

FIRST RECORD OF THE WHITE WAGTAIL IN FLORIDA

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At 1400 hours DST on 18 March 2007, three birders from St. Louis discovered and photographed a White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*; Figs. 1, 2) at Moon Lake Park, western Pasco County, Florida (28E 17'15.8 N, 82E 36'27.4 W). The bird flew into the park and was observed for 20 minutes before the birders left to contact others. When they and others returned within the hour, the wagtail was gone and it did not reappear. The bird was relocated at 1210 on 19 March and remained until 1325, when it again departed. The wagtail was next (and last) observed from 0930-1000 on 22 March. It was not seen despite all-day searches during 20 and 24-26 March, and less-intensive searches during 21 and 23 March. The next four paragraphs are based on 30 minutes of observation by BP on 19 March, supplemented by observations and photographs of others.

OBSERVATIONS

The White Wagtail frequented the 80-m “artificial” (i.e., trucked-in) sand beach at Moon Lake Park, a 2.7-ha recreational park east of Port Richey. The remainder of the park, which was not seen to be used by the wagtail, was composed of a playground, several shelters and small buildings, a boat ramp, a paved parking area, and mowed grassy areas with dozens of 12-15-m tall cypresses (*Taxodium* spp.). The wagtail foraged actively along the beach, walking or running back and forth and often changing course as it pursued prey. It captured several large dragonflies, a fly, and numerous unidentified prey. The foraging maneuvers used included running down or picking up prey from the surface of the sand, plucking dragonflies out of the air as they flew past, and upward sallies to capture other aerial prey. Prey, including the wings of the dragonflies, was swallowed whole. The wagtail bobbed its entire hind end frequently, in the manner of a waterthrush (*Seiurus* spp.), and, when walking, also bobbed its head back and forth.

The wagtail appeared to ignore the birders, sun-bathers, and others present on or near the beach, and occasionally approached observers to within 6-7 m. It often uttered a two-note call, accented on the second syllable, that was reminiscent of an American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*). Other behaviors observed included preening, scratching its



Figures 1 and 2. White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba*, at Moon Lake Park, Pasco County, Florida, 18-22 March 2007. The wagtail is a male, mostly in first-alternate plumage. It belongs to the western form of the subspecies *M. a. alba*, which breeds in southern Greenland, Iceland, and across continental Europe, and winters from continental Europe to northern Africa. Note that the outermost tertial (T1) is missing from each wing, exposing the worn retained juvenal primaries. This individual furnished the first report and record of any wagtail for Florida, and marked the 500th bird species verifiably recorded in the state. Its presence 12 km inland from the Gulf of Mexico during its northbound migration is difficult to explain. Photographs by David Faintich, 18 March 2007.

head, resting, defecating, and frequently scanning the sky, presumably for aerial predators. The wagtail sought the shade created by a sign on the beach; afternoon temperatures during 19 March were in the high 70's F with little cloud cover. After foraging actively for 85 minutes on 19 March, the wagtail flew up and over the cypresses toward the north-northeast. It clearly foraged and roosted elsewhere, but birders did not locate these sites.

While under observation, the wagtail did not interact with any other birds at Moon Lake Park; the only other species seen on the beach were several medium-sized wading birds, one Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*), three American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*), and one Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*). Three raptors that prey on landbirds were observed over the park during times when the wagtail was absent: one Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*), one Cooper's Hawk (*A. cooperii*), and one Short-tailed Hawk (*Buteo brachyurus*).

Description—The White Wagtail was a slim terrestrial landbird with a long, slender tail (perhaps 40% of its body length) and pied plumage. The head was white with a black hindcrown, nape, and throat that extended downward to encompass the entire breast (Figs. 1, 2). The black throat and nape were narrowly separated by a variably-shaped white "wedge" that extended down onto the lower neck. The underparts were white with a small blackish area on the belly that appeared to be absent or molting feathers. The uppertail coverts, rump, and mantle were medium-gray and contrasted sharply with the black nape. The carpal areas were grayish-brown, the median coverts blackish, and the primaries and secondaries brown. A rather bold, white upper wingbar was present on each wing but each lower bar had mostly worn away. Two generations of median and greater coverts were clearly visible, with the outer coverts extensively brown-centered and with their whitish tips almost worn away. The tertials were brownish with black centers and bold white edges. The outermost tertial (T1) on each wing was absent, exposing the primaries. The brownish-black inner and white outer rectrices were abraded. The eyes, bill, legs, and feet were black; the legs were unbanded. The large eyes were conspicuous against the white face.

Taxonomy—The White Wagtail is a polytypic species comprised of two groups that until recently were considered separate species. The White Wagtail was composed of six subspecies (*alba* [including "*dukhunensis*"], *baicalensis*, *ocularis*, *personata*, *subpersonata*, and *yarrellii*), while the Black-backed Wagtail (*Motacilla lugens*) was composed of three subspecies (*alboides*, *leucopsis*, and *lugens*). With the recent (re)-merger of the two groups into a single species (Banks et al. 2005), the White Wagtail is comprised of nine subspecies (Alström and Mild 2003).

With its wholly black chin, throat, and breast, the Moon Lake Park wagtail was mostly in alternate plumage. The sharp contrast between the black nape and the medium-gray mantle sexed the bird as a male, and its worn, retained juvenal remiges and rectrices aged it to 8-10 months old. Its plumage was therefore categorized as First-Alternate or First-Summer (Alström and Mild 2003). Since it was mostly in alternate plumage, the Moon Lake Park White Wagtail could be identified to subspecies. Its medium-gray mantle immediately ruled out the four black-backed races (*alboides*, *leucopsis*, *lugens*, and *yarrellii*). Four of the five gray-backed subspecies could also be eliminated: *baicalensis*, which has a white chin, throat, and wing-panels; *ocularis*, which has a black eye-line and white wing-panels; *personata*, which has a dark-gray mantle and largely black head; and *subpersonata*, which has a largely black head and white wing-panels (Alström and Mild 2003). The eastern form of *alba* (“*dukhunensis*,” often considered a separate subspecies) was ruled out because it has broader white wing-bars that sometimes form a wing-panel (Alström and Mild 2003). Thus, the Moon Lake Park White Wagtail was of the western form of *alba*, which breeds in southern Greenland, Iceland, and across continental Europe, and winters from continental Europe to northern Africa (Alström and Mild 2003).

DISCUSSION

The Moon Lake Park White Wagtail furnished the first report and record for Florida, being accepted by the Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee (#07-634) as species #500 for Florida (A.W. Kratter in litt.). There are four other observations of the White Wagtail in the Southeast: an adult *lugens* at Cedar Island, North Carolina on 15 May 1982 (LeGrand 1982); an adult *ocularis* at Johnson’s Bayou, Louisiana on 12 October 1996 (Jackson 1997); an alternate-plumaged male *ocularis* at Huntington Beach State Park, South Carolina during 16-21 April 1998 (Behrens 1998, Bearden et al. 2004); and a juvenile—probably *alba*—at Sandling Beach State Recreation Area, North Carolina on 22 October 2002 (Bearden et al. 2004). Additionally, a Citrine Wagtail (*Motacilla citreola*) was photographed at Starkville, Mississippi during 31 January-1 February 1992 (DeBenedictis 1995), and a “Yellow” Wagtail, tentatively identified as an Eastern Yellow Wagtail (*M. tschutschensis*) was observed at Fort Morgan, Alabama on 29 September 2003 (Banks et al. 2004, Duncan and Duncan 2004).

It is difficult to explain the presence of a western *alba* White Wagtail 12 km inland from the central Gulf coast of Florida during the latter half of March. Florida is within the latitudes in which White Wagtails winter (Alström and Mild 2003), so the wagtail may have wintered locally. (Moon Lake Park is an unremarkable spot that seldom is

birded.) Alternatively, the wagtail could have been northbound from a wintering site farther south. Or the wagtail may have flown west across the Atlantic Ocean from its African wintering grounds and arrived in Florida, although its appearance near the Gulf coast makes this scenario seem unlikely. Perhaps the Moon Lake Park White Wagtail simply was “lost;” other wagtails in the Southeast have been observed during unseasonable periods and always for very brief periods (see above).

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