

Character	B 88594	B 88633
Measurements in mm.		
Chord of wing	85	80
Bill from skull	16.5	15
Tarsus	27	26
Tail	82	78
Hind claw	11	11
" " with toe	20	20
Wing-formula		
Longest primary	2nd and 3rd	2nd
3rd shorter by	—	0.5
4th " "	1	0.5
5th " "	3	3.5
6th " "	12	11
7th " "	17	15
Emargination on	3rd, 4th, 5th	3rd, 4th, 5th

By arrangement H. G. Alexander, I. J. Ferguson-Lees, Guy Mountfort and myself met at the Bird Room of the British Museum (Natural History) on 26th November and, after a careful examination of skins of 1st-winter *M. citreola* and *M. f. thunbergi*, were unanimous in the conclusion that the Fair Isle birds were referable to the former species. A note on the differences between these two rather similar wagtails will be appearing in a future number of *British Birds*.



Guy Mountfort.

1ST-WINTER YELLOW-HEADED WAGTAIL (*Motacilla citreola*) ON FAIR ISLE,
20TH-25TH SEPTEMBER 1954

The upper shows the striking pattern on the wing: clear white margins to the inner secondaries, and broad white tips to the greater and median coverts forming a prominent double wing-bar. In the lower, the white wedges on the basal halves of the 5th-10th primaries and all the secondaries are clearly seen, also the white eye-stripe and some indication of the forehead lighter than the crown; the depth of grey on the flanks is not well illustrated, however. (see page 26).