

SYKES'S WAGTAIL AS A BRITISH BREEDING BIRD.

BY
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SYKES'S WAGTAIL (*Motacilla flava beema*) has hitherto been on the British list as a rare straggler on migration. It is the purpose of this note to show that it sometimes breeds in the south-east corner of England. I have suggested this ever since May 5th, 1923, when an adult male (now in the collection of Eastbourne College) was obtained in this area while in company with a female.

In recent years Mr. R. H. Higgins and I have been trying to convert suspicion into certainty. On July 14th, 1932, we discovered a male, which, though it appeared at the time to be alone, was seen by me next day in the company of what I took to be a well-grown young bird. In 1934, throughout the month of May, we saw a male and female together several times and decided that they were nesting. We kept away for a fortnight and then went expecting to find a nest with young in it, which we could have invited people down to see. To our great disgust the birds had disappeared, and we found a weasel hunting the ground. This year (1935), on May 13th, we at last watched a pair of birds to their nest and when the cock bird was subsequently picked up dead close to it, I submitted it for identification to Mr. H. F. Witherby, Mr. H. Whistler and Dr. C. B. Ticehurst. All these authorities agree that the bird was undoubtedly typical of *M. f. beema*. Meantime, to my amazement, on June 3rd I had found another pair apparently nesting only a few miles away.

It seems, then, quite probable that birds of this form have nested or attempted to nest five times in this area, and the question now arises, whether some of the birds previously reported as nesting examples of the Blue-headed (*Motacilla f. flava*) may not really have been *M. f. beema*. In support of this I may state that Dr. C. B. Ticehurst has now labelled as *M. f. beema* a male bird killed in Kent on June 19th, 1908, when accompanying a brood. This bird was wrongly stated to be a female and was reported at the time as a very worn aberrant specimen of *M. flava* (*Bull. B.O.C.*, Vol. XXIII., p. 53). Furthermore, his brother, Dr. N. F. Ticehurst, tells me that when he photographed the nest found on June 4th, 1905, the bird was attributed to *M. f. flava* (see *Brit. B.*, Vol. I., p. 142), but the late M. J. Nicoll, who was present, suggested at the time that it had the appearance of *M. f. beema*. I think it probable that before the publication of the *Practical Handbook*

most people, if they saw a Yellow Wagtail with anything in the nature of a grey or blue head, set it down as *flava* regardless of the exact shade or the colour of the cheeks. Incidentally the Booth Museum at Brighton has a bird labelled as a "Grey-headed", which seems to me to be also *M. f. beema*. This bird was shot by C. C. Steyn on the Adur (Shoreham) on May 5th, 1887.

[Mr. Arnold's discovery that a small group of Blue-headed Wagtails of the type of Sykes's Wagtail (*Motacilla flava beema*) has bred over a period of years in south-east England, is of the greatest interest and importance. In the *Practical Handbook* (Vol. I., p. 196) two occurrences of *M. f. beema* are admitted, one on April 20th, 1898, near Rottingdean, Sussex, and the other at Fair Isle on May 18th, 1910. The first of these was probably of the type described by Mr. Arnold, and it would seem likely that the Fair Isle occurrence may have been the same. The male taken near Winchelsea with a nest on May 31st, 1901 (R. Butterfield, *Zool.*, 1901, p. 389) and referred to in *British Birds* (I., p. 136) and in the *Practical Handbook* as a worn example of *M. f. flava* was probably also of this type. It is unfortunate that the females of the various forms of *flava* are so much alike that the observations must rest mainly on the appearance of the males. In seeking an explanation of this surprising discovery it would seem entirely unlikely that these birds originated from the region inhabited by the geographical form separated under this name, the breeding area of which is in western Siberia, and its wintering range in India, with casual occurrences in south-east Europe and north Africa. This view is strengthened by the fact recently made clear by Dr. A. Kleiner* that the breeding Blue-headed Wagtails in Hungary may be divided into three types, the most prevalent being like *M. flava flava*, a second with dark ear-coverts and a third with pale ear-coverts interspersed with white and with a pale crown, that is to say a bird like *M. f. beema*. We hope that further investigations will throw light on what must now be regarded as a puzzle, but it may be suggested that an explanation may possibly lie in these pale-headed birds in south-east England and also in Hungary having originated independently as mutations, in which case they cannot be regarded as a geographical race at present. We notice that Dr. Kleiner advocates the deletion of *M. f. beema* from the Hungarian list.—EDS.]

**Die Rassen der Schafstelzen in Ungarn*, Kgl. Ung. Ornithologischen Institutes Budapest, 1935. Dr. Kleiner's paper is in Hungarian, and we quote from a short summary given at the end in German.