

## TWO FURTHER SIGHT RECORDS OF *MOTACILLA* WAGTAILS IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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### INTRODUCTION

Wagtails *Motacilla* spp. breed mostly in Eurasia and are migrants or vagrants to Australia (Johnstone 1982, Slater *et al.* 1986). As they exhibit a range of plumages depending on race, age, sex and season, field identification is sometimes difficult. The Yellow Wagtail *M. flava* is considered a regular visitor to marshes of northern Australia between August and April, overflying normal wintering grounds (Johnstone 1982), while the Grey Wagtail *M. cinerea* and White (Pied) Wagtail *M. alba* are vagrants (Storr *et al.* 1982). The Yellow-headed (Citrine) Wagtail *M. citreola* is known from a sight record of a male in nuptial plumage at Woolaware Bay, near Sydney, New South Wales, in July 1962 (McGill 1963), and a brief sighting of an immature on the South Alligator River floodplain, Northern Territory, on 27 December 1981, identified in flight by call and dorsal pattern only (McKean 1982).

In South Australia, *M. cinerea* has been recorded at Waterfall Gully, 8 km E of Adelaide, throughout late March 1980 (Sara 1982) and an unidentified wagtail was observed in Alligator Gorge, Mount Remarkable National Park, on 10 April 1984 (Natt 1986). This note reports two further sightings of *Motacilla* wagtails in South Australia, including the first positive identification of *M. citreola* in the State.

### DESCRIPTIONS

#### *Bird One*

At approximately 13.30 on 29 May 1987, KF and AH located a *Motacilla* wagtail at a small, muddy swamp surrounded by Scarlet Bottlebrush *Callistemon rugulosus*, adjacent to the Goolwa Sewage Works, 85 km SE of Adelaide. It was feeding actively in a shallow pool within 15m of the observers, and its yellow underparts were obvious.

Following this report, the bird was relocated at the same site by many observers until 5 June 1987. Additional details were noted by GC and RK. A composite description follows:

Forehead, throat, supercilium and a line extending around the ear-coverts yellow. Chest, except sides, yellow merging to a whitish abdomen. Ear-coverts mid-grey with yellow feathers immediately below and behind the eye. Wings blackish, coverts and primaries with obvious white edges, which were especially noticeable on the coverts. Tail blackish with prominent white outer rectrices. Crown, back, rump, flanks and sides of chest mid-grey. Legs long and black, eyes dark. Size comparable with nearby Willy Wagtail *Rhipidura leucophrys*.

Most of its time was spent walking along the water's edge, pecking at small invertebrates. It did not associate with any other species. Difficult to approach, it moved to another section of the swamp when flushed. Its flight was strong and undulating and a *treeep* call was given on each ascent. Bushes and fences were occasionally used as perches, from which it emitted a soft *chit-chit* call. It occasionally bobbed its tail.

Apart from the many observations made of the bird during its stay at the Sewage Works, M. Carter also obtained some excellent photographs on 2 June 1987 (Plate 1a and b).

#### *Bird Two*

On 26 December 1987 another wagtail was flushed from a shallow marsh with samphire *Halosarcia* sp. and short sedges at the margin of Lake Alexandrina, approximately one kilometre E of Milang (20 km NE of Goolwa). The observers, Richard Allen, GC and RK, were alerted by a single *sweet* call, similar to but higher pitched than that of a Richard's Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae*, given on each ascent of this bird's strong, undulating flight. The bird circled high, then alighted briefly in the same area, but was partly obscured by vegetation. The upperparts, including the rump, were greyish-brown and the tail was darker with prominent white outer rectrices. The supercilium and underparts were whitish, and no wing bars were



Plate 1a and b: Yellow-headed Wagtail, Goolwa, South Australia, 2 June 1987. From colour slides by M. J. Carter.

noted. The legs and bill were dark. When flushed, it circled several times and called continuously with its legs hanging (*cf.* Brown Songlark *Cinclorhamphus cruralis*), hovered for a few seconds around a nearby ornamental pine, then was pursued by a Welcome Swallow *Hirundo neoxena* out of sight along the shoreline. The bird was not relocated on this or subsequent visits in December and early January.

#### DISCUSSION

Bird One was identified as *M. citreola* in female or eclipse plumage on the basis of the following features: rump grey (yellowish in all plumages of *M. cinerea*), supercilium yellow with line extending around the ear-coverts, flanks and sides of chest grey (yellow in nuptial *M. flava*), crown and back grey (olive-grey in *M. flava*), yellow forehead and bold white edges to blackish wing-coverts. These features are adequately illustrated in Slater *et al.* (1986) and Simpson & Day (1984). Moffat (1981) discussed Australian records of *M. flava* and hypothesized that, as the records were made during the species' breeding season, birds in nuptial plumage had undertaken a form of reverse migration. The sighting of *M. citreola* at Goolwa, also made during its breeding season, would therefore suggest that it was a female rather than a male in eclipse plumage.

Insufficient details were obtained to identify Bird Two to species. Its general shape and

behaviour resembled Bird One, although its greyish-brown upperparts, lack of a paler rump and lack of obvious wing bars suggest *M. flava* in eclipse or immature plumage.

As the number of overwintering *M. flava* recorded in northern Australia appears to be increasing (Johnstone 1982), it is reasonable to expect occasional records in South Australia, particularly during the summer months. *M. citreola* and *M. cinerea*, however, are unlikely to be more than accidental visitors.

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