

BLACK-BACKED WAGTAIL NESTS ON ATTU ISLAND, ALASKA

by George F. Wagner

WITH THE PUBLICATION OF THE sixth edition of the A.O.U. *Checklist of North American Birds* (1983), the Black-backed Wagtail (*Motacilla lugens*) received recognition as a full and distinct species. It was included in the A.O.U. area on the basis of its regular occurrence in the western Aleutians and St. Lawrence Island and occasional records from mainland Alaska as well as Oregon and California. It was not known to breed in Alaska. However, investigations at Attu Island, Alaska, resulted in a nesting discovery and led to the suggestion that the event was not an isolated incident.

Morlan (1981) adequately discussed the identification and West Coast occurrence (through 1980) of both wagtails — *M. lugens* and *M. alba ocularis* (White Wagtail). Since the most current field guide (Farland 1983, National Geographic Society 1987) reflect those points of identification, they will not be repeated here.

The Black-backed Wagtail is a common coastal breeder in north-



Adult male Black-backed Wagtail on territory. Holtz Valley, Attu Island, Alaska. June 9, 1985. Photograph/G. F. Wagner.

ern Japan (Hokkaido and northern Honshu) and southeastern USSR (northwest coast of the Sea of Japan, Sakhalin I., the Kuril Is., and Kamchatka Peninsula), but not on the Commander Islands (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1970, Johansen 1961). The species winters in southern Japan, southeastern China, Taiwan, and southern South Korea. This wagtail has been documented in North America outside of Alaska

only as a casual straggler, mostly from the West Coast. However, a number of late winter and spring records (Morlan 1981; *Am. Birds* 39:347, 1985; *Am. Birds* 40:517, 1986) from California, Oregon, and Washington undoubtedly represent individuals that had wintered in the New World. Since this coastal species does not migrate south of the 20th parallel in Asia, the assumption that individuals have wintered in the A.O.U. area (north of Panama's 10th parallel) becomes unavoidable.

Although the Black-backed Wagtail has been recorded several times along the coast of mainland Alaska, it is a reoccurring species only on St. Lawrence Island and in the western Aleutians. On St. Lawrence Island, where White Wagtails breed, it appears to be a rare, irregular, spring overshoot. Jon Dunn (pers. comm.) encountered only a lone bird three out of seven years at Gambell. The report of six individuals there in 1977 (Morlan 1981), if correct, would indeed represent an extraordinary event.

In the western Aleutians, from Adak to Attu, the Black-backed Wagtail is encountered annually in small but significant numbers; mostly during spring migration (Byrd *et al.* 1978; Gibson 1981; Wagner pers. obs.). It occurs most often and in greatest numbers in the western section — the Near Island Group. On Attu and Shemya, it has been recorded every year since 1975, with up to half a dozen birds present at one location in some years. Small numbers have been recorded here as far back as 1913 (Thayer and Banks 1921). Attu, the westernmost island in this group, lies only 600 km (380 miles) east of the USSR's Kamchatka Peninsula, where *M. lugens* is a fairly common breeder (Dement'ev 1970).

On August 4, 1983, on Attu's Massacre Beach, I encountered a group of three Black-backed Wagtails, an adult male in post-breeding

molt and two fully feathered juveniles. The two juveniles closely followed the adult bird as it foraged along the edge of the beach vegetation. On numerous occasions, the adult was observed feeding the insects it collected to the begging young. These two dependent young and the adult male undoubtedly indicated a successful nesting nearby. True to the fleeting nature of wagtails, this family trio was observed for only a short time before it flew off.

On August 6, an adult female of the species was detected west of the United States Coast Guard Station.



Adult female Black-backed Wagtail gathering insects. Peaceful River, Attu Island, Alaska. August 7, 1983. Photograph/G. F. Wagner.

This was some 3 km (2 miles) southwest of the family trio locality. After a day of surveillance, the female led me to an old dilapidated wooden bridge over the lower section of Peaceful River. There I discovered an active Black-backed Wagtail nest containing five young.

The nest was located out of view under the bridge, on a broken support cross-beam. The river flowed directly beneath, some two m (6 feet) below the nest. This location offered complete protection against predation from the introduced Brown Rats (*Rattus norvegicus*) and Arctic Foxes (*Alopex lagopus*). The structure and makeup of the nest could not be examined owing to its inaccessible location. Nests on Kamchatka (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1970) were reported to be large, well built, cup-shaped structures, made

with dry, wild rye stems and lined with vegetable fluff or animal hair. These materials are available on Attu.

Like the nest, the brood of five young was also normally hidden behind being fed to reveal the gray-brown down on their heads and necks. They were judged to have hatched at least a week earlier and no longer appeared to require regular brooding during the day.

Initially, both parents were present near the nest, but by August 10, only the female was seen servicing it. The male had departed and was not seen in the area again. The female collected various insects and their larvae from the surrounding lush vegetation or from the rocky river bed, and even caught them on the wing, and fed this aggregate to the young. The feeding intervals ranged from less than one minute to as much as 15 minutes. White fecal sacs were routinely removed from the nest by the parent and disposed of some distance away.

When the nest was checked on August 16, it was empty. The young had moved onto the rocky river bed. There the female continued to feed them. At this time, their heads still retained some down, and their tails had not grown to full length. By August 23, they were mostly on their own, as the female was only seen briefly feeding one of her progeny. Thereafter, she left the area and was not seen again. The five juveniles, however, remained in the vicinity of the Coast Guard Station and frequented its refuse dump. They stayed together in loose association in this area through mid-September, and were last recorded on the island on September 27, 1983.

Although these two broods represent the first successful nesting records for the species in Alaska, two other breeding attempts were previously noted. However, both were believed to have involved interbreeding with White Wagtail. In the

first, G. Maisel (pers. comm.) observed and photographed a male *M. lugens* at such a suspected mixed nest at Nome in the summer of 1973. In the other, Jon Dunn (pers. comm.) observed a male *M. lugens* copulating with a female *M. alba ocularis* at Gambell, St. Lawrence Island, in early June 1983. Both of these events took place at sites where the Black-backed Wagtail is quite rare and where White Wagtails are known breeders (Kessel and Gibson 1978). In the western Aleutians, where the White Wagtail has yet to be documented, no interbreeding is expected. In 1983, both parents of



Adult female Black-backed Wagtail feeding young at nest. Peaceful River, Attu Island, Alaska. August 7, 1983. Photograph/G. F. Wagner.

the second Attu brood were positively identified as *M. lugens* to completely refute the possibility of such interbreeding.

When faced with two successful nestings in one year in a small portion of a large island group whose breeding potential has not previously been investigated, the question arises as to whether the discovery represents a tip of the proverbial iceberg. Certainly, in this case, it is clear that the Near Island Group does not support a breeding population of Black-backed Wagtails. The species does not migrate to this island group, but arrives there as a wanderer from the nearby Asian coast. The complements of the two 1983 nests did not return to Attu in 1984. Breeding there is probably therefore a happenstance occurrence for this species. It only takes place

when a number of chancy and inconsistent conditions are met.

In order for nesting to occur there, the most difficult criterion appears to be the actual pairing of two sexually mature birds. Since this species' arrival there is a fortuitous occurrence owing as much to chance and weather events as to any other factor, the probability of such a successful pairing is small. It is further complicated by the fact that *M. lugens* does not reach its adult plumage until the third year (Morlan 1981) and second-year birds, which are more apt to wander than adults, represent a sizable portion of Near Island records. In the spring of 1982, at least half a dozen different Black-backed Wagtails were recorded on Attu; yet not a single high-plumaged male was present. On June 8, 1985, M. Karmody discovered an adult-plumaged male singing on territory on an old bridge in Attu's Holtz Valley. That lone male remained there on territory through at least June 19. No females were recorded during this period. In early May 1986, five adult males were present for a number of days at the Coast Guard Station. One of these males remained there on territory through late June. No females were seen that year.

Timing and habitat conditions also appear to be important factors. A site that proved suitable one year may be less desirable another year. During the second week of May 1985, a paired mature male and female were present for several days in the vicinity of the 1983 nesting site. Yet they did not remain to nest, possibly as a result of the late snow cover on that side of the island that year. Their fate is unknown but the possibility exists that more favorable conditions existed elsewhere on Attu or its neighboring islands and that their nesting went undetected.

In my three seasons (1983-1985) of investigation of the breeding birds of Attu Island, only in 1983

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did I find evidence of successful Black-backed Wagtail nests there. However, it should be pointed out that Attu's vast size and rugged terrain prevented a completely thorough census of the island. Even more significant is the fact that the other four islands in the Near Island Group remained completely unsurveyed for nesting land birds. These islands are all within sight of each other and all contain suitable but somewhat inferior habitat for this species. The possibility therefore remains strong that other nestings might have occurred and went undetected during those three years. No other landbird breeding study has been made in the Near Islands before or since and the Black-backed Wagtail's status remains somewhat conjectural.

Given these circumstances, I believe that the 1983 nesting discovery should not be dismissed as a unique, one-time occurrence. Black-backed Wagtails have been recorded in small numbers in the Near Islands as far back as 1913. In recent years the species has proved to occur annually in significant numbers. In 1983, a breeding census was conducted for the first time on Attu Island, and this species was found nesting there. Furthermore evidence from Attu in the form of two separate nestings in

1983, paired birds in 1985, and adult males singing on territory in 1985 and 1986 support the conjecture that this species is an irregular but consistent nester in the Near Islands. ■

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank C. Fred Zeillemaker of the Aleutian Islands National Wildlife Refuge and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for their support and cooperation in the underlying study which made my trips to Attu possible. I also extend my appreciation to Jon Dunn, Mike Karmody, Gerry Maisel, Rich Stallcup, and Paul W. Sykes, Jr. for their observations. P.W. Sykes, Jr. kindly reviewed an early draft of this article.

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