

## Status and Occurrence of Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin and Don Cecile.

### Introduction and Distribution

The Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) is an Old World species of flycatcher found breeding from Greenland across northern Europe into northern Asia (Kren and Zoerb 1997). Birds found in North America are divided geographically and into 2 subspecies. In Eastern North America, the Northern Wheatear is of the subspecies (*O. o. leucorhoa*) and breeds from Axel Hibernia Island (Boothroyd 1984) and Ellesmere Island (Godfrey 1986), both in the Northwest Territories, south through Baffin Island to northern Quebec and along the coast of Labrador to Grady Island (Godfrey 1986). The Northern Wheatear breeds south of this main range on Cornwallis and Coats Island (Koes 1995), north tip of Uman Peninsula (Koes 1995), and Rankin Inlet, Northwest Territories (Lein and Maher 1970). These birds migrate back towards Europe to winter in Africa (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This subspecies of Northern Wheatear is rare to casual along the east coast of North America in migration (Kren and Zoerb 1997). Due to its limited range and distribution, this subspecies will not be considered for the purposes of this article.

In western North America, the Northern Wheatear is of the nominate subspecies (*O. o. oenanthe*) and breeds from the Arctic coast of Alaska (Bailey 1948), Yukon Territory (Godfrey 1986), and in the northwestern Mackenzie region (Godfrey 1986) southwest to Seward Peninsula, Alaska (Kessel 1989); the mountains between Tanana and Yukon Rivers, Alaska (Blackwelder 1919); the western Askinuk Mountains near Cape Romanzof, Alaska (Kren and Zoerb 1997); in the open country between Fairbanks and Livengood, Alaska (Gabrielson and Lincoln 1959); Mt. McKinley National Park, Alaska (Murie 1946); Talkeetna Mountains, Alaska (Gabrielson and Lincoln 1959); and Kenai and Chugach Mountains, Alaska (Isleib and Kessel 1973). The Northern Wheatear breeds throughout most of Yukon Territory except southeast and along the border between Mackenzie District and Yukon (Koes 1995). The breeding range extends to the Ogilvie and Richardson Mountains, Yukon Territory (Godfrey 1986), particularly along Dempster Highway, Yukon (Frisch 1987); also along the British, Wernecke, and Barn Mountains, Yukon Territory (Frisch 1987); the area of King Point, Yukon (Rand 1946); Kluane National Park, Yukon Territory (Koes 1995), is the extreme southern point of this species' breeding range. In the Northwest Territories, the Northern Wheatear breeds along the Dempster Highway near the border with the Yukon and North Canol Road (Frisch 1987).

On the west coast of North America south of Alaska, the Northern Wheatear is an accidental vagrant. In British Columbia, there are only a handful of Northern Wheatear records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). In Washington State, there is only 1 accepted record by the Washington

Bird Records Committee (WRBC 2014). There are 6 accepted records for Oregon by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OBRC 2012). The most records along the west coast are for California where there are 11 accepted records by the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). The Northern Wheatear has also been found as an accidental vagrant from Arizona (Benesh and Rosenberg. 1997). This species is also an accidental vagrant, primarily in the fall from Mexico, Bermuda, Cuba, Barbados, Puerto Rico, and the Netherlands Antilles (Kren and Zoerb 1997, Howell and Webb 2010). Though it is a species that migrates completely out of North America for the winter, there are a couple of accidental winter records for Texas and Louisiana (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

### **Identification and Similar Species**

The identification of the Northern Wheatear is covered in all standard field guides. This is a small species with birds measuring 15 cm in length (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Northern Wheatear likes to feed on the ground and has an upright stance and likes to bob its tail (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). In the context of British Columbia, there are no other similar looking species that should cause any problems in identification.

The adult males in breeding plumage have a gray crown that extends down the nape onto the back (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There is a white line from above the base of the bill that extends over and behind the dark eye (Brazil 2009). Below this is a dark line that extends from the base of the bill through the eye and behind as an ear patch (Sibley 2000). The bill is short, small and black (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The chin is white with a buffy wash on the chest with white below that extends down the chest on to the belly, flanks and undertail coverts (Brazil 2009). The wings are black both folded and in flight (Sibley 2000). The rump is white and this extends down onto the base of the tail with a bold, thick black band that goes across the tail tip (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). There is an indented dark area in the central part of the tail giving it an inverted black T pattern (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The legs are long and black (Brazil 2009).

The adult females in breeding plumage are less striking in plumage than the males (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The facial pattern is more subdued and there is a thin white line from the base of the bill that goes over the eye and extends behind the eye (Brazil 2009). There is a thin dark line below the white line that runs from the base of the bill through the eye but is thin past the eye (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The ear patch is less demarcated like on the adult male (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). Otherwise the plumage of the adult male is similar to the adult male's plumage (Brazil 2009). The breast often is a bit buffier and extends further down on the belly (Sibley 2000).

The juvenile plumage is only held briefly on the breeding grounds from July – August and birds change into 1st winter plumage before migrating south (Sibley 2000). These birds are very similar looking to adult birds in fall plumage (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Aging birds in the fall is very difficult if they are not in the hand (Kren and Zoerb 1997). The main differences with breeding plumage are that these birds are extensively buffy on the throat, buff edges to the wings and from the throat down to the lower belly, but still have white undertail coverts (Kren and Zoerb 1997, Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

The call is a weak, high whistle “heet” and a dry, clicking “tek” (Sibley 2000).

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

In British Columbia, the Northern Wheatear is an accidental vagrant with 5 Provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). All records in the Province are from the fall migration period (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). There is 1 record for the Queen Charlotte Islands, 1 record for Vancouver, 2 for Vancouver Island, and 1 intriguing record for the Haines Pass region (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The Haines Pass record comes from a very poorly covered region in the Province and yet it has appropriate breeding habitat in abundance (J. Fenneman Pers. Comm.). This species breeds very close to this area in the Yukon at Kluane National Park (Sinclair *et al.* 2003). Future expeditions by keen observers are encouraged especially to look for evidence of breeding as this would furnish a new breeding species for British Columbia (J. Fenneman Pers. Comm.).

The coastal records of Northern Wheatear are true vagrants and fit the pattern of vagrancy found along the entire west coast, from Washington State to California (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, OFO 2012, WRBC 2014). The Northern Wheatear has been found from August to November (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, OFO 2012, WBRC 2014). Although the sample size is small, October seems to be the month with the highest chance to find this species (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, OFO 2012, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1, WRBC 2014). The Northern Wheatear likes to frequent open areas, such as beaches, or open grassy areas with rocks and gravel, often with logs to perch on (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009, Brazil 2009). This species likes to feed on the ground or very close to it (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009).

Given how common this species is in its western Arctic breeding range, it is very likely more birds will turn up in the fall in the future. It is a species that can be found anywhere in British Columbia and observers in the interior should keep an eye open for this beautiful species.



Figures 1, 2, 3 & 4: Record #4: Northern Wheatear at French Creek on Columbia Beach side, Parksville October 8, 2005. Photos © Rick Toochin.

**Table 1: Records of Northern Wheatear for British Columbia:**

- 1.(1) fall plumage October 10-16, 1970: Keith Taylor, Ron Satterfield, mobs  
(BC Photo 106 & 125) Victoria International Airport (Tatum 1971, Stirling 1971)
- 2.(1) fall plumage November 1, 1980: Mary Morris, Ryan Nichols: south of Sandspit  
(P. Hamel Pers. Comm.)
- 3.(1) fall plumage August 29, 1993: G. & L. Kubica: Haines Summit  
(Bain and Holder 1993e, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 4.(1) fall plumage October 7-20, 2005: Ralph Hocken, mobs (photo) French Creek on Columbia  
Beach side, Parksville (Cecile 2006a, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 5.(1) fall plumage August 31, 2011: Roger Foxall, mobs (photo) Iona Island Sewage Ponds,  
Richmond (Toochin *et al.* 2014)

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