

Black-headed Wagtail *Motacilla flava feldegg*

Male; Salisbury Plain (Wiltshire): 1st, 8th–11th & 15 June
2014

Observers:

P. E. Castle (PEC)

P. Combridge (PCo)

G. O. Harris (GOH)

Prior experience of ‘yellow wagtails’

PEC: *feldegg* in Greece and Israel; various other [sub]species and variants in Europe and Israel (including *thunbergi*, the most recent being breeding birds in Finland in June 2012).

PCo: *feldegg* in Greece and Turkey (breeding) and in the Levant (migrants); various other [sub]species and variants in Europe (including lots of race *thunbergi*), the Middle East, Africa, and south and southeast Asia.

GOH: *flavissima* only

Background

Nowadays in Wiltshire, Yellow Wagtails of the race *flavissima* nest almost exclusively in arable (see *Birds of Wiltshire* 2007). Thus, as regular visitors to farmland areas on Salisbury Plain, PEC and PCo often see *flavissima* and hear them in song and calling.

On 1 June PEC heard an unusual ‘yellow wagtail’ song, though because the area was shrouded in thick fog he was unable to locate the singer. The song differed from that typical of *flavissima*, by being more metallic with a ‘zrrr’ sound rather than the softer ‘swee’ of *flavissima*. However, the idea that the singer was something other than an unusually sounding *flavissima* never occurred and so PEC thought no more about it until 8 June, when once again he heard the unusual song. This time, without the handicap of fog, the wagtail was located singing on a track only a few metres in front of the observer’s car and then repeatedly song-fighting over the adjacent winter wheat field, and it became clear that it was a male *feldegg*. PEC showed the bird to GOH (an RSPB contract worker), who also saw the bird on 9th. PEC also informed the several other observers who were assisting with monitoring and conservation work in that area, though the wagtail proved highly elusive so that, in the event, it was only seen again by PEC and PCo (see below).

PEC’s description

On 8 June at about 14:00 I again heard the rather distinctive wagtail song (heard previously on 1 June; see above), and soon realised that the bird in question was on the track in front of my car. The light was not ideal but the wagtail had an obvious dark head; it then flew over the adjacent winter wheat field and continued singing for the rest of my stay there (until about 17:00). Most of the time it was perched in the wheat out of sight or briefly song-fighting (rather pipit-like), but eventually I managed to see it several times on top of the wheat and in the strong sun light it looked very reminiscent of a singing male Black-headed Bunting, with its jet black head and golden yellow underside, a beautiful bird! I got out of my car and ‘scoped (x33) the wagtail for several minutes when it perched closer in full view in order to check the plumage detail and confirm that it was indeed a male *feldegg* and not a

hybrid or a different race. The crown, nape and ear coverts were a uniform jet black with no hint of a supercilium or paler feathers, and the throat and underparts were a vivid golden yellow (egg yolk) with no hint of a paler submoustachial stripe, the gold meeting the black with no white at all. The mantle, back and wings were olive in colour (greenish brown), with paler wingbars, darker tail with white outer tail feathers and black legs. The calls in flight were very reminiscent of Citrine Wagtail, which I had heard most recently in November 2013 in Israel, definitely a harsher 'zrre' sound compared to the soft 'swee' of *flavissima*, of which there were two or three singing males in the same field.

On the evening of 11 June I again searched for the wagtail, and eventually found it singing at one end of the field at about 20:30, and I had closer views through my 7x42 bins as it perched on top of the wheat, and was able to confirm the details noted above, basically black and gold.

PCo's account and description

On 8 June I received message from PEC telling me that a Black-headed Wagtail was present at a locality on Salisbury Plain. At the time I was involved in active conservation work at this site, and so on my next visit to the area on 10 June I looked for the wagtail, though finding it proved rather more difficult than I had anticipated: despite arriving at first light it wasn't until 10:42 hours that I heard a call very reminiscent of a Citrine Wagtail *M. citreola* and saw the *feldegg* fly past me only to disappear in the far corner of a nearby cereal field. I did not see it again that day or on my next visit on 11th. On 15th the wagtail once again proved elusive until, at about 0700, I located it nearby perched on top of the cereal crop and was able to watch it for some minutes with 10x42 binoculars; I then decided to photograph the bird, to which end I walked along the edge of the field to get closer. Unfortunately, the wagtail slipped away while I was doing this and I was unable to relocate it before I left the area in early afternoon. (Note that there were two male *flavissima* also present in the same general area.) I was unable to locate the Black-headed on subsequent visits. (I did consider the possibility that the wagtail might be a dark-headed *thunbergi* or perhaps even an intergrade or variant, but there was nothing in either plumage or, to my ear, call, to support the notion.)

Descriptions (10th & 15 June; wagtail observed with 10x42 binoculars)

10 June: in flight only, when yellow underparts, black head and white outer tail feathers were evident as it flew past. Main feature that day was the **call** (repeated several times): a loud 'shrreep', distinctly harsher than the flight calls ('sweep') given by the *flavissima* also present. As noted above, the call was reminiscent of Citrine Wagtail (and the one I associate with Black-headed Wagtail); *thunbergi*, to my ear, sounds much the same as *flavissima*.

15 June: I spent a fairly tense 2–3 hours searching before locating the wagtail perched on top of cereals, when I took the following notes:

General impression: size/shape as *flavissima* but plumage even more striking: at the risk of sounding absurd, the combination of a black head and bright yellow underparts brought to mind a male Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala* (in later conversation, PEC commented that this comparison had also occurred to him).

Plumage: entire head (lores, forehead, crown, ear-coverts and nape) a glossy jet-black (no sign of white anywhere), contrasting sharply with a greenish mantle. Feathers of closed wing blackish edged paler and with obvious pale wing-bars; tail not noted that

day (but see notes for 10 June); entire underparts (from throat to undertail coverts) a bright, rich yellow; no trace of white on the throat. Bill and legs black.

I did not hear the Black-headed Wagtail in song.