

Status and Occurrence of Eastern Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla tschutschensis*) in British Columbia.
By Rick Toochin.

Introduction and Distribution

The Eastern Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla tschutschensis*) is a small passerine species that breeds from the arctic coast of the northwestern Mackenzie River Delta, west across the arctic coast of the Yukon, west throughout northern and western Alaska, west into Russia from the Chukotka Peninsula, south and east to Amurland as far west as eastern Kazakhstan, north-eastern Mongolia, and Northeast China (Godfrey 1986, Alstrom and Mild 2003, Brazil 2009, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This species winters from southern Japan, southern China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Southeast Asia, the Greater Sundas, and northern Australia (Alstrom and Mild 2003, Brazil 2009). Birds that breed in North America migrate back to Russia to winter in southern parts of Asia. One Eastern Yellow Wagtail subspecies called (*Motacilla tschutschensis simillima*) that breeds in eastern Siberia has been recorded as a casual vagrant on islands in western Alaska north to St. Lawrence Island and is accidental on the Alaskan Mainland (Gibson and Kessel 1997, West 2008). Some authorities recognize this as a subspecies of Eastern Yellow Wagtail which Clements *et al.* (2014) merges with the nominate subspecies of Eastern Yellow Wagtail called (*Motacilla tschutschensis tschutschensis*). In 2004, the AOU recognized a split in the former species called Yellow Wagtail which was officially split into two species: Eastern Yellow Wagtail and Western Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*). The systematics of the Western Yellow Wagtail is complicated and is currently not fully understood (Banks *et al.* 2005). There are many distinct subspecies that are currently lumped together under Western Yellow Wagtail that could be split into more species in the future (Banks *et al.* 2005). The Western Yellow Wagtail breeds from Europe, North Africa, through Turkey, the Middle East, Iran, north and east to Eastern Mongolia, and across southern Russia into the Arctic regions of Siberia to the Kolyma River (Alstrom and Mild 2003, Brazil 2009). This species winters from Sub-Saharan Africa, areas of the Arabian Peninsula, India and areas of South and South-east Asia (Alstrom and Mild 2003). Currently, the AOU doesn't recognize any records of Western Yellow Wagtail for North America (Banks *et al.* 2005). It is unclear if there are any records for North America, but observers should keep this in mind when reporting Eastern Yellow Wagtail anywhere in North America (Banks *et al.* 2005).

All records south of Alaska of the Eastern Yellow Wagtail are presumed by authorities to be of the subspecies (*Motacilla t. tschutschensis*) due to its abundance in northern Alaska (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). A photographic record from Ocean Shores in Washington State of an adult bird found on July 29, 1992, was believed to be of the subspecies (*Motacilla t. tschutschensis*) (Wahl *et al.* 2005). Due to the similarity of immature and winter plumages of the two known Eastern Yellow Wagtail subspecies that are known occur in North America in Alaska, it is presumed at

this time that all West Coast records south of Alaska, pertain to the more abundant (*Motacilla t. tschutschensis*), but in the future, a more in depth study of these records could change our current understanding (Hamilton *et al.* 2007).

Along the west coast, the Eastern Yellow Wagtail is a casual vagrant with almost all records occurring in the fall (Roberson 1980, Hamilton *et al.* 2007). In Washington State, there are only two accepted state records by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2013). In Oregon, there are only three accepted state records by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2012). There are eighteen accepted state records for California by the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). There is one accepted record for Nevada (Cressman *et al.* 1998, Banks *et al.* 2005, NBRC 2015). There is even an incredible accepted record of “Yellow Wagtail” for Alabama, but it is unclear which species is involved (Banks *et al.* 2005, ABRC 2015). There is one accepted record for Mexico from the Baja Peninsula (Banks *et al.* 2005). An even more spectacular record is of a photographed “Yellow” Wagtail from Plum Beach, Brooklyn, New York, from September 7, 2008 (NYSARC 2008, Guthrie 2009). In British Columbia, there are over ten Provincial records and all have come from coastal locations (Campbell *et al.* 1997, Toochin *et al.* 2014).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Eastern Yellow Wagtail is covered in all standard North American field guides. Adult males are very beautiful and if seen well can be identified to subspecies (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In many field guides, there is mention of the subspecies (*Motacilla tschutschensis simillima*) which is different looking to the (*Motacilla tschutschensis tschutschensis*), but the former is not recognized as a subspecies by some authorities (Alstrom and Mild 2003, Dunn and Alderfer 2011, Clements *et al.* 2014). In Alstrom and Mild (2003), the subspecies (*Motacilla tschutschensis simillima*) of Eastern Yellow Wagtail is merged with the subspecies (*Motacilla tschutschensis tschutschensis*). Most North American field guides show the adult plumage of (*Motacilla tschutschensis simillima*) due to its noticeable differences to adult plumaged (*Motacilla tschutschensis tschutschensis*) (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Due to the extreme complexity of the “Yellow Wagtail” group, identification discussion will be confined to adults. Separating subspecies in other plumages is not yet straightforward, nor is there universal agreement on which subspecies are recognized.

Adult breeding-plumaged male Eastern Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla tschutschensis tschutschensis*) has a gray crown, white eye stripe from the base of the black bill over and behind the eye (Brazil 2009). The ear coverts are grayish-black with a white malar stripe that runs down the border (Alstrom and Mild 2003). Below the dark eye is a white eye-arc (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The chin is white and the throat is yellow with a speckled breast band (Brazil 2009, Dunn

and Alderfer 2011). The belly, flanks and undertail coverts are bright yellow (Sibley 2003). The legs are long and black (Sibley 2003). The back down to the rump is green (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The wings are dark with white-edged greater coverts and tertial feather edges (Brazil 2009). The tail is the shortest in length of all Wagtails occurring in North America; however, it is slightly longer than the tail of an American Pipit (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The tail is pumped in flight and bobbed constantly when birds are sitting on the ground (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The outer tail feathers are white and the inner tail feathers are dark (Sibley 2003). In flight, the tail is spread showing bold white (Brazil 2009). Adult female Eastern Yellow Wagtails of the subspecies (*Motacilla tschutschensis tschutschensis*) are duller with a white throat, white mixed into the yellow breast, olive that both cuts across the upper breast and goes down along the sides and flanks, and with white undertail coverts (Brazil 2009). Otherwise the females are similar to the males. On the head the gray crown and gray ear coverts are not as contrasting as the adult males (Brazil 2009).

Adult breeding-plumaged male Eastern Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla tschutschensis simillima*) has a dark crown with a broad white line that goes from the base of the black bill over and behind the dark eye (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The ear coverts are black, and there is no obvious white eye-arc below the eye (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The chin is white with a bright yellow throat that extends down to the belly, flanks and undertail coverts that averages brighter than the nominate subspecies (Alstrom and Mild 2003, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There is little to no dark breast band across the upper breast (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The back to the rump is dark green (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The wings are dark with white-edged greater coverts and tertial feather edges (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The outer tail feathers are white and the inner tail feathers are dark (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In flight, the tail is spread showing bold white (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). It is important to note that some others like Alstrom and Mild (2003) found that this subspecies was more variable than many field guides show, and certain identification is not always possible. Adult female Eastern Yellow Wagtails of the subspecies (*Motacilla tschutschensis simillima*) are similar enough to the subspecies (*Motacilla tschutschensis tschutschensis*) that differences are subtle and in some cases not easily separated in the field (Alstrom and Mild 2003).

All first winter Eastern Yellow Wagtail have 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 as in Citrine Wagtail (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 (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This fades off as birds change into first winter plumage (Alstrom and Mild 2003). Another important field mark in identifying first winter Eastern Yellow Wagtails is that they have a yellow-coloured vent (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The

calls of Eastern Yellow Wagtail are a thinner buzzy sounding “*tsweep*” call note that is repeated in flying birds (Alstrom and Mild 2003, Brazil 2009)

One species that can look similar to the Eastern Yellow Wagtail is the Citrine Wagtail. Although there are two subspecies of Citrine Wagtail, only (*M.c. citreola*) is highly migratory and one such individual appeared in Comox, British Columbia November 15, 2012 – March 25, 2013 (Toochin 2013) for a second North American record. Like all wagtails this species pumps its tail as it walks on the ground (Alstrom and Mild 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 and Mild 2003, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). A black line cuts across the nape onto the sides of the neck (Alstrom and Mild 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 coloured (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 and Mild 2003, Mullarney *et al.* 2009). The lower rump and tail are dark coloured with broad white outer tail feathers (Alstrom and Mild 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 that extends fully around the outside of a dark auricular patch (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom and Mild 2003). There is dark gray feathering on the crown that extends onto the back (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom and Mild 2003). The yellow of the throat extends down the breast, similar to the adult male (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom and Mild 2003). The colouration 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 and Mild 2003). Winter adult males lose the dark nape line and develop a dark auricular patch on the face (Alstrom and Mild 2003, Brazil 2009). Adult females lose yellow tones on the breast and chest, but keep the yellow tones on the face (Alstrom and Mild 2003, Brazil 2009). First winter birds are very white overall and lack yellow tones on the face and breast (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom and Mild 2003). The crown is dark gray which extends onto the back (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom and Mild 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 and Mild 2003). There is a dark malar stripe that runs down from the bill base to the side of the throat (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom and Mild 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 and Mild 2003, Brazil 2009). First winter birds have two large wing bars and white-edged tertial feathers with large black-centered feathers (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom and Mild 2003). The tail feather pattern is the same as an adult bird and is readily identified by being long in overall size

(Jonsson 1992). On the upper side of the inner tail feathers appear black feathers with bold white outer tail feathers (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom and Mild 2003). The underside of the tail is very pale, and the legs are black (Jonsson 1992, Alstrom and Mild 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 and Mild 2003).

The identification of the Western Yellow Wagtail is complicated due to the large number of subspecies found within its substantial range in Europe to Asia (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The most likely subspecies to make it to North America is the migratory Siberian subspecies (*Motacilla flava thunbergi*) (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The adults have a dark blackish-gray crown, with black ear coverts (Brazil 2009). There is a faint light line from the black bill to the dark eye that slightly flares out behind the eye (Alstrom and Mild 2003). There is a thin short white line outlining the ear coverts that borders the chin and throat (Brazil 2009). The chin, throat, breast, flanks and undertail coverts are yellow (Brazil 2009). The back and rump are green (Brazil 2009). The wings are black with light edges on the lesser coverts and greater coverts making two weak wing bars (Brazil 2009). The tertial feathers have black centers with thin light edges (Brazil 2009). The tail is long and slender and is black with white outer tail feathers (Brazil 2009). It is pumped in flight and bobbed constantly when birds are standing on the ground (Alstrom and Mild 2003). The legs are long and black (Brazil 2009). Adult females are duller overall with a gray crown that extends to the ear coverts (Brazil 2009). There is a thick white stripe that starts from the base of the black bill and goes over the dark eye and flares out past the eye (Brazil 2009). The throat and breast down to the central area of the belly are white (Brazil 2009). The flanks down to the under coverts are light yellow (Brazil 2009). The rest of the bird is similar looking to the adult male (Brazil 2009). Immature birds look similar to Eastern Yellow Wagtails (Alstrom and Mild 2003). Calls include a thin buzzy “*tsweep*”, “*bizi*” or “*zi*” (Brazil 2009). The song is given from a perch and is made up of a short series of twitters and “*srii-sriit*” sounds (Brazil 2009).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Eastern Yellow Wagtail is a casual vagrant to British Columbia with fourteen Provincial records (Campbell *et al.* 1997, Toochin *et al.* 2014). Of these records 10 are from the fall period which mirrors all other records down the west coast (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Toochin *et al.* 2014). British Columbian Records have occurred from September 1 – October 18 which is exactly the same time period for California with records in that state starting from mid-August to the end of September (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Toochin *et al.* 2014). Birds found in this period are almost always juvenile or immature birds making identification of subspecies impossible due to the overall similarities of both Eastern Yellow Wagtail subspecies at this age (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Toochin *et al.* 2014). Of note, there are no spring records from California to Washington

(Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2013). In British Columbia, there are three spring records spanning from April 30 – May 16 (Toochin *et al.* 2014). These birds were most likely individuals that successfully wintered somewhere in the New World. An intriguing record comes from the Queen Charlotte Islands of a bird seen while field crews were conducting alpine bird surveys (Walmsley 1994). An adult male Eastern Yellow Wagtail was watched singing and doing nuptial flights in early June 1993, and was seen again in the same alpine area a few times until early July 1993 (Walmsley 1994). There are no confirmed breeding records of Eastern Yellow Wagtail away from the north coast of the Yukon and the Mackenzie River Delta in the Northwest Territories (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Unless further survey work is conducted in similar areas in the future, this record will always remain an unsuccessful or possible breeding attempt (Walmsley 1994). It should be noted that a second bird was never reported, and no nest with eggs or chicks was ever found despite many searches (Walmsley 1994). There is only one other record along the west coast that doesn't fall into the established fall period. This was of an adult breeding-plumaged bird found at Ocean Shores Washington on July 20, 1992 (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2013). Almost all records to date south of Alaska have been along the coast (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). There is an intriguing inland record from Boulder City, Nevada, on September 11, 1994 (Cressman *et al.* 1998, NBRC 2015), and another from the San Quintin Plain in Baja California in Mexico (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Most Eastern Yellow Wagtails are found solitary which was the case of an immature bird found on Bearskin Bay, in Queen Charlotte City, by James Bradley on September 29, 2014 (J. Bradley pers. Comm.); however, some Eastern Yellow Wagtails have been found with large groups of American Pipits. This was the case on September 29, 2014 when the author found an immature Eastern Yellow Wagtail with 500 American Pipits in a corn stubble field in Sumas Prairie, Abbotsford (R. Toochin pers. Obs.). It is highly likely this species will occur again in British Columbia since it breeds in North America and is highly migratory (Campbell *et al.* 1997). The most likely areas for future sightings are coastal estuaries and agricultural fields (Campbell *et al.* 1997). Since there are a couple of inland North American records, interior observers should watch for this species in the fall and check areas that get large numbers of American Pipits. The recent record of an immature White Wagtail in Salmon Arm on September 21, 2014, sets the precedent that a wagtail can be found inland in the province (D. Cecile pers. Comm.).



Figure 1: Record #: 14: Eastern Yellow Wagtail immature at Skidegate on September 29, 2014. Photo © James Bradley.

Table 1: Records of Eastern Yellow Wagtail for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) immature October 6, 1985: Brian M. Kautesk, Dale A. Jensen: Piper Road, Burnaby Lake, Burnaby (Kautesk and Jensen 1986)
- 2.(2) immatures September 20, 1986: Andy Stewart: NW Corner of Lulu Island, Richmond (Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 3.(1) immature September 1, 1991: Mike Bentley: Sandspit, Queen Charlotte Islands (Siddle 1992a, Campbell *et al.* 1997)
- 4.(1) adult breeding plumage June/July, 1993: Phred Collins : Summit Lakes on Mt Larson, Queen Charlotte Islands [bird doing nuptial displays](Walmsley 1994)
- 5.(1) immature September 4-8, 1995: Hank Vanderpol, mobs (photo) Martindale Flats, Central Saanich near Victoria (Bowling 1996a, Davidson 1995)
- 6.(1) immature October 5-7, 1995: Brent Diakow, mobs (photo) Central Saanich, near Victoria (Bain and Holder 1995f, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 7.(1) immature October 18, 1996: Rick Toochin, Stuart Holwill: Iona Island Sewage Ponds, Richmond (Toochin 1999, Plath 2000)
- 8.(1) adult breeding plumage May 1, 1998: Darryl Lum, Margaret Huntley: Martindale Flats, Victoria (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 9.(1) adult breeding plumage April 30, 2004: Aurora Patterson: Tofino Airport (Cecile 2004c, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 10.(1) immature September 21, 2009: Rick Toochin: Sooke (Toochin 2012b)
- 11.(1) adult breeding plumage May 16, 2010: Dave Newell, mob: Martindale Flats, Victoria (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 12.(1) immature October 12, 2013: Adrian Boyle (photo) Royston (Toochin *et al.* 2014)

- 13.(1) immature September 29, 2014: Rick Tootchin (FN) Cole Road near Campbell Road, Abbotsford (R. Tootchin Pers. Obs.)
- 14.(1) immature September 29, 2014: James Bradley: Bearskin Bay, Queen Charlotte City (J. Bradley Pers. Comm.)

Hypothetical Records:

- 1.(1) adult breeding plumage August 9, 2003: Jukka Jantunen: RPBO, Metchosin (J. Jantunen pers. Comm.) [note: observer feels bird's calls better fits Yellow than Citrine Wagtail]

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Barbara McKee and Don Cecile for editing the manuscript. I would also like to thank Peter Hamel for details on all the Queen Charlotte Island records of Eastern Yellow Wagtail. I also wish to thank Jukka Jantunen for details on his observation from Metchosin. I also wish to thank James Bradley for details and use of his pictures from the recent Queen Charlotte Islands record. All photos are used with permission of the photographer and are fully protected by copyright law.

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