Species: WHITE WAGTAIL

Record No. 694-02-02

Location: EE WILSON WILDLIFE AREA

County: BENTON

Date(s): DECEMBER 13, 2002

Reporters	details	slides	prints	tapes
JOEL GEIER	A			

Specimen no. & location _____

_____

Accepted 9-0

verified _____

Single rept. sighting ✓

Multiple rept. sighting _____

Not accepted _____

origin questionable _____

exotic not estab. _____

Records split _____

Records combined _____

Disposition

Secretary's File

Main File A

Slide File _____

Print File _____

Tape File _____

Duplicate File

details A

slides _____

prints _____

tapes _____

Date reporter(s) notified: 12-5-08

694-02-02 A

RARE BIRD REPORT

Attn: OBRC
P.O. Box 10373
Eugene, OR 97440

1. Name and address:

Joel Geier
14505 Corvallis Rd.
Monmouth, OR 97361-9603
tel +1 541 928-2815
e-mail jgeier@attglobal.net

2. Bird identification

Motacilla alba ocularis ("Eye-striped" or "Swinhoe's" White Wagtail)
1 adult male (most likely) or first-winter male (less likely).

3. Date

December 13, 2002

4. Location

Benton County, Oregon, Section 8, Township 10 S Range 4 W (Willamette Meridian).

In agricultural field adjacent to Southern Pacific railroad tracks along east boundary of E.E. Wilson Wildlife Area, roughly 50 yards east of tracks and 100 yards or less south of Benton/Polk county line. DeLorme Oregon Atlas & Gazetteer p. 53, C7.

Habitat: Open, muddy ground in ponded and mostly vegetation-free area of field planted in annual ryegrass, heavily grazed by Canada Goose flocks in area where wagtail was seen. Field is narrow (less than 100 yards across, east to west) and bounded by brushlines along railroad tracks (to west) and along border with a larger field of perennial orchardgrass (to east), the latter planted and established for one year prior to sighting. Portion of field where wagtail was seen is used year-round by Horned Larks.

5. Details

Circumstances of observation

I encountered this bird beside a large field puddle around 1:05 PM during a run in a field west of our house. I initially saw this bird from a distance of about 50-60 yards as I crossed this field from the west side, to the north of the puddle, with the bird working its way toward me as it foraged

along the edge of the puddle. I approached and then circled around from west to east, gaining clear views from front, side, rear, and various rake angles, at a distance of about 25 yards (possibly as close as 40-50 ft for part of the time), using the Celestron "Pioneer" 8x40 binoculars I habitually carried on runs at that time.

.

I did not have a notebook or writing instruments along, so I was not able to put down notes immediately. I observed the bird for about 5 minutes, trying to mentally note as many details as possible, then ran back to the house (approx. 0.5 mile) to post a rare-bird alert (RBA) and fetch my notebook and scope. The bird was still calmly feeding around the edge of the puddle when I left it.

By the time I returned around 1:30 PM the bird was gone. I returned to the house and made additional notes and a sketch from memory (attached). The bird was also not relocated by others who visited the field later in the day, nor on subsequent days.

Weather and Light Conditions

I saw the bird in a break between showers on a cool drizzly day. I noted down the following weather information in my birdnotes.net report for this outing (subsequent comments in parentheses).

Temperature: 50 deg F (estimated)
Wind speed: <1 km/h gusting to 6-11 km/h (calm to very light breeze)
Wind direction: NW prevailing
Percentage of sky covered by clouds: 100%
Precipitation: showers/intermittent rain

Viewing conditions were in fairly good diffuse light typical of a cloudy winter day in the Willamette Valley, slightly dim due to the overcast conditions. The sun was behind clouds so angle of view with respect to the sun was not a significant factor in the sighting. My series of views as I walked around the bird were from the NW, N, NE, and finally ENE.

Context

At the time of this sighting I was aware of Black-backed Wagtail as another species of wagtail occurring as a vagrant which was quite similar to White Wagtail. However I did not know what the most significant field marks were for making the distinction, although I guessed (from the name) that the back coloration might be important, so I gave special attention to that. Otherwise I looked for characteristics which struck me as unusual based on my familiarity with my point of reference, which was breeding- and fall-plumaged White Wagtails of the nominate subspecies *M. a. alba*, and in particular the western form of that subspecies which I have seen regularly in Sweden (during 2.5 years' residence and numerous return trips for business). My most recent encounter with wagtails, prior to this sighting in Oregon, was in Uppsala, Sweden in September 2002.

Description

My first impression of this bird when I saw it from far off was of a small sandpiper ("peep"), due to its general size and the way it was foraging around the edge of a puddle. However, as I came closer I quickly recognized it as a wagtail very similar to the White Wagtails which I was familiar with from Sweden.

General appearance: Pipit-sized, delicate bird, crisply patterned in black, white and gray. Black "hood" (cap and nape), white face with suggestion of a thin black streak through the eye, black bib, white belly, pale gray back, black legs, dark thin, thrush-like bill, black tail with white edges, contrasting feather edges on folded wings. See sketch and accompanying notes.

Behavior: Feeding, strutting around puddle edges and picking at ground, tipping in wagtail fashion, and alternately standing at alert. The behavior and action of the bird was typical of a wagtail, bobbing its head and tail as it strutted with a jerky motion around the edge of the puddle, pausing to pick at the top of the soil.

As typical of wagtails I have seen in Sweden, this bird allowed a fairly close approach without any apparent concern, and continued its foraging without pause during the time I observed it. It was still strutting around the puddle as I left it. From its movements and vigor, the bird seemed to be a normal, healthy individual. The bird was solitary and had no interactions with other species present (at a distance) in the same field.

Voice: Bird was silent during time observed.

Head: Extensive white on face giving "blank-faced" look, as on a White-breasted Nuthatch. No yellowish tinge. Very thin or broken eye stripe, seen mainly as an elongation of the black around the eye ("bird wearing eye-liner") and as corresponding streaks connecting to the hood and the gape. I looked hard at this but with the binoculars I had, I could not tell for sure if the eye stripe was continuous or broken fore and aft of the eye. If the eye stripe was continuous, it would have had to be very thin. Black cap and black on back of head forming "hood."

Throat and upper breast: Solid black bib contrasting cleanly with white background on breast, distinct from or thinly connected to hood at side of neck. "Neckline" at top of bib showed a distinct dip in middle of throat (*i.e.* border concave upward). Throat area above this line was gray or dingy white. Bib extended about halfway down breast.

Belly and flanks: White, contrasting cleanly with darker (grayish) wings.

Mantle, back and rump: Uniform, pale gray all the way from cleanly contrasting with black hood at nape to dark at base of tail. Seen well in view from rear and rear rake angle. Clean contrast of the even, pale gray of the back with the black hood, in the nape area.

Wings: Only observed in folded position. The most noticeable markings on the wings were four dark streaks contrasting with adjacent areas of lighter gray on the wings. On the accompanying

sketch these are described as "edges to primaries" but from the diagrams of wagtail topography in Alström (2003) I see what I saw should be interpreted as the dark centers of tertials contrasting with lighter edges (first three) and the underlying dark secondaries and primaries.

Unfortunately I did not pay close attention to the pattern formed by the wing coverts ahead of the dark streaks on the trailing part of the wings. I did not notice any extensive white patch in this area, and my impression when I first checked a field guide (when I posted the RBA immediately after returning to the house, within 10 minutes after the field observations) was that there was no bright white patch.

Although I did not specifically note light wing bars, I suspect that these were present. These would be part of what I regard as the "typical" wing pattern of western-race, subspecies *alba* White Wagtails I have seen in Sweden, and hence light wing bars would not have caught my attention as unusual. I had the opportunity to test this supposition with the next wagtail I saw (in April 2003, in SW Sweden); on that bird I noted that the contrast in the tertials was the first part of the wing pattern to catch my attention, before noticing the light wing bars.

I am convinced that a bold white patch, if one were present, would have struck me as an unusual and conspicuous marking on the bird, especially as it would break up the basically gray upper parts (wings and back) that I am accustomed to seeing on Swedish wagtails. On this basis, and on the basis of my note in the RBA written down just after I returned from the field, I consider it most likely that the bird did not have such a patch, but rather light wing bars or blurred, grayish-white plumage without clear markings in this area. However, my recollection is not 100% clear on this point so it should be regarded as an uncertain aspect of the description.

Notes on accompanying sketch:

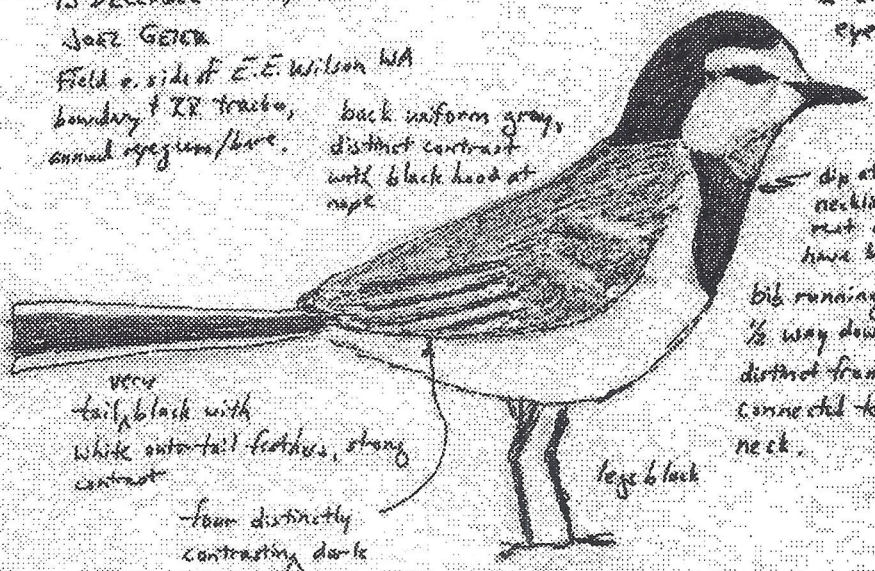
The accompanying sketch was drawn after returning from my unsuccessful attempt to relocate the bird (around 2 to 2:30 PM on the day of the sighting, so 1 to 1.5 hours after the observation). The sketch was made entirely from memory (i.e. without reference to field guides), so as to avoid the influence of having details influenced by other depictions. I did glance at the Sibley guide immediately after viewing the bird, around 1:15 PM, and at that time noticed the significance of the coverts as a field mark, so I had that point in mind while making the sketch.

On completion of this drawing I felt a few things were slightly misdrawn, but I chose to leave the sketch as is rather than to refine it, as details of drawings can have a tendency to be self-reinforcing in one's memory. Details that I think are somewhat misdrawn in this sketch are:

- Tail length (I ran out of room on the sketch pad so made it shorter)
- Extent of black on hood (seems it was somewhat less broad between the front edge and the back of the head, so more white area on cheeks).
- Position of boundary between black hood and gray back (may have been a bit higher on the nape).

The sketch has been scanned in gray-scale as the original is entirely in shades of gray and black.

WAGTAIL
13 December 2002, Benton Co.
Joel Geier
Field e. side of E.E. Wilson WA
boundary & RR tracks,
annual ryegrass/bare.



Behavior: Strutting around edge of large puddle in open grass field (mostly bare or barely sprouted around puddle), picking at soil, typical wagtail action.

Viewed @ 25-30 yards w/
Celestron 8x40 binoculars

Reasons for identification

Familiarity with species

The White Wagtail (Sädesärla) is one of the most familiar birds in Sweden where I lived for 2.5 years (1990-92). I frequently saw them around buildings, parking lots and similar settings, and occasionally even had one show up on the patio outside our apartment. Since then I have returned to Sweden on business trips 2-3 times per year and have seen more of these birds, including flocks in fall migration when this species can be locally abundant. In all I have seen at least several hundred birds of this species. Presumably all of those were of the nominate subspecies *alba*, and more specifically of the western race, in either breeding plumage or fresh basic (fall) plumage.

I have not seen any Black-backed Wagtails. I have seen a few Yellow Wagtails in the southern half of Sweden, all nominate-subspecies birds in breeding plumage.

Field guides and references used

A&M = Alström, P. and Mild, K., *Pipits and Wagtails*, Princeton University Press, 2003. [used as primary reference].
Beaman, M. and Madge, S., *The Handbook of Bird Identification for Europe and the Western Palearctic*, Princeton University Press, 1998. [depicts European White Wagtails].
Sibley, D.A., *National Audubon Society: The Sibley Guide to Birds*, 1st edition. Knopf, 2000. [depicts Black-backed and Siberian/Alaskan race of White Wagtail].
National Geographic Society, *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, 3rd edition, 1987. [depicts Black-backed and Siberian/Alaskan race of White Wagtail].
Larsson, P., *Fåglar för alla i Sverige och övriga Norden.* Wahlström and Widstrand, 2001. [not very technical, but used for good depictions of the races of wagtails occurring most commonly in Scandinavia, to check my standard for comparison].
Peterson, R.T., Mountfort, G., and Hollom, P.A.D., *A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe*, 2nd edition, Houghton Mifflin, 1966.

Similar species/subspecies that were eliminated

American Pipit present in a nearby field at the time of the sighting, is structurally similar to the bird observed, but easily eliminated based on very different plumage. Other pipit species can similarly be eliminated out of hand. Grey Wagtail (*M cinerea*), Yellow Wagtail (*M. flava*) and Citrine Wagtail (*M. citreola*) do not have any plumages combining a black hood and bib with a mainly white face. African Pied Wagtail (*M. aguimp vidua*), Japanese Wagtail (*M. granda*) and Mekong Wagtail (*M. samveasnae*) all show more extensive black on face.

Black-backed Wagtail (regarded as a subspecies of White Wagtail, *M. alba lugens* according to the taxonomy followed by A&M, but still listed as a separate species *M. lugens* according to the AOU checklist which was followed by Sibley) is very similar in some plumages (mainly first-winter male), and must be separated with care. This is the main ID problem in the present case, and is discussed at length below.

Other subspecies of White Wagtail either show blank white faces with no eye stripe (as in *yarrelli*, *baicalensis*, *leucopsis*, and the nominate *alba*), or more extensive black on face (*personata*, *subpersonata*, *alboides*). Some of the "white-faced" White Wagtails (*leucopsis* and *baicalensis*) can apparently show faint dusky lores suggestive of an eye stripe, judging from the depictions of A&M, but not enough to produce the effect seen on the bird reported here.

Concerning Black-backed Wagtail (*lugens*), the main consideration needs to be given to winter plumages. According to A&M, post-breeding moult in adults as well as post-juvenile moult is in general complete by early October, two months prior to this observation. Pre-breeding moult could begin as early as December but normally occurs January to March.

Adult male winter *lugens* can be ruled out based on the uniform, pale gray upperparts which was clearly observed. Adult male winter *lugens* has either a dark black back or a gray back with large, black blotches according to A&M. Also, adult male winter *lugens* has whitish secondaries and primaries which would interfere with the folded-wing pattern that was clearly noted, and a conspicuous white patch which could scarcely be overlooked.

Adult female winter *lugens* usually shows dark blotches on the upperparts, which were not observed. According to A&M adult female *lugens* can sometimes show even gray upperparts, so the observation of this character does not definitively rule out *lugens*. First-winter male *lugens* can also sometimes show a combination of black cap/nape and even gray mantle and back.

However according to A&M both female and first-winter male *lugens* show on average a wider dark eye stripe than *ocularis*, with a pronounced "hook" at the back forming a black patch just behind the ear coverts. This hook was not observed on the bird in the field; rather the rear part of the eye stripe was noted to sweep up smoothly out of the hood, as indicated in the sketch.

For an eye stripe as thick as A&M show for adult female and first-winter male *lugens*, it should have been clear that the eye stripe was continuous in the views for this report. The difficulty in making out the eyestripe fore and aft of the eye is consistent with the thinner eye stripe shown by *ocularis*. According to A&M some first-winter *ocularis* show thinner eye stripes than adults, so this characteristic may also point toward a first-winter bird.

Both first-winter male *lugens* and adult female *lugens* show bright, distinct white panels on the wing coverts, and whitish secondaries and primaries. Even if it were possible to have overlooked the white panels in this observation (which seems doubtful for the reasons discussed above), the whitish wedges formed by the folded secondaries and primaries below the tertials would have interfered with the pattern which was clearly seen on the rear part of the folded wing. Thus the observations of the folded wing point toward *ocularis* rather than first-winter male or adult female *lugens*. M&A note that this characteristic must be use with care as some female *lugens* and a few male *lugens* can show a folded-wing pattern similar to *ocularis*.

The extent of black in the cap and clean contrast in the nape presents one problem for an identification of this bird as a first-winter *ocularis*. Steve Mlodinow pointed out to me, in a

private discussion, that first-winter male *lugens* may have this character whereas an article on wagtail identification by Sibley and Howell (Western Birds, vol. 29, no. 3, 1998) indicates that a basic-plumage *ocularis* should have less than 50% of its cap being black. I did not obtain a copy of that article, but it is referred to by A&M who presumably took these arguments into consideration. According to the subspecies descriptions by A&M, the extent of black on the cap is a variable characteristic in both *lugens* and *ocularis*, apparently with a tendency toward more black in adults and males. Adult male winter *ocularis* according to A&M "often have some gray" on crown and nape, with reference to the same age and plumage state in nominate *alba*. Comparison with the nominate description indicates that the result of "some gray" can be a reduced contrast between nape and mantle, but not always.

To summarize, based on my reading of A&M the extent of black on the nape seems to be a less definitive characteristic than was reportedly suggested by the Sibley and Howell article, and would seem to be of more use for ageing and sexing of birds than for categorically distinguishing between these subspecies, although perhaps this character could be of value for treating populations in an average sense.

The extent and especially the solidity of the black bib points toward an adult rather than a first-winter bird. The crisp white on the face, and absence of any yellowish tinge, also points toward an adult bird. This argues against the possibility of first-winter male *lugens*, which is the only age and plumage of *lugens* likely to match all other observed characteristis.

The observation of fairly clean contrast on the nape and relatively extensive black seems to point more toward an adult male *ocularis* than a first-winter male, but apparently is within the range of variation for either.

Many adult male winter *ocularis* shows extensive white on the coverts, which was not noted. However, A&M indicate that some *ocularis* adult males show definite wingbars, and even on birds with white wing panels, the extensive dark centers can "shine through" through to create a blurred appearance in this area. Either of these could explain the lack of an impression of a bold white wing panel.

With the limited observations at hand (especially lacking careful observations of the wing coverts), definite ageing does not seem possible. However, an adult male *ocularis* seems more likely to have the degree of nape contrast observed, and also fits better with the observations of bib and facial coloring.

Comparisons with photos: Examination of the photos of first-winter *lugens* in the back pages of A&M, and of various vagrant photos on-line, all show either (a) a darker gray ground color on the back resulting in less contrast between black hood and mantle than I observed, or (b) a blotchy back. Also all show vivid white patches dominating the appearance of the folded wing, and a whitish wedge formed by the folded secondaries which interferes with the tertial pattern I observed very clearly. Lastly all show strong eye stripes that would have been clearly visible as continuous, at the viewing distance for my observation. In contrast, photos of *ocularis* show hind-wing patterns, eye-stripe thicknesses, and back coloration consistent with what I observed.

In summary, all observed characteristics point toward *ocularis* except possibly the nape contrast – which appears to be a variable trait in both *lugens* and *ocularis*. The thinness of the eye stripe and lack of a "hook" at the back are the most conclusive of the observed traits for this identification, along with bib and facial coloring which point toward an adult rather than a first-winter bird. Back color, the pattern on the hind part of the folded wing, and inferred lack of a bright white patch on the wing coverts, also support the identification as *ocularis* although they would not be conclusive on their own.

Hybrids/intergrades:

A&M (p. 364-365) note some limited evidence of intergradation between *ocularis* and *lugens* where their breeding ranges overlap in coastal Kamchatka, and express suspicion that intergrades might be more common than thus far documented, especially considering the frequency with which presumed intermediates have been reported (In fact they raise this, along with DNA evidence, as grounds for questioning the split of *lugens* and *ocularis* into separate species under the biological and monophyletic species concepts).

If such intergrades are determined to occur with significant frequency, the possibility of a vagrant intergrade would need to be addressed. I did not find a description of what to look for in such a bird. However, there does not appear to be anything in the observations reported here that cannot be explained in terms of normal variation within the subspecies *ocularis*.

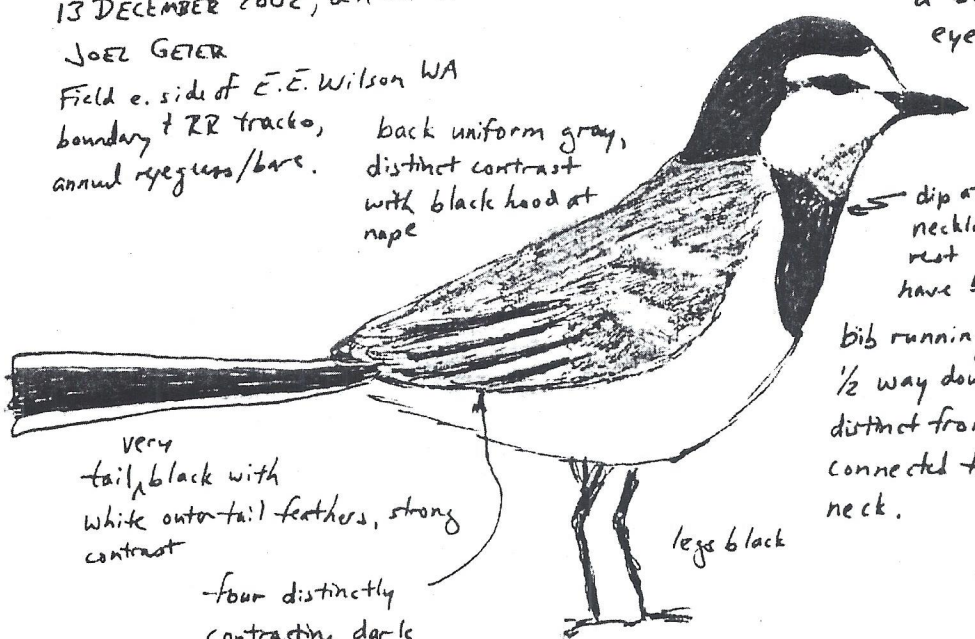
6. Photos, recordings

None

7. Signature, Date

August 12, 2003

WAGTAIL
13 DECEMBER 2002, Benton Co.
JOEL GEIER
Field e. side of E.E. Wilson WA boundary & RR tracks, annual ryegrass/bare.



Behavior: Strutting around edge of large puddle in open grass field (mostly bare or barely sprouted around puddle), picking at soil, typical wagtail action.

Viewed @ 25-30 yards w/ Celestron 8x40 binoculars