

MOTACILLA WAGTAIL SIGHTING IN ALLIGATOR GORGE, S.A.

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All *Motacilla* wagtails, including the Grey *M. cinerea*, Yellow *M. flava* and Yellow Headed Wagtail *M. citreola*, occur mainly in the northern hemisphere and are only vagrants to Australia. Most of the existing Australian records of the species have been in northern Australia. There are very few records of their occurrence in southern Australia. The only previous sightings of a Wagtail in South Australia was of a Grey Wagtail in 1980, at Waterfall Gully, 8 km east of Adelaide (Sara 1982).

My sighting of a *Motacilla* species was at "The Terraces", Alligator Gorge in Mount Remarkable National Park, 10 April 1984, a warm, still morning. "The Terraces" is part of a creek which runs through the Gorge, where water runs over bare rock terraces or waterfalls. The creek was not running but water was seeping from the walls, forming a series of rock puddles.

DESCRIPTION

I first noticed the bird running and walking along bare rock between puddles. It seemed to be feeding on insects. It was slightly larger than an Eastern Spinebill *Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris* and had a long slender tail, like a Richards Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae*, only longer. Its whole shape was rather like a Richards Pipit. Its most striking feature was the bright yellow under its tail and lower body. Its head appeared to be grey with a dark beak and slight eyebrow. It had dark wings with white edges on its primaries and secondaries. Its underside, including its breast and upper abdomen was lighter. Its legs appeared to be dark, fine and long.

I followed it as it made its way up, along the puddles running along the rock. Every now and then it would flit upwards or run along as if chasing an insect. When it was stationary it had a peculiar habit of rocking its tail up and down or rocking its body back and forth, like a praying mantis.

Once it stood on a rock next to a pool, the whole time rocking backwards and forwards. The bird seemed nervous and watchful and would not let me approach too closely. When I accidentally startled it into flight, its call was a "chip, chip, chip" quickly repeated.

DISCUSSION

Unfortunately it is not possible to determine from my description of the head, back and rump colours, whether this bird was a *Motacilla flava*, *Motacilla cinerea* or *Motacilla citreola*, (J. McKean, D. Close pers. comm.). It is interesting that the account by Sara (1982), contains some striking similarities to my sighting. Both occurred in similar habitat at much the same time of the year (March - April). Sara's description of the bird also is similar.

In conclusion, it is interesting that there have been two accounts of a *Motacilla* wagtail during the last four years in South Australia. The bird may stray or venture into a suitable habitat in southern Australia more often, or more regularly, than is thought.

REFERENCE

Sara, G.J. 1982. A Grey Wagtail in South Australia. *S.Aust. Orn.* 28: 220.

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