

Ohio's First Northern Wheatear

Ed Pierce

What does Martin Luther King Day have in common with a Northern wheatear? Nothing, except that's when this first state record and I crossed paths. It was a deliberate crossing on my part. Mark Shieldcastle, Wildlife Biologist, State of Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife, called the night before reporting that he had again located this member of the thrush family.

Mark first reported the bird January 4th to Tom Bartlett (Compiler) as it fell within the count week for the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge Christmas count. Here's how Mark described it for the Toledo Naturalists' Association 1987 Yearbook:

"For the past three years, I have been operating a series of feeders in the Lake Erie marsh region for the purpose of determining bird movement between feeders, winter territory homing, and longevity of species utilizing feeders. On January 4, a day of miserable 4 below temperature and 30 to 40 MPH winds, I chose to forego my research for the safety of the birds with which I work. The combination of temperature and winds would create a dangerous chill factor. Instead, I chose to stock up the feeders for the week. It was while walking across the frozen marsh that the bird found me. In reality, this is what really happened. The bird's curiosity, as I would soon discover, got the best of it. I am not sure who was more interested in whom. For several minutes, we observed each other from about ten feet. It was a jumpy bird, wagging and spreading its tail and bobbing its entire body. It had a grayish-brown back and a buffy breast reminding one of a horned lark, but the facial pattern and the bold rump and tail pattern were unmistakable. With its curiosity satisfied, the bird flew across the marsh unit to a large group of stumps and a nearby dike to protect itself from the wind."

However, Mark didn't give Tom the location of this particular feeder so interest lapsed in the intervening days. Most Ohio vagrants stay only a short interval at best and Mark was in Mississippi from January 5th to the 16th.

Upon his return on that Saturday, he relocated the bird. He again saw it on the 17th and attempted to band it, but was unsuccessful. When I arrived at Mark's at 8:00 a.m., I met Tom Kemp and the three of us, to my surprise, went directly across the street to the Turtle Creek Marina. How convenient: the feeder was in a small marsh area owned by the Marina next to the boat docks.

We parked Mark's truck on the dike road that gave access to the docks and walked into the frozen marsh and toward the feeder. Mark pointed to an area in the marsh where the bird apparently roosted and, as if summoned, up it sprang. It sat near the top of the marsh vegetation until disturbed by a three wheeler and dog and then hid lower near the ground. We flushed it to the top of a lone 20' cottonwood some 50' away where it sat and watched us. Eventually, it flew out of this tree and perched on the top of the raised boat dock. The remainder of the morning, the bird flew from these dock perches to the adjacent marshes, disappearing from view for up to 15 to 20 minutes at a time. It used the docks and the rock access road to feed, perhaps on dormant insects or some form of insect life that wasn't visible to our eyes. Bent (1949) describes the bird as insectivorous, but cites one instance of a vegetable diet with 5% gravel.

Mark again attempted banding by setting the nets in a semi-square around the bird's original roost in the marsh. We pursued it toward the nets without success. Once it even sat on the top of the net. After I left, I learned the bird had been netted at about 5:00 p.m. when it went to roost for the evening. The cover photo of this issue is one of the series of shots taken by Mark during the banding.

Bent's description of behavior fits best what we saw:

"The wheatear is a lively and sprightly bird, constantly active. As already mentioned, it is a characteristic species of open country, with a liking for rather stony and waste places. It is essentially terrestrial in habits, moving over the ground in a quick succession of long hops, sometimes so rapidly that it seems to run, frequently halting on some little eminence or flitting a short distance from one such perch to another, or making little fluttering dashes into the air after insects. At rest, the carriage is rather upright, but it is seldom long still, constantly bowing and bobbing and at the same time spreading the tail and moving it up and down. When perching off the ground, it usually does so on fences, walls, rocks, or heaps of stones, sometimes on bushes, but in England, not often on trees. Where there are scattered trees on its breeding ground, it may sometimes be seen to perch on them, but it has been repeatedly observed that on migration the Greenland wheatear is much more disposed to perch in trees than birds of the present race"

As word spread in the following days, many observers found the bird until it was last seen January 21, 1988. Mark told me that he doesn't believe the bird was deliberately driven from the area by the press of observers. He says that on the last occasion the bird was flushed from its roost in the marsh, it flew north toward Lake Erie rather than south to the boat docks because observers on the dike were unknowingly between the bird and the docks. It apparently didn't return. Those who entered the Marina properly obtained the permission of the owner.

There are two races of wheatear in North America: the "Greenland" and the "Yukon" or "European". The latter is the nominate race (*Oenanthe oenanthe oenanthe*) that breeds in the British Isles, Northern Norway, Finland, Northern Russia and Northern Siberia, south to Northern Africa, Asia Minor and central Asia and extends into Alaska, Yukon and Western Mackenzie in North America. The "Greenland" race (*Oenanthe oenanthe leucorhoa*) breeds in eastern Arctic Canada, Labrador, Greenland and Iceland south to Northern Quebec (Godfrey 1966, Bent 1946).

Mark had hoped by banding to determine the race of this Ohio bird. However, even the bird in the hand may not be conclusive. Mark reports the wing chord measurement to be 98 mm and its tarsus to be 28 mm. But his wing measurement was made by the American technique (without flattening the wing) and on a live bird. To date, I've been unable to find any corresponding measurements on either race. The European technique (wing flattened) and skin specimen measurements, which although done in an American work (Ridgway) with apparently the American technique, I classify as akin to wing flattened. This would, in my opinion, give a greater wing length than the corresponding American measurement on a live bird. Svensson (1984) found that the wing flattened method on Song thrush (*Turdus philomelos*) increased the wing length measurement on both live (7) and skin (10) birds by 0-1.0 mm.

Using this conversion factor, the wing measurement of this Ohio bird (98 mm) eliminates the "Yukon" female under all sources, but not the "Yukon" male nor the "Greenland" female under any source. The "Greenland" male is eliminated under all sources other than Svensson (1975). In addition, the tarsus measurement (28) eliminates the "Yukon" male under Witherby, but not Ridgway.

In short, using measurements of the Ohio bird, it could be a "Yukon" male (Ridgway), a "Greenland" male (Svensson, 1975) or a "Greenland" female (Witherby, Ridgway, Svensson (1975)).

The Ohio tarsus measurement does eliminate Pied wheatear (22-25 mm, Witherby) and all subspecies of Black-eared wheatear (22-24 mm, Witherby) which, although not native to North America (Europe), do have similar basic plumaged birds as Northern wheatear.

Plumage descriptions in Witherby help to identify sex and age in the Ohio bird in my opinion. The black, not dark-brown tail, wing-feathers and wing-coverts, lores and ear coverts (which are tipped in brown) eliminates the adult female and first winter male and female for me (juvenile body feathers, lesser and medium coverts moulted in August). A first summer (adult summer plumage acquired by a moult usually confined to body feathers in January/February) adult male (Witherby 1943) and even a second year adult male (Svensson, 1984) should have distinctly browner central tail feathers (remiges) than lores and ear coverts. The Ohio bird was uniformly black in these areas, eliminating all but an adult male. The lack of white on the forehead bothers me, but Witherby (1943) states that "feathers with grey tips conceals the white in variable degree."

Mark did think the bird was in fresh plumage and that there was no noticeable difference in wear on the various wing feathers. Indeed the "greyish-white" tips of the tail feathers and "pale to rich buff" edgings of the outer webs of the wing feathers (Witherby) were evident. According to Witherby, by January there are few edgings left and the tips of the tail feathers are worn off. Perhaps the complete adult molt in August was delayed. The bird was fat and healthy in his opinion. He didn't age it by mouth lining. The skull was ossified, but that occurs within two months in wheatears (Svensson, 1984).

My guess? An adult male in winter plumage. Which race? I pick "Greenland" because of the browner and less gray upperparts and browner ear-coverts with less black.

The "Greenland" race migrates from the middle of August into the latter part of September to Western Africa. Occasional birds may linger into October and November (Brunn 1980). It arrives in Greenland in the first half of May. The spring route is more northerly than this one which is why spring records in the United States are not as numerous as fall (Brunn). Brunn searched all records published in *American Birds* and *Audubon Field Notes* among other reference books and collected 53 records of Northern wheatear, all in the eastern United States and southeastern Canada up to presumably 1980. Three of these records occurred in January (see Canada 2, US (NY) 1). The bulk occurred in the fall. Although most records are undetermined as to race "all specimens obtained in the area have been of the 'Greenland' race" (Brunn).

I searched all of American Birds since Brunn's article and listed all Northern wheatear sightings reported out of the breeding area below. The distribution map of these sightings make it apparent that there are no reported sightings west of the Mississippi where you would most expect to find the "Yukon" race. (Ridgeway does give specimen records for Boulder, Colorado, for May 14, 1880, and also for New Orleans, Louisiana, for September 12, 1888, both of which he lists as the "Greenland" race).

The "Yukon" race migrates to the southwest across the Pacific Ocean and inland to east Africa and southern Arabia. It is scarce on the Siberian east coast. The birds are on the move in August and seen at least until the end of the month and probably later, as it has been recorded as late as September 21st in east Siberia (Bent). The earliest spring arrival in Alaska was May 13th, with numbers seen May 23rd and 24th.



FALL ●		WINTER ○		SPRING ×	
DATE	LOCATION	DATE	LOCATION	DATE	LOCATION
10/17/86	Westchester, NY	1/4-21/88	Ottawa Co., OH	5/29/86	Sable Is., N.S.
9/28/86	Jones Beach SP, LI, NY	2/15/81	N. Branford, CT	5/12/86	Ottawa, Ontario
11/12/85	Cape May Pt., NJ			5/23-25/83	Seal Is., N.S.
9/23/85	Vershire, VT	SUMMER ☒		5/13-14/83	St. John, Nfd.
9/17/85	Bald Eagle SP, PA			6/4/82	North Pt., Ontario
10/27/84	Plymouth, MA			6/1/81	Thompson's Beach, NJ
9/28-29/84	Lake Placid, NY	7/2/85	Cape Henrietta Maria, Ontario	4/14/82	Oak Hammock, S, Manitoba
9/15/83	Brigantine, NJ	5/6-6/23/86	Winisk, Ontario	6/6/80	Newbury, MA
9/13-17/83	Cornwall, VT	6/22/87	Winisk, Ontario	5/24/80	Newbury, MA
10/2/82	Chincoteague Flats, VA			5/23/80	Chatham, MA
9/27/82	Roseville, MN			5/19-21/80	Osterville, MA
9/13-16/82	Accabonack, LI, NY			5/17-27/80	Guilford, CT
10/29/81	Andros Is., B.I. (West Indies)				
10/26-29/81	L'Anse-aux-Meadows, N.S.				
10/20/81	Pinellas Co. Wellfields, FL				
10/12-15/81	White Pine, MI				
10/12-13/81	L'Anse-aux-Meadows, N.S.				
9/27+/81	Cruger's Is., NY				
9/27-28/81	Cape May Pt., NJ				
9/25-27/81	Brier Is., N.S.				
9/25/81	Dixfield Notch, NH				
10/3/80	Colchester Pt., VT				
9/25/80	Prince Georges Co., MD				
9/19/80	St. Ignace, MI				

Source	Race	Measurements (mm)			tarsus
		wing Method	Male	Female	
Witherby (1943)	Yukon	Wing flattened (European)	94-98 (100)	89-96	25-27
	Greenland	Same	(100) 103-108 (110)	96-104	27-33
Ridgway (1907)	Yukon	Skins from "an- terior side of bend to (tip) of longest primary" with dividers	93-101 (16 spec- imens of which 6 are Alaska; Alaska Ave. 98.7)	90-94 (7 speci- mens of which 4 are Alaska; Alaska Ave. 93.1)	24.5-29 (m) (Alaskan Ave. 27.4) 25.5-27 (f) (Alaska Ave. 26.2)
	Greenland (cited in Godfrey, 1966)	Same	100.5-106.5	97-103.5	27-30.5 (m) 27.5-29 (f)
Svensson (1975)	Yukon	Wing flattened (European)	92-100	90-96	Not given
	Greenland	Same	(97) 99-110	96-105.5	Not given

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