AUSTRALIAN BIRD WATCHER 1995, **16**, 21-33

White Wagtails *Motacilla alba* in Victoria

by MIKE CARTER[1], ROBERT FARNES[2] and NEVILLE PAMMENT[3]

[1]30 Canadian Bay Road, Mt Eliza, Victoria 3930
[2]P.O. Box 475, Portland, Victoria 3305
[3]Department of Chemical Engineering, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria 3052

Summary

Two White Wagtails *Motacilla alba* seen in Victoria in 1992 constitute the first fully authenticated records for the state and the third and fourth acceptable records for Australia. One was identified subspecifically as *leucopsis* and the other as *baicalensis* or an intergrade with that form, whereas a previous Western Australian record was *ocularis*. This is an account of these occurrences together with discussion of their likely provenance and the features used for identification to subspecific level, age and sex. It is suggested that one bird was moulting on a revised timetable now in phase with the austral rather than boreal seasons.

Introduction

Five species of wagtails (Motacillidae) have been recorded in Australia but only one is generally recognised as appearing regularly. The Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* is an annual non-breeding summer visitor which occurs most abundantly in the tropical wet areas of Western Australia and the Northern Territory, and more occasionally in Queensland. A second species, the Grey Wagtail *M. cinerea*, is probably also a regular but rare summer visitor to Arnhem Land, N.T. (Carter 1993a). Elsewhere both are only rare vagrants. The other species, Citrine (Yellow-headed) Wagtail *M. citreola*, White Wagtail *M. alba* and Black-backed Wagtail *M. lugens*, are very rare vagrants. Like the two more regular species, they are long-distance migrants normally restricted to the Northern Hemisphere, breeding in the eastern Palearctic and wintering in the Oriental region. Until 1992, there were only one or two accepted records of each of these vagrants. Since then, there has been a spate of White Wagtail reports. The Victorian birds described here have been followed by an unconfirmed report from Broome, W.A., and detailed records from Darwin, N.T., in 1993 and 1994 (Andrew & Eades 1992a,b, 1993, 1994; Mitchell 1992a,b, 1993, 1994).

In 1992 three White Wagtails were reported in Victoria. This is exceptional as there is only one previous record of any species of *Motacilla* in the state (Emison et al. 1987).

The first report came from Gippsland in the east when Maggie and John Marriott of Paynesville saw one near their home in early May 1992. Unfortunately, the bird was seen only once and its identity was not confirmed. Apparently the bird was black, white and grey, the grey of the back being of a hue similar to that of a Silver Gull *Larus novaehollandiae*.

The second report was from Portland in the Western District where Pamment and Marjorie Pegler found a wagtail on 7 June 1992. They immediately contacted Carter, seeking advice regarding the characters which distinguish the White Wagtail from its close relative, the Black-backed Wagtail. Their description of the face as completely white indicated that the bird was a White Wagtail. This was a significant find because there was no confirmed record for southern Australia. Carter proceeded immediately to Portland, observed the bird during the afternoon of the next day and obtained some distant photographs. Better photographs were later obtained by both Carter and Farnes.

The last reported sighting was on 23 August 1992. During its eleven-week stay the bird was seen by well over one hundred observers. In particular, Farnes monitored its presence and movements on almost a daily basis.

The third report was from the Otway coast in southern central Victoria. This bird was discovered by Kim Hatcher on the ocean beach at Urquhart's Bluff 8 km south-west of Anglesea on 6 September 1992. Although the area was searched during the following week, it was not seen again until 12 September when it was found by Terry Lewis, Peter Crabtree, Mark Barter and Carter at the mouth of the Anglesea River. Over the next few days it was seen there by a number of observers including David Eades, David James, Paul Scofield and Trevor Pescott. It was last seen on 15 September 1992. This bird was much more approachable than the Portland bird and therefore better photographs were obtained in spite of the bird's short stay.

The Portland bird

Habitat and behaviour

The Wagtail was usually to be found within the grounds of the Australian Meat Holdings (Borthwicks) Abattoir or in the adjoining wool-store property. Occasionally it was seen flying high into the distance but was not seen elsewhere and usually returned fairly quickly. In the late afternoon during the early part of its stay, it was sometimes seen flying west, presumably to roost.

The abattoir grounds include two effluent ponds and a system of paddocks used to hold the day's kill (normally 280 cattle and several thousand sheep). The paddocks were reduced to a bog and were partly flooded, the result of persistent heavy rain and high density of stock. Animal droppings and straw trampled into the mud provided a rich fauna of insects and other invertebrates. Favourite feeding areas for the Wagtail included the effluent ponds, the shores and surroundings of a small dam which had overflowed, grassy verges along fence-lines and an area where horses had been stabled.

The Wagtail spent much time feeding in the open on the ground but it also perched freely on fences, power-lines and trees. It was even observed feeding on a roof where grass was growing in the corrugations of the asbestos-cement sheeting. It walked up and down, gleaning insects from the blades of grass.

The bird was very active, walking, running and making frequent short flights. It bobbed its tail vigorously while moving around, most emphatically on landing, apparently to regain balance. The flight was extremely undulating with the pitch becoming more exaggerated on longer sorties. The wings beat rapidly to achieve the upward bound but were closed tight against the body during the descent.

There was a large population of birds in the area. In particular the Wagtail shared the open areas with Black-fronted Dotterels *Elseyornis melanops* and White-fronted Chats *Epthianura albifrons*. Its frequent association with the Chats, which it superficially resembled from a frontal aspect, was very evident. The banks of the effluent ponds were covered with rank vegetation dominated by the introduced weeds Hemlock *Conium maculatum*, Marshmallow *Malva nicaensis*, Black Nightshade *Solanum nigrum* and Stinging Nettle *Urtica* sp. The Wagtail fed with the Chats on the crusty surface of one of the 'ponds' while large numbers of Welcome Swallows *Hirundo neoxena* hawked low overhead. It rested and preened while perched in the Hemlock. Yellow-rumped Thornbills *Acanthiza chrysorrhoa*, Silvereyes *Zosterops lateralis*, European Greenfinches *Carduelis chloris*, House Sparrows *Passer domesticus*, Red-browed Finches *Neochmia temporalis* and Common Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris* were numerous here.

Description

General. This bird is pictured in Plates 7 and 8 which illustrate well the bird's shape and plumage pattern. These were produced from colour slides taken by Farnes and Carter. The photograph in Plate 8 was over-exposed but is included here to illustrate the breast pattern. All details are as observed in June unless otherwise stated. The only plumage changes noted throughout its stay were on the breast (see below). Basically it was a black-and-white bird in immaculate plumage, a typical *Motacilla* wagtail, lightly built with longish legs and long tail. In colouration it most resembled White-fronted Chat, but in shape it more resembled a shorter-legged, longer-tailed, slimmer version of Richard's Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae* but with a more horizontal posture.

The description concentrates on the colours and shades. For a more precise appreciation of the markings refer to Plates 7-8.

Size. About 17 cm long including the long tail. Body larger than White-fronted Chat but smaller than Black-fronted Dotterel.

Bare parts. Bill black, fine and thorn-like; legs mid to dark grey, paler on outer side of tarsus; eyes dark.

Head. Nape and centre of crown black, remainder white. No eye-line.

Upper body. Black of nape continuing on to the sides of the neck and then merging with the dark grey of the mantle. Background colour of mantle and back mid to dark grey with some blacker feathers asymmetrically distributed. Upper-tail coverts and most of rump black, shading in from the back. Scapulars similar to back but with more black. Generally there appeared to be only a slight difference in shade between the black head and the adjacent upperparts, but at close range in strong sunlight the back appeared distinctly paler.

Tail. The rectrices were mainly black above with outermost white or mainly so. When viewed from below, the tail was mostly white with a narrow black centre.

Underparts. White, with black forming a bib on the breast and pale grey upper flanks (often concealed). The black bib was confined to the upper breast. Depending on posture, it was straight or slightly scooped at the top and tapered at the sides (shaped like a map of Tasmania), with a regular and defined border, surrounded by the white of the throat, cheeks, sides of neck and breast. Only a small white gap separated the top corners of the bib from the black of the nape and shoulders. By 11 August 1992, a white patch had developed in the centre of the black bib and the edges had become mottled. The more ragged appearance of the bib was also noted on 8 August by Stephen Clark of Hamilton (pers. comm.). The pale grey flanks were normally hidden beneath the folded wings but occasionally the wings were tucked into the flanks, exposing the greyness.

Wings. Lesser coverts appeared black in the closed wing but browner when the wing was stretched. Median coverts were pure white or mostly so. Greater secondary coverts were virtually white, making a prominent white patch in each wing. In this patch some very obscure smudges resulted from small dark centres at the bases of these coverts being only partially visible. Those few primaries and secondaries visible in the closed wing appeared dark brown. The three visible tertials were very large feathers. The longest, which reached to the tip of the primaries, was black or blackish with a prominent white outer edge. The two shorter tertials were less striking in colour (browner and with the pale outer borders less conspicuous) and were therefore deemed to be older. The following details of the remiges and greater primary coverts were determined from photographs or brief opportunities in the field, such as when the bird preened or stretched its wing. The secondaries were brown, apparently with whitish inner webs which were broader and brighter towards the inner wing. They appeared translucent when viewed against the light. The primaries were similar except that the outer two to four were wholly dark with no pale area and appeared duller. There was no obvious evidence of wear or moult. The alula was brown. The greater primary coverts appeared dark.

Call. A shrill *tissiwick* uttered frequently in flight. Alternatively expressed as *chit-a-chit*.

Identification

These days it is generally recognised that there are twelve species of wagtail in the world (Sibley & Monroe 1990). The combination of a white forehead, unmarked white face and an isolated black bib on the breast is found only in some races of the White Wagtail, so specific identification was straightforward.

The Portland White Wagtail *Motacilla alba leucopsis*, **11 June 1992. Lateral aspect.**
Plate 7 Photo: R. Farnes

The Portland White Wagtail *Motacilla alba leucopsis*, **21 June 1992. Frontal aspect.**
Plate 8 Photo: M.J. Carter

The Anglesea White Wagtail *Motacilla alba [baicalensis]*, 12 September 1992. Top: lateral aspect, bottom: frontal aspect.

Plate 9 Photos: M.J. Carter

Identification to race of this very diverse species (10 subspecies) was more difficult. Suspected of being pertinent to this problem was the determination of the bird's sex and age, so some attention was directed to this. Ultimately, these aspects were found not to be significant. The identification to subspecific level is important for two reasons. Firstly, the taxonomy of the wagtails is not yet fully understood or agreed upon and in future some races may be elevated to specific level, as happened recently in the case of the Black-backed Wagtail. Secondly, and of more immediate interest, is an understanding of the likely provenance of the birds visiting Australia and the geography of their normal breeding and winter ranges.

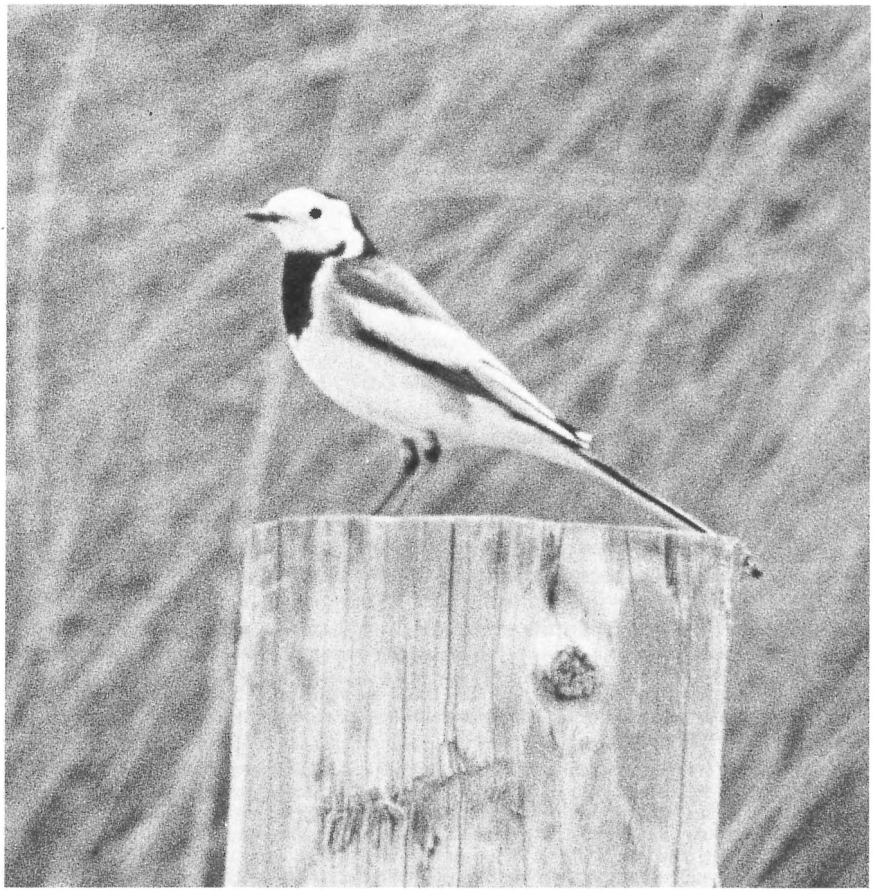
Most of the following analysis is derived from Sharpe (1885), Etchecopar & Hüe (1983) and Cramp (1988).

The boldness, precision and pattern of the markings indicate that the bird was in breeding plumage, as expected of a wagtail from the Northern Hemisphere in June. Since most of the plumage was fresh, it had apparently only recently completed at least a partial moult. Full, or virtually full, adult plumage is achieved in the majority of individuals in one year.

The plumage sequences and moults of the White Wagtail complex are too irregular and variable to be able to assign the age and sex of this individual with confidence. The mixture of grey in the black of the dorsal surface indicates that the bird was not an adult male. Thus it was either an adult female or a first-summer bird of unknown sex. The fact that the lesser coverts were black and if, as believed, the inner webs of some secondaries were white, the bird was an adult (Sharpe 1885), and therefore a female.

Significant to the subspecific identification is the general darkness and extent of black in the upperparts. The critical black areas are across the shoulders adjoining the nape, the lesser coverts on the wing, the adjacent scapulars, and the liberal sprinkling of black feathers in the back and mantle and the extent of black on the rump. This clearly places the bird as one of the three forms of the White Wagtail complex in which the adult male in breeding plumage has black upperparts, *leucopsis, alboides* or *yarrellii*. Females resemble males but are slightly duller. All the characters described above are consistent with *leucopsis* and therefore it is assigned to that race. The extensive area of white on the closed wing, and the white (not black) throat, distinguish this breeding-plumaged bird from the Pied Wagtail *M. a. yarrellii* of Britain and Ireland. The Himalayan and western Chinese race, *alboides*, has more black on the face, breast and back. Per Alström and Krister Mild of Sweden, who are preparing a treatise on pipits and wagtails, the Motacillidae, concur with this identification (in litt.). The Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union Records Appraisal Committee (RAC) has also endorsed this identification (submission no. 162, R. Patterson in litt.).

Other somewhat similar but dorsally grey races (with no black on the mantle, back, scapulars or wing coverts), are *ocularis, baicalensis, dukhunensis* and the nominate *alba*. These races further differ from *leucopsis* as follows: *ocularis* has a black eye-line and, in breeding plumage, a black chin and throat; the white wing-patch of *baicalensis* is usually less extensive and is interrupted with darker markings; *dukhunensis* and *alba* have much less white in the wing and in breeding plumage have black chins and throats; all other races have more black on the head. According to Etchécopar & Hüe (1983) and Lekagul & Round (1991), some birds of race *leucopsis* have a black chin or throat but most have a white throat as in the Portland bird. In fact the presence of a black throat is so rare that Alström & Mild (in litt.) have not encountered any with this feature.



The Anglesea White Wagtail *Motacilla alba [baicalensis]*, **14 September 1992.**
Plate 10 Photo: T. Pescott

There are good illustrations of *leucopsis*, which closely resemble the Portland bird, in Woodcock (1980, p. 82), Wild Bird Society of Japan (1982, p. 225), and Lekagul & Round (1991, p. 241). The birds illustrated are adult males with solid black backs. Takano (1981, p. 123) has a good photograph of *leucopsis* which, allowing for the fact that the bird is in winter plumage, is also a reasonable likeness.

The Anglesea bird

Habitat and behaviour

The chosen environment here was the open beach and adjacent grassy areas. Particularly favoured was the inland side of the sandbar which normally completely blocks the surface flow of the river to the sea. Recent heavy rains had caused a breach in the sandbar along one bank. Presumably the water here was more fresh than saline because Black-fronted Dotterels were feeding along this shoreline. The Wagtail was

very active, hunting flies and other invertebrates on the open sand, among rocks placed to inhibit erosion, and in the flotsam and jetsam, especially seaweed.

Description

General. Compared with the Portland bird it seemed rather more robust in the body, had a flatter forehead and appeared longer-tailed (see front cover and Plates 9-10). Basically, this was a *grey*, black and white bird. Most of the body plumage was in excellent condition but the tail appeared worn.

Size. About 18 cm long including the very long tail.

Bare parts. Bill black, fine and thorn-like; legs dark grey but upper two-thirds of tarsi sandy yellow on front and outer edge; eyes dark.

Head. White with black crown and nape, black commencing above rear of eye and broadening suddenly on the nape. From the hind crown and extending forward about one-quarter the distance to the eye (2 or 3 mm) was the vestige of a black eye-line. On one side of the head this was not quite continuous with the crown and thus formed an isolated spot.

Upper body. Light grey, darker than the upperparts of an adult Silver Gull but not quite as dark as those of an adult Crested Tern *Sterna bergii* in fresh plumage. These species were available for comparison. There was a strong and sudden contrast where the grey mantle abutted the black of the nape. The rump was pale grey like the back, with a fairly abrupt transition to the black of the upper-tail coverts immediately adjacent to the base of the tail.

Tail. Rectrices were mainly black on the upper side with the outermost white. The underside of the tail was mostly white with a black centre. Tips of the rectrices parted easily in the wind, giving the impression that they were worn.

Underparts. The black pectoral patch was parallel-sided, with a markedly scooped top where it extended round onto the sides of the neck. It was rounded at the bottom, its borders were well defined, and it was isolated from the grey upperparts and sides by a narrow white band. It extended to the lower breast. The pale grey of the flanks extended well below the edges of the folded wings. The sides of the breast were a darker grey, reaching almost to the bottom of the black breast-patch. The remainder of the underparts was white.

Wings. The lesser coverts were a darker grey than the mantle. Median coverts were pure white. Greater secondary coverts were white with a few obscure grey streaks. Some coverts had tiny black spots at their centres. The few remiges visible in the closed wing looked greyish brown. All three tertials were new and fresh-looking; they were mostly white with some black mainly on the inner web. The longest tertial did not quite reach to the tip of the primaries. The white coverts and tertials formed a very prominent and virtually uniform white patch and line in the otherwise grey wing.

When the bird was preening and a wing was opened, it could be seen that all the remiges were dark brown without any pale areas except perhaps very narrowly on the extreme inner edge of some. They appeared old and worn. The alula (and possibly some of the adjacent primary coverts) was mainly black, which contrasted prominently with the brown primaries.

Call. A short, hard *tissick* uttered in flight.

Identification

Specific identification was based on the same characters as the Portland bird and the same references have been used in this analysis. In this case the partial presence of an eye-line might have suggested the possibility of an aberrant Black-backed Wagtail, but the shade of grey of the upperparts was too pale for that species and there was no white in the remiges.

Regarding subspecific identity, it was initially suggested by Carter that this bird had come from a zone of overlap between two of the 'grey-backed' races of White Wagtail, probably *baicalensis* and *ocularis* but possibly *leucopsis* and *ocularis*. The vestigial eye-line suggested a relationship with *ocularis* and there seemed to be too much white in the wing for pure *baicalensis*. *Baicalensis* closely resembles *leucopsis*, differing mainly in that it is grey, not black, across the shoulders and rump.

From the description and after studying photographs of the bird, Per Alström and Krister Mild wrote, 'This bird looks like an adult male *baicalensis*. It is not uncommon for this subspecies to show so much white on the coverts as the Anglesea bird. Of course, we cannot rule out an intergrade between two subspecies, but the plumage is so close to a typical *baicalensis* that we feel that it could be accepted as *showing the characters* of this race'. In accepting the record to species level, the RAC (submission no. 163) concurred with this view (R. Patterson in litt.). Alström and Mild also advised that the vestigial eye-line can be seen on many subspecies and is not necessarily an indication of a relationship to *ocularis*.

Judging by the large size of the black pectoral patch, Carter is of the opinion that the bird was at least in partial breeding plumage although the large breadth of the white forehead might indicate otherwise. With regard to age, assuming that *baicalensis* has the same plumage sequences as other White Wagtails, it is clear from the breast pattern that the bird was not a juvenile or first-winter bird (i.e. two or three months old). In young birds the breast-patch is restricted to a crescent across the upper breast. Thus it was either an adult in its first summer (13 to 14 months old) or even older.

An indication that the bird was not a full adult but only in its second year (first summer) is that there was no white in the secondaries. According to Sharpe (1885), white is present on the inner webs of these remiges in adult plumage in both *baicalensis* and *leucopsis*. There is little or no white in the juvenile remiges of *leucopsis* and it is assumed that the same is true of *baicalensis*, for which a detailed description is not available. This development of white with age on the inner web of the secondaries appears to be similar to that in the Black-backed Wagtail where, however, there is a greater extent of white and the primaries also become white. Therefore, the Anglesea bird had apparently retained its juvenile remiges for a little more than one year, which is consistent with the judgement that the remiges were old.

Thus, for the time of year, the bird appeared to be in a confused state of moult. The head, body and some of the contour feathers on the wing were fresh and new, whereas the remiges were old and worn.

Reverse-cycle moult

Mature White Wagtails normally moult twice a year. There is a complete post-breeding (summer-autumn) moult in which all the feathers, including the remiges, are replaced. In the pre-breeding (winter-spring) moult, the head, body, lesser, median and some greater coverts are replaced, together with some or all of the tail feathers and at least one, sometimes all three, tertials, but not the remiges nor the outer wing coverts (Cramp 1988).

As White Wagtails are normally exclusively birds of the Northern Hemisphere, the summer-autumn moult takes place from July to September and the winter-spring moult in the December to March period. The condition of the Anglesea individual precisely matches a bird nearing completion of its winter-spring moult, six months later than normal but in the proper season. This would be understandable if the bird had been in Australia for some time, experiencing the reversed seasonal cycle of the Southern Hemisphere. Perhaps it was the same bird as seen at Paynesville in May and its biological rhythm may have become attuned to the austral sequence. It is well established that change in daylight length can be the stimulus controlling the onset of biological functions such as moult (J.M. Harrison in Thomson 1964, p. 485; Thomson 1964, p. 630).

Implicit in the reverse-cycle moult theory as applied in this case is that one moult must have been repeated. The evidence indicates that it was the pre-breeding moult

which was repeated because the bird still retained its old juvenile remiges as indicated by the pattern of the secondaries (no white on the inner webs). If in December to March it had undergone a summer-autumn moult, the remiges would have been renewed and replaced with adult-patterned feathers six months earlier than normal. In this case one marvels at the durability of the remiges and wonders what condition they were in when eventually replaced.

What is not clear is why increasing daylength should stimulate the pre-breeding moult. After all, those individuals overwintering in Borneo near the Equator, where daylength is constant, would not receive this stimulus. Perhaps the changing inclination of the sun has more significance. For a discussion on reverse-cycle moult and other influences which might affect moult sequence, see Carter (1993b).

Were they the same bird?

The Anglesea bird appeared shortly after the Portland bird disappeared, leading to the presumption that they were most likely the same individual (Andrew & Eades 1992b). However, comparison of the foregoing descriptions and plates shows that they were obviously not the same bird, even allowing for the possible effects of moult and wear. According to Cramp (1988), the body moult of nominate *alba* takes an average of 73 days, but in late starters may be completed in 53 days. The moult of the tertials takes eight to nine weeks. The Portland bird had commenced moult by 8 August but this was evident only on the breast. Perhaps just 40 days had elapsed between commencement of moult in the Portland bird and the detailed study of the Anglesea bird and just 32 days for changes to parts other than the breast to manifest themselves.

The Anglesea bird differed from the Portland bird in the following respects:

(1) The **black on the head** extended only to the centre of the crown, not well forward of the eye as in the Portland bird. The forehead actually appeared much flatter, even allowing for any illusion produced by these different patterns. The black was also more extensive adjacent to the ear-coverts and thus the posterior of the white face was not a regular semicircle. It is accepted that this difference could be explained by a change into winter plumage, but it is doubtful if sufficient time had elapsed.
(2) The **mantle, back, scapulars** and **lesser coverts**, i.e. the 'shoulders' and 'saddle', were light grey not dark grey to blackish. The **rump** was grey not black.
(3) The **longest tertial** was mostly white not mostly black. The two **shorter tertials** were also much whiter. As all were fresh, one or two may have been replaced within the previous few weeks but not all of them. Moreover, their pattern was completely different.
(4) The **vestigial eye-line** was completely absent in the Portland bird.
(5) The **legs** were paler.
(6) There was no white in any of the **remiges** and these were old.
(7) The grey on the underparts was darker in tone and far more extensive on the **flanks** and **sides of the breast.**
(8) The **black on the breast** was more extensive (twice the area) and a completely different shape, extending farther round onto the sides of the throat and downwards onto the lower breast. Whereas the Portland bird had a 'bib', the Anglesea bird had a 'waistcoat'. A change into winter plumage would mean less black on the breast, not more (Sharpe 1885; Dementiev & Gladkov 1954; Takano 1981, p. 123; Cramp 1988).

Points 2 to 8 are differences which cannot be explained by moult and it is now agreed that they were indeed different birds (Andrew & Eades 1993).

Previous Australian reports

Until the present Victorian records, the RAC had adjudicated on only two Australian reports of White Wagtails. A report from Katanning, W.A., on 1 May 1971 was not accepted but a sighting at Broome, W.A., on 18 November 1977 (Johnstone & Smith 1978) was accepted (Patterson 1991). This bird could not be identified to race but because it had a wholly white face, i.e. had no eye-line, it could not have been *ocularis* (nor a Black-backed Wagtail).

In our opinion there is a second acceptable record. This is a specimen now in the Western Australian Museum, collected in Geraldton, W.A., on 18 March 1981 (Storr et al. 1982). It was identified as *ocularis* and, after having examined the skin and compared it with specimens of *ocularis* and *lugens* from the British Museum, Carter agrees with this. The record is currently under consideration by the RAC, but it has not yet been formally endorsed.

Under the heading *M. a. ocularis*, Storr (1991) listed two reports from the south-west of Western Australia. One at Woodanilling in May 1971 is assumed to be the unacceptable report from Katanning referred to above. The other is from Manjimup in April 1978 but no details are given. Presumably sufficient evidence was presented to Storr to convince him to include this observation. If any documentation exists, it should be submitted to the RAC.

A Black-backed Wagtail was present on Fraser Island, Queensland, from 4 July to 5 September 1987. This has been accepted by the RAC, submission no. 134 (R. Patterson pers. comm.).

The taxonomic status of the Black-backed Wagtail is contentious. Peters (1960) regarded this form as a race of the White Wagtail. Cramp (1988) was less sure and treated it uncertainly as a race of the White Wagtail, designating it *M. (alba) lugens*. Australian authorities have decided to follow Sibley & Monroe (1990) in regarding this taxon as a full species (Christidis & Boles 1994).

The wagtail which was present at Lakes Entrance in Victoria from 19 February to 6 March 1985 is treated as a White Wagtail in Emison et al. (1987). This occurrence has not yet been submitted to the RAC. The bird had a black eye-line and was either a White Wagtail of race *ocularis* or a Black-backed Wagtail. It was apparently immature and therefore identification is difficult. Based on some rather subtle characters (e.g. bill size, some white in remiges, white throat, extent of black on rump), Carter (who saw, photographed and studied this bird) considers that it was a Black-backed Wagtail. Tim Reid advises that he is currently preparing a submission, but for the time being the status of the Lakes Entrance bird remains uncertain.

Origin of the Australian White Wagtails

In composing the following summary, particular reference was made to Dementiev & Gladkov (1954), Peters (1960), Etchécopar & Hüe (1983), Cramp (1988) and Lekagul & Round (1991).

M.a. ocularis breeds across northern Siberia from the Bering Strait westward to about 95° E. It has the most northerly distribution of any race, extending south to about 57° N. It migrates southwards, wintering from southern China westwards to Bangladesh, reaching 10° N in South-East Asia.

The breeding range of *leucopsis* extends westwards from the coast of eastern Asia to about 105° E. It occupies the area south of *ocularis* down into southern China. It winters in southern China and South-East Asia. Its vernacular name of Chinese Wagtail indicates its normal distribution.

Baicalensis breeds to the west of *leucopsis* and south of *ocularis* east to about 95° E, centred on the Lake Baikal and Mongolian region between about 45° N and 60° N. One known region of intergradation with *leucopsis* is at Vitim on the River Lena (56° N, 115° E). In winter, it ranges from southern China westwards to Iran, reaching to about 20° N.

All the other races have a more westerly distribution except for *alboides* which breeds south of *leucopsis* and *baicalensis*, west from central China through the Himalayas. Resident in some areas, at the most it is a short-distance or altitudinal migrant. The four races mentioned occur together on migration in Thailand, where *leucopsis* is the commonest winter visitor.

The most southerly limit of the normal range of the White Wagtail is northern Borneo where, according to MacKinnon & Phillipps (1993), it is common. No information regarding the subspecies occurring there is given.

Considering the distribution and movements of the three more migratory forms discussed here, each must be regarded as a potential natural vagrant to Australia. Surprisingly though, even in Africa, the range of the Western Palearctic races which winter there does not extend south of the Equator. Perhaps a few of the birds heading for Borneo are making the extra step to Australia.

An inscription on the label attached to the specimen of *ocularis* which was collected while feeding on the wharf at Geraldton, reads, 'The bird may have arrived aboard the merchant vessel *Maria Grande*, the last port of call being Kuwait'. Given that Kuwait and the likely route of ships crossing the Indian Ocean are remote from any region inhabited or traversed by *ocularis*, this possibility can be discarded.

Acknowledgements

The management and staff of the Borthwicks Abattoir at Portland, especially the General Manager, John Lens, were very helpful. Outside working hours, bird-watchers were allowed free access to search their grounds and observe their rare visitor which had also attracted general local interest. Our gratitude conveys with it the thanks of the numerous observers who benefitted from this policy. We thank Kim Hatcher and Rory O'Brien for immediately informing Carter of the discovery of the bird at Anglesea and also the observers of the Paynesville bird, Maggie and John Marriott, for providing information about their sighting. Many people assisted in the field and in other ways with the Portland bird and we mention in particular Ivor Graney, Murray Grant, Chris Corben, Jeff Davies, David Eades and Dion Hobcroft. David Eades was one of just a few to see and comment on both birds. His provocative and often controversial opinions regarding plumage features, their analysis and significance to ageing, sexing and subspecific identity, stimulated much study resulting in greater scholarship of all concerned. He also assisted with literature research. David James made several positive suggestions which improved the text and was extremely helpful in supplying some of the more obscure references. Allan Burbidge drew our attention to some additional Western Australian reports. Trevor Pescott provided his photographs of the Anglesea bird and Mark Barter reviewed a draft of this paper. Tricia Carter assisted with the word-processing. We are particularly grateful to Per Alström and Krister Mild of Sweden for giving their authoritative opinions on the subspecific identities of both birds and for commenting on the description. Carter is grateful to Belinda Gillies of the Museum of Victoria, Ron Johnstone of the Western Australian Museum and Peter Colston of the British Museum for making available the specimens. We congratulate the Slater family for anticipating the possible occurrence in Australia of both *leucopsis* and *baicalensis*. Both were prematurely included in their field guide (Slater et al. 1986), thus assisting in the preliminary identifications.

References

Andrew, D.G. & Eades, D.W. (1992a), 'Twitchers' Corner', *Wingspan* **7**, 5.
——— & ——— (1992b), 'Twitchers' Corner', *Wingspan* **8**, 7.
——— & ——— (1993), 'Twitchers' Corner', *Wingspan* **10**, 3.
——— & ——— (1994), 'Twitchers' Corner', *Wingspan* **14**, 3.
Carter, M. (1993a), 'Grey Wagtails', *Wingspan* **10**, 25.
——— (1993b), 'Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* in Australia — Addendum', *Aust. Bird Watcher* **15**, 155-159.

Christidis, L. & Boles, W.E. (1994), *The Taxonomy and Species of Birds of Australia and Its Territories*, RAOU Monograph **2**, Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, Melbourne.
Cramp, S. (Ed.) (1988), *The Birds of the Western Palearctic, Vol. 5, Tyrant Flycatchers to Thrushes*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
Dementiev, G.P. & Gladkov, N.A. (1954)(1970 translation), *Birds of the Soviet Union*, vol. 5, 714-737, Israel Program for Scientific Translation, Jerusalem.
Emison, W.B., Beardsell, C.M., Norman, F.I., Loyn, R.H. & Bennett, S.C. (1987), *Atlas of Victorian Birds*, Dept Conservation, Forests & Lands and RAOU, Melbourne.
Etchécopar, R.D. & Hüe, F. (1983), *Les Oiseaux de Chine, de Mongolie et de Corée. Passereaux*, Société Nouvelle des Editions Boubée, Paris.
Johnstone, R.E. & Smith, L.A. (1978), 'Another observation of the Pied Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*) in Western Australia', *West. Aust. Nat.* **14**, 56.
Lekagul, B. & Round, P.D. (1991), *A Guide to the Birds of Thailand*, Saha Karn Bhaet, Bangkok.
MacKinnon, J. & Phillipps K. (1993), *A Field Guide to the Birds of Borneo, Sumatra, Java and Bali*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
Mitchell, P. (1992a), 'Bird reports series 95', *Bird Observer* **722**, 13.
——— (1992b), 'Bird reports series 97', *Bird Observer* **726**, 15.
——— (1993), 'Bird reports series 101', *Bird Observer* **734**, 15.
——— (1994), 'Bird reports series 106', *Bird Observer* **744**, 14.
Patterson, R.M. (1991), Submission no. 23 and Submission no. 24, Records Appraisal Committee, Opinions and Case Summaries 1988-1991, *RAOU Report* **80**, 8.
Peters, J.L. (1960), *Check-list of Birds of the World*, vol. 9, 137-140, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts).
Sharpe, R.B. (1885), *Catalogue of the Passeriformes in the Collection of the British Museum*, vol. 10, 457-493, British Museum, London.
Sibley, C. & Monroe, B. (1990), *Distribution and Taxonomy of Birds of the World*, Yale University Press, New Haven.
Slater, P., Slater, P. & Slater, R. (1986), *The Slater Field Guide to Australian Birds*, Rigby, Sydney.
Storr, G.M. (1991), 'Birds of the South-West Division of Western Australia', *Rec. West. Aust. Museum Suppl.* **35**.
———, Johnstone, R.E. & Smith, L.A. (1982), 'A specimen of the White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*) from Geraldton, W.A.', *West. Aust. Nat.* **15**, 55-56.
Takano, S. (Ed.) (1981), *Birds of Japan in Photographs*, Takai University Press, Tokyo.
Thomson, A.L. (Ed.) (1964), *A New Dictionary of Birds*, Nelson, London.
Wild Bird Society of Japan (1982), *A Field Guide to the Birds of Japan*, Wild Bird Society of Japan, Tokyo.
Woodcock, M. (1980), *Collins Handguide to the Birds of the Indian Sub-Continent Including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal*, Collins, London.

Received 21 June 1994 ■