

First record of Citrine Wagtail (*Motacilla citreola*) for British Columbia and Canada.

By Rick Toochin.

Introduction and Distribution

The Citrine Wagtail (*Motacilla citreola*) is a Eurasian passerine found as a breeding species from Finland south with scattered locations in Poland east through northern Russia, with a small populations breeding in Turkey and western Georgia east with scattered breeding areas in eastern Iran, through Afghanistan, some regions of Pakistan with much of the Himalayas east into central China, Mongolia to Transbaikalia in eastern Russia (Cramp 1988, Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009, Clements *et al.* 2012). Citrine Wagtails are migratory birds that mainly winter in southern Asia from southern China westward through the northern part of Vietnam, northern Laos, through northern and central Thailand, Burma, through northern India to Pakistan with smaller numbers known to winter in Iran (Cramp 1988, Alstrom *et al.* 2003). There are two distinct subspecies of Citrine Wagtail. The first subspecies is the dark backed form (*M. c. calcarata*) which is a short distance migrant that is found breeding from southern China west through the Himalayas to Iran (Alstrom *et al.* 2003, Clements *et al.* 2012). The second subspecies is the gray backed (*M. c. citreola*) which is more widespread form and is a long distance migrant that is found in north east Russia through to Siberia, Mongolia and Manchuria with birds wintering in India (Alstrom *et al.* 2003, Clements *et al.* 2012). The Citrine Wagtail is a rare but increasingly regular vagrant in parts of Eastern Europe and is a rare but regular vagrant to Great Britain in migration (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Alstrom *et al.* 2003). This species is a fall vagrant to Iceland with 10 accepted records to 2006 (Pétursson and Kolbeinsson 2013). There is one accepted fall record for the Azores (Rodebrand 2013). Almost all records in Western Europe are of the subspecies (*M. c. citreola*). Citrine Wagtails are scarce migrants along the Korean Peninsula, throughout Japan and Taiwan (Brazil 2009). There are no records for Alaska (West 2008). There was only one previous North American observation prior to the recent British Columbia record, of a bird found on January 31-February 1, 1992 at the Starkville Sewage Ponds in Oktibbeha County, Mississippi (DeBenedictis *et al.* 1994).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of adult breeding plumaged Citrine Wagtails is fairly straight-forward but since this is an accidental species to North America; most field guides do not discuss or illustrate anything for this species. There are two subspecies of Citrine Wagtail. The one that will be focused on here is the highly migratory (*M. c. citreola*) which is the most likely the type of Citrine Wagtail that was found in Comox, British Columbia. Like all wagtails this species pumps its tail as it walks on the ground (Alstrom *et al.* 2003). Adult breeding plumaged male Citrine Wagtails have an all bright yellow head with a staring black eye and long black bill (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Alstrom *et al.* 2003, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). A black line cuts across the nape onto the sides of the neck (Alstrom *et al.* 2003). The yellow of the head extends down to the throat, chest and lower belly (Jonsson 1992). The sides of the breast are grey which extends down the flanks (Jonsson 1992). The undertail coverts are white (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Jonsson 1992, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The back down to the rump is gray colored (Brazil 2009, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The wings are black with two large white wing bars and white edged tertials with dark centers to the feathers (Alstrom *et al.* 2003, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The lower rump and tail are dark colored with broad white outer tail feathers (Alstrom *et al.* 2003, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The underside of the tail is white with a dark line that runs down the center of the tail (Jonsson 1992). The legs are black (Brazil 2009). Females are similar to males but have more limited yellow on the face with yellow over the eye and extending fully around the outside of a dark auricular patch (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom *et al.* 2003). There is dark gray feathering on the crown that extends onto the back (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom *et al.* 2003). The yellow of the throat extends like the adult male down the breast (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom *et al.* 2003). The coloration of adult females is similar to an adult male but the overall brightness of the yellow on the head is much duller in overall coloration (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom *et al.* 2003). Winter adult males lose the dark nape line and develop a dark auricular patch on the face (Alstrom *et al.* 2003, Brazil 2009). Adult females lose yellow tones on the breast and chest but keep the yellow tones on the face (Alstrom *et al.* 2003, Brazil 2009). First winter birds are very white overall and lack yellow tones on the face and breast (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom

et al. 2003). The crown is dark gray and this extends onto the back (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom *et al.* 2003). There is a broad white supercilium over the eye that extends down and completely around the gray auricular patch and back to the white throat (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Alstrom *et al.* 2003). There is a dark malar stripe that runs down from the bill base to the side of the throat (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom *et al.* 2003). These birds have dark eyes and a dark bill but note some birds can show a pale base to the bill (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Alstrom *et al.* 2003, Brazil 2009). First winter birds have two large wing bars and white edged tertail feathers with large black centered feathers (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom *et al.* 2003). The tail feather pattern is the same as an adult bird and is readily identified by being long in overall size and on the upper side of the inner tail feathers have black feathers with bold white outer tail feathers (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom *et al.* 2003). The underside of the tail is very pale and the legs are black (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom *et al.* 2003). The calls of Citrine Wagtail are similar to both Yellow Wagtails but are more drawn out sounding “*srreep*” which can be repeated a few times with birds in flight (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Alstrom *et al.* 2003).

The four different subspecies of adult Eastern Yellow Wagtails are very different to adult Citrine Wagtails (Clements *et al.* 2012). Immature Eastern Yellow Wagtail is similar looking to immature Citrine Wagtail but it is important to note that the facial pattern is different. All first winter Eastern Yellow Wagtail has a long broad white stripe over the eye and a white throat but the white stripe doesn't wrap around the auricular patch and attach to the throat (Lewington *et al.* 1992, Alstrom *et al.* 2003, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). Juvenile birds have a malar stripe that connects to a dark collar across the chest that separates the throat from the breast (Jonsson 1992, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). This fades off as birds change into first winter plumage (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom *et al.* 2003). Another important difference is that first winter Eastern Yellow Wagtails have a yellow colored vent (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom *et al.* 2003). The tail of Eastern Yellow Wagtail is shorter compared to Citrine Wagtail (Alstrom *et al.* 2003). The calls of Eastern Yellow Wagtail are similar to Citrine Wagtail but are a thinner buzzy sounding “*tsweep*” call note that is repeated in flying birds (Alstrom *et al.* 2003, Mullarney *et al.* 2009).

Occurrence and Documentation

On November 15, 2012 David Routledge discovered a wagtail in a farm field near the Courtenay River Estuary. Believing the bird to be an immature Yellow Wagtail he alerted birders to his find on many social media outlets (Yahoo message #22111 BCVIBIRDS). It was a couple of days later the bird was thought to be instead a White Wagtail but it was not until pictures were circulated that some alert observers realized the bird was in fact an immature Citrine Wagtail (J. Bradley Pers. Comm.). The bird was seen by many people from all over North America thanks to the hospitality of the land owner allowing observers to venture on the property to see the bird. The bird was last reported on March 25, 2013; in the same general area it was originally found. It is impossible to know how this bird ended up in Comox. It is logical to look at Asia as the most likely route this bird took to reach Comox, British Columbia, but given the birds rare status in Japan, Korea and the fact that there are no records for Alaska it seems a low probability. In almost every case of Asian birds turning up south of Alaska there are normally records from Alaska that occurred previously in the past which is logical given Alaska's close proximity to Asia. There is only one Asian species that turned up along the coast of North America south of Alaska first before eventually being found in Alaska and that is Little Curlew. No matter what manner the Citrine Wagtail made it to North America it travelled a long distance before it settled in Comox for the winter. The origin of the Citrine Wagtail in Comox it is by far one of the most extreme examples in British Columbian avian history of a lost bird. The likelihood of another being found in the Province in the future seems highly remote.



Figure 1: Record #1: Citrine Wagtail immature on November 18, 2013 near Courtenay River Estuary. Photo © Mike Ashbee.

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