

A YELLOW WAGTAIL *Motacilla flava* NEAR PORT MACDONNELL IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA. The family Motacillidae comprises about 55 species with a distribution centred in Eurasia, where most species are migrants (Pizzey and Knight 1997). Wagtails are terrestrial birds with long legs and they wag their tails up and down and also call in flight (Wild Bird Society of Japan 1982). Two species of *Motacilla* wagtails regularly reach the island of New Guinea (Rand and Gillard 1967; Beehler and Finch 1985). Since 1905 the Yellow (Blue-headed) Wagtail has been recorded with increasing frequency in northern Australia as a summer migrant between November and February, with few records occurring outside these months or further south (Blakers, Davies and Reilly 1984; Pizzey and Knight 1997). In South Australia, there have been seven records of wagtails, encompassing three species, Yellow, Citrine *M. citreola* and Grey *M. cinerea* Wagtail (Sara 1982; Natt 1986; Holder *et al.* 1988; SAOA 1994; SAOA 1998; Carpenter *et al.* 2003).

The first confirmed Yellow Wagtail for South Australia was initially observed by Bob Snell at Tolderol Game Reserve in July 1994 and details were reported by David Close and John Hatch

(SAOA 1994; J. Hatch, pers. comm.). This bird appears to be referable to the subspecies *simillima*, not *angarensis* as published in the *SAOA Newsletter* (SAOA 1994; J. Hatch, pers. comm.).

At 0930 h on Thursday 22 May 2003, I drove onto the beach at a locality about two or three hundred metres east of Stony Point, which is c. 6.5 km E of Port MacDonnell in South Australia. About 100 m ahead I noticed what at first appeared to be a pipit on a kelp sea wrack along the high tide line. Observing the bird through binoculars, I realised that it was a wagtail of a genus that I have seen in New Guinea and Hong Kong, where three species winter. I then observed the bird through 9x20 Nikon Binoculars and a 20x60 Nikon spotting scope and made notes of the bird's appearance over approximately the next half hour while it snatched insects among the wrack. The bird was about the same size as a Richard's Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae* or Skylark *Alauda arvensis*, but with a longer tail that it constantly wagged up and down. My notes describe the bird as:

Bill dark. Crown and nape blue-grey. Back, wings and rump olive green with buff edges to the primaries

and the tips of the greater and median wing coverts creating two narrow pale wing bars. Tail dark, the outer retrices edged narrowly white. Chin white, remainder of underparts to the vent clear bright yellow. A narrow white eyebrow line running from the bill across two thirds the width of the head, and the cheek dark giving the white chin the appearance of a moustache stripe when viewing the bird side on. Legs dark.

The olive back separates this species from the Grey Wagtail, which has a grey back. The Grey Wagtail, in New Guinea at least, is seldom found away from torrent streams, so a beach would be an unlikely habitat to find this species. The Citrine Wagtail in non-breeding plumage has much bolder wing bars and lacks the clear, bright yellow underparts. The bird closely matches the depictions of male Yellow Wagtails in breeding plumage in the Australian field guides (Pizzey and Knight 1997; Simpson and Day 1999; and Morcombe 2000) and the white chin separates this bird as the race *tschutschensis* (Pizzey and Knight 1997; Simpson and Day 1999). However, based on specimens, Yellow Wagtails with white eyebrow and chin visiting New Guinea and Australia are referable to the race *simillima* (Schodde and Mason 1999), the field guides being less reliable here.

The bird spent most of the time on the ground actively hunting small flying insects, which it caught at the rate of about four or five a minute. Occasionally it flew strongly to the top of a coast saltbush *Atriplex cinerea* giving a thin metallic call, which I vocalised as 'pzzzzt'. The bird seemed unconcerned by the presence of my vehicle and at times was as close as 20 m. However, my

alighting from the vehicle at about 50 m range caused the bird to fly at least 20–30 m further away.

The bird was seen later in the day by some other observers, but could not be found at the locality the next morning.

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