

Bird notes

First record of White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* for South Australia

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INTRODUCTION

The White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* consists of numerous subspecies and breeds across high latitudes of the northern hemisphere from NE Canada, Iceland, Europe and Asia to China and Japan and the west coast of Alaska. In Asia, it winters across southern China and most of Indochina south to Thailand, Myanmar, the Andaman Islands, Bangladesh, and northern and north-eastern India (Alström and Mild 2003: 357). It is a vagrant to Australia and, prior to the sighting reported here, 26 records of White Wagtail had been accepted by the BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee (BARC), but this is the first record for South Australia (SA).

THE RECORD

While conducting a monthly summer wader survey in Price Saltfields, north-eastern Yorke Peninsula, SA, on 15 April 2021 at c. 1610 h, Colin Rogers (CR) was scanning the track counting Red-necked Stints when he noticed a wagtail associating with some White-fronted Chats *Epthianura albifrons* feeding on insects near saltbush along the edge of the track. Apart from the similarity in facial pattern it was soon obvious that the bird was a White Wagtail, which CR had seen on numerous occasions in Asia and Europe. Alerting Teresa and William to its presence we took several photographs, some reproduced here, over a period of about 10 minutes before the wagtail flew past us and was lost from sight. As it flew it made a series of thin high-pitched calls and displayed an obvious white wing-bar.

After continuing with the wader count, we returned down the same track and again saw the White Wagtail on the edge of the track well in front of us. However, we could not relocate the bird when we approached the area of the sighting and did not see it again before leaving at 1730 h.

DISCUSSION

The identification of the Price Saltfields bird as *Motacilla alba* is straightforward but identification to subspecies is more difficult, particularly when moult is incomplete.

Of the subspecies of White Wagtail noted by Alström and Mild (2003), four are possible vagrants to Australia (Menkhorst *et al.* 2017). These are: *M. a. leucopsis*, *M. a. ocularis*, *M. a. lugens*, and *M. a. baicalensis*. Of these, *lugens* and *ocularis* are ruled out as both have an obvious black eye-stripe running across a white face from the bill, through the eye to the nape. Figure 1 reveals a bird with a mostly white face and at best a light grey line between the eye and the nape. That leaves *leucopsis* and *baicalensis* as possible candidates.

In breeding plumage these two subspecies have similar black breast patches in profile, but the mantle, back and lesser wing coverts are black on *leucopsis* while they are grey on *baicalensis*. Examination of Figures 1 and 2 reveals that although the bird appears to have grey upperparts, the lesser wing coverts and



Figure 1. White Wagtail, Price Saltfields, 15 April 2021. Image Colin Rogers



Figure 2. White Wagtail with white face, black lesser wing coverts and some black mantle feathers suggestive of *M. a. leucopsis*. Price Saltfields, 15 April 2021. Images Colin Rogers

some mantle feathers are black suggesting that the bird is moulting into breeding plumage of subspecies *M. a. leucopsis*. However, intergrades between subspecies in north Asia makes precise identification difficult. Nevertheless, no other subspecies fits as well as *leucopsis* in this case.

Motacilla alba leucopsis breeds in eastern China and Korea and winters in southern China and south to Thailand, Myanmar, Andaman Islands, Bangladesh, and northern and north-eastern India. Consideration of previous weather patterns might explain why this individual was so far from its usual winter range. As illustrated

in Figure 3, extreme weather systems existed off the north-west coast of Western Australia in early April 2021 (ABC 8 April 2021) and these impacted some of the southern wintering areas of *M. a. leucopsis*. Furthermore, Tropical Cyclone Seroja then crossed the Western Australian coast south of Geraldton on 11 April, an unusual southerly landfall for a cyclone (ABC 12 April 2021). This unusual series of weather systems may well have propelled the wagtail onto Australian shores and onto Yorke Peninsula in SA.

Prior to the record reported here a White Wagtail

of the subspecies *M. a. lugens* was reported from Christmas Island on 19 March 2021 (Loh 2021). After our sighting, a White Wagtail, possibly of the race *leucopsis*, was reported on 27 April, from Home Beach on Stradbroke Island, Queensland (Dale and Ferber 2021).

Of the five species of Wagtail recorded in Australia (Menkhorst *et al.* 2017: 502–505) this first record of a White Wagtail for SA leaves only the Forest Wagtail *Dendronanthus indicus* yet to be recorded in the state.

The record was submitted to BARC as Case 1182 and accepted on 20 July 2021 and submitted to the South Australian Rarities Committee (SARC) as Case 142 and confirmed.

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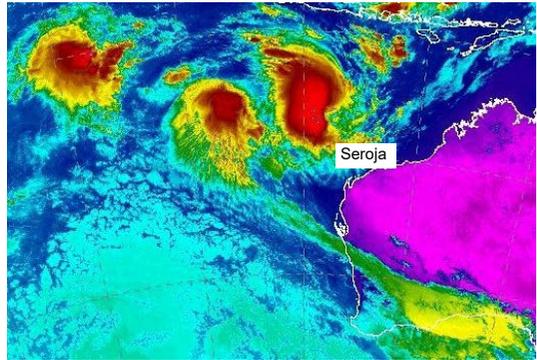


Figure 3. Two tropical lows and Tropical Cyclone Seroja off the coast of Western Australia on 8 April 2021. Source ABC (8 April 2021); Bureau of Meteorology

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