

## NOTES

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## STATUS OF THE NORTHERN WHEATEAR IN FLORIDA

P. WILLIAM SMITH<sup>1</sup> AND GLEN E. WOOLFENDEN<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*South Florida Natural Resources Center, Everglades National Park,  
40001 State Road 9336,  
Homestead, Florida 33034*

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Biology, University of South Florida,  
Tampa, Florida 33620*

The recent publication of two books on the avifauna of Florida (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Stevenson and Anderson 1994) in quick succession after nearly 40 years since the previous comparable undertaking (Sprunt 1954, 1963) might seem to settle the status of Florida's birds for some time to come. However, differences between the two recent works, questions not addressed by either, and added ornithological data, require ongoing reviews of many species. In this note we update the status of the Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) in Florida through 1994 based on our analysis of existing literature. A *report* refers to any claim of a species' presence, while a *record* is a report confirmed by an existing specimen or photograph (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992). Initials identifying collections also follow Robertson and Woolfenden (1992).

The first record of a Northern Wheatear in Florida is an individual found 1 November and collected 2 November 1955 (USNM 460083) in the NW 1/4 of Section 30, Range 28E, Township 48S, Collier Co., "14 miles WSW of Immokalee" (A. Sprunt IV and H. P. Bennett *in* Stevenson 1956, Sprunt 1963). This location, about 13 km SSE of the present-day headquarters of Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, was on open prairie near a trailer used by wildlife personnel (T. Below pers. comm. to L. Douglas *in litt.*). The specimen's tag states that the bird is a male with wing (arc) of 102 mm and tail length of 61 mm. We remeasured the flattened wing to be 104 mm. Among male Northern Wheatears, these data are consistent only with *O. o. leucorhoa* (Svensson 1984, Cramp 1988), the subspecies breeding in eastern arctic Canada, Greenland, and perhaps Iceland, although the taxonomic status of the Icelandic population is uncertain (Clement 1987, Cramp 1988). The rich peachy coloration of this specimen, especially on the breast, also is characteristic of *leucorhoa* (Clement 1987, Cramp 1988). The tips of the primaries have poorly defined edgings and the rectrices have clearly pointed centers with uneven whitish tips. The condition of these feathers suggested that they are retained from juvenile plumage, indicating that the bird was in first basic plumage (Cramp 1988).

The second record of a Northern Wheatear in Florida is supported by an archival photo (TTRS P139) taken on 26 September 1976, 3 km NW of Cape San Blas, Gulf Co. (B. Atherton, et al. *in* Purrington 1977, L. Atherton *in litt.*). The location is referred to as the St. Joe Peninsula in Purrington (1977) and in Stevenson and Anderson (1994); Cape San Blas is the southernmost elbow of the peninsula. The date typed on the photo is 9/26/77, clearly an error because the record originally was published earlier. The date of this record is listed in Stevenson and Anderson (1994) as 10/26/76, another lapsus. The photo clearly is of a Northern Wheatear. Its overall rich peachy plumage and the bird being perched on the end of a tree stub rather than on the ground or a rock suggests that it probably is *leucorhoa* (Clements 1987, Cramp 1988).

The third record of this species in Florida is beset with irregularities. A report of a Northern Wheatear on St. George Island, Franklin Co., on 21 September 1982 by a single

observer was submitted to the Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee (FOSRC 82-020) but was not accepted (Bowman 1982). We examined the description of this bird and its behavior now archived at FLMNH and found the data sketchy and unconvincing. No mention is made of a corresponding specimen. Nevertheless, a mummified carcass of a Northern Wheatear with a tag giving the same date and location as FOSRC 82-020 was presented to Louisiana State University (LSUMZ 136610) by H. M. Stevenson. Its form as a mummy rather than as a prepared study skin was explained as due to a misguided attempt to thaw the frozen specimen in a microwave oven (V. Remsen pers. comm.). The only additional information on the tag is "shot by hunter". The existence of this specimen was generally unknown until it was disclosed in Stevenson and Anderson (1994) and attributed to James Stevenson, who submitted FOSRC 82-020.

We examined and measured this mummy and have no doubt that it is a Northern Wheatear. Although it was not sexed by gonad inspection, its flattened wing (100 mm) and tail length (55 mm) are most consistent with an *O. o. leucorhoa* female when taken in conjunction with the rich peachy plumage and absence of prominent dark lores (Cramp 1988). All flight feathers are fresh with broad, even-pale tips. The rectrices have dark centers and rounded rather than pointed tips. These characters point to the bird being a recently molted adult in basic plumage; adults of *leucorhoa* normally undergo a complete molt of their flight feathers before departing from the breeding grounds (Cramp 1988). The original sight report failed to mention the specimen. The collector was not recorded on the tag. We see no reason to doubt the date or location of collection, however, based on the facts and James Stevenson's recent recollections of the attending circumstances (*in litt.*). We conclude that the specimen represents a valid record of a Northern Wheatear in Florida.

The fourth record is of a bird discovered on 19 October 1994 by Elizabeth Carter near the plant nursery in the administrative and residential area of Bill Baggs Cape Florida SRA, Dade Co. (Figure 1). This bird was seen and photographed by many Florida field ornithologists through 23 October 1994 (Wamer and Pranty 1995). A complete description, including color photos, is archived at FLMNH (FOSRC 94-316). This bird's rich peachy coloration and habit of perching on trees and buildings suggested *leucorhoa* (Clements 1987, Cramp 1988).

In addition to these four verifiable records, two sight reports of Northern Wheatears in Florida have been published. Both occur within the period when Northern Wheatears are known to be present in the state, but neither report has sufficient evidence to be credible. The first was mentioned in Sprunt (1954) as 'hypothetical' and involved a bird seen on 1 October 1951 at St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, Wakulla Co., by Mrs. J. De Lime, the refuge manager's wife. Sprunt's (1954) account expressed confidence in the report's correctness based on his lengthy conversation with the observer, but no description was published or appears to be available now. The report consequentially cannot be evaluated in a modern way and, therefore, cannot stand as a *record* even under relaxed standards.

The other sight report of a Northern Wheatear in Florida was from the Crossbar Ranch Wellfield, Pasco Co, on 20 October 1981 (B. Lenz and C. O'Sullivan *in* Atherton and Atherton 1982). The two observers submitted reports to the FOSRC (81-003). Our review of the extensive written material, now archived at FLMNH, suggests that it is highly unlikely that the bird they observed was a Northern Wheatear. Their discussion likens the bird seen in both color and pattern to illustrations of adult male Northern Wheatears in breeding plumage. That plumage, however, is attained only in spring, primarily through wear, and does not occur in autumn when male Northern Wheatears look quite different from the bird described. In fact in autumn they are hardly distinguishable in the field from females or immatures (Clement 1987, Cramp 1988). The FOSRC did not accept this report (Bowman 1982), and we believe it is best disregarded by future students of Florida's avifauna.



**Figure 1. Northern Wheatear, Bill Baggs Cape Florida SRA, Dade Co., 20 October 1994. Photo by Larry Manfredi.**

That all four confirmable records through 1994 of Northern Wheatears in Florida appear to involve *leucorhoa* is expected, based on the pattern of records elsewhere in North America south of its breeding range. The species usually is reported at least once (often several times) annually in southern Canada or the United States, most often along the eastern seaboard. We are not aware that any subspecies but *leucorhoa* has been recorded east of the Mississippi River or in the West Indies (A. O. U. 1957). This population is perhaps unique among passerines breeding in eastern arctic North America in that it migrates eastward across the North Atlantic to Europe, thence southward to West Africa to winter, returning by the same route in spring (Snow 1953, Cramp 1988). It is not surprising that a population dependent on favorable tailwinds for the long initial portion of its autumn journey would be displaced periodically.

Most reports of *O. o. leucorhoa* from eastern North America south of its breeding range, including those from Florida (21 Sept. - 2 Nov.), are in autumn. The principal African wintering grounds of this subspecies are between 10° and 16°N (Cramp 1988, Keith et al. 1992). Southbound Northern Wheatears in North Africa, at latitudes comparable to those of Florida, typically have few fat reserves (Keith et al. 1992), and autumn individuals in eastern United States are notorious for short stays that rarely exceed a few days. If individuals migrating southward in the Western Hemisphere seek the same wintering latitude as they do in Africa, most are likely to end up in the Caribbean Sea, probably lacking sufficient energy reserves or refueling opportunities to reach the South American

mainland, which barely reaches 10°N. This geographic irony possibly accounts for the relatively few spring reports of Northern Wheatears in the eastern United States.

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