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## White-crowned Black Wheatear: new to Britain and Ireland

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**A**t about 18.15 GMT on 4th June 1982, A. C. Easton and R. Conner were told by Mr and Mrs R. Tarry of Kessingland, Suffolk, that they had seen what they thought was possibly a Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucura* to the north of the pumping station at Kessingland. Their description was good, so ACE telephoned me and we went to investigate.

The bird was easily found, in the exact spot that Mr Tarry had described. It was quite approachable, and we instantly identified it (at that time) as a Black Wheatear. Since it was all-black, with a white rump, uppertail- and undertail-coverts, and a white tail except for black central feathers, we did not consider the possibility that any other species could be involved or needed to be eliminated. We had, however, noted a single white feather on the forehead; and that the white on the outer tail feathers extended to the tip with, apart from one or two small marks, no terminal black band.

The wheatear was frequenting a small pit which was being used to dump farm rubbish and pieces of disused machinery, and a flat grassy area around this. While we were watching it, a gentleman on holiday at Kessingland came along and told us that he had observed the bird for the past two days; he had no idea what it was, believing it to be a freak Wheatear *O. oenanthe*. The supervisor of the nearby pumping station confirmed that it had been there for a few days before it was reported.

After we had watched the wheatear for about an hour, we went off to spread the news. When we arrived at my home, we checked our notes against various books. It was then that we realised that our initial identification was wrong. Looking at the illustration in Heinzel *et al.* (1972), we concluded that our bird must be a White-crowned Black Wheatear *O. leucopyga*. This is the only species which has a combination of all-black body (in non white-crowned specimens) and all-white sides to the tail. The single white feather on the forehead of our bird then became much more significant.

The wheatear was watched by a large number of people on 5th, but as many more missed out on 6th, by which time it had disappeared. This was the first record of White-crowned Black Wheatear in Britain and Ireland, and the species' most northerly occurrence by around 1,700 km.

### Description

**HEAD** Black, more or less tinged brownish, except for one white feather just right of centre on forehead.

**BODY** Rump, lower back, uppertail- and undertail-coverts, vent and rear flank white, this extending well up back and much farther than I have seen in photographs of Black Wheatear (e.g. plate 67 in Ferguson-Lees 1960); at times, the white showed in rough T shape between tertials when wings folded. Rest of body black, more or less tinged brownish, with no noticeable bluish gloss; black appeared to extend back to just between legs.

**TAIL** White, except for central feathers which were black. All outer feathers unmarked, apart from one on right-hand side which had small black mark at tip. Underside of each feather appeared to have small dark marks at tip, but only fleeting glimpses obtained, so accurate description cannot be given.

**WINGS** Blackish-brown and paler than rest of body, looking reminiscent of Ring Ouzel

*Turdus torquatus* at a distance. Coverts sooty-brown, edged slightly paler brown, but this noticeable only at close range; primaries sooty-brown, perhaps slightly paler than coverts; secondaries appeared to be a bit darker than primaries, but this difficult to confirm.

**BARE PARTS** Eye black. Bill and legs black, but appearing quite grey in some lights.

**SIZE AND SHAPE** No direct comparison with any other species, but appeared to be slightly larger than Wheatear. Shape and stance as in typical Wheatear, but appeared quite pot-bellied at times.

**BEHAVIOUR** Similar to Wheatear. When we watched at close range during first evening, flicked wings quite often and 'waved' tail up and down slowly. This behaviour not seen on following day (perhaps anxiety reaction to my close approach on previous evening).

**AGE AND SEX** Probably first-summer (see discussion below).

Peter Clement has commented (*in litt.*) that 'the bird was most likely to have been of the nominate race *O. l. leucopyga*, from North Africa, on tail pattern. The state of plumage does not help subspecific identification and only measurements in the hand would have confirmed. Many birds from Egypt and Sinai are intermediate between the two races.'

The wheatear stayed in the vicinity of the small pit and the surrounding area of flat stony ground, which was covered to a varying extent with short grass and dune-type flora. The pit was being gradually infilled with farm rubbish, including pieces of concrete, metal, wood, tyres, bricks, a trailer, and soil which was being dumped on the afternoon of 5th and which may have been the cause of the bird's departure. The vegetation in the pit was much lusher than in the surrounding area and the bird obtained much of its food there. It was seen to feed mainly on brownish and greenish



**121 & 122.** White-crowned Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga*, Suffolk, June 1982, showing rump and tail pattern (left, B. J. Brown; right, M. A. Harding)



**123 & 124.** White-crowned Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga*, Suffolk, June 1982, showing stance and extent of white on underparts (John Hewitt)

**125 & 126.** White-crowned Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga*, Suffolk, June 1982 (below, M. A. Harding; right, Mike Frost)





Fig. 1. White-crowned Black Wheatear  
*Oenanthe leucopyga*, Suffolk, June 1982  
(M. P. Frost)

caterpillars, which it persistently bashed and squeezed before swallowing. Other observers reported seeing it eating earthworms.

### **Weather, and occurrence of associated species**

The weather during May and June 1982 was abnormally dry and sunny. According to Blowers (1983), only small amounts of rain fell between 7th and 27th May, and in a warm southwesterly airflow temperatures soared to 75°F (24°C) on 16th. The temperatures in the first week of June were the hottest for 35 years, and a very warm air-stream originating from North Africa and the Mediterranean raised temperatures to over 80°F (27°C) in Suffolk.

There seems little doubt that this weather pattern was the cause of the vagrancy of the White-crowned Black Wheatear. A number of other southern species occurred in Britain at the time, but the Marmora's Warbler *Sylvia sarda* at Langsett, South Yorkshire, from 15th May (Lunn 1985) is most significant: it could have come from the same area, on the same air-stream. It is quite possible that our bird had been at Kessingland for up to a couple of weeks, as the spot is virtually unwatched, particularly in summer; most birders visiting Benacre, to the south, stop short of the pumping station. It may seem amazing that two unexpected 'firsts' should have arrived in Britain at the same time, but the possibility was foreseen (Sharrock 1982): 'One year, perhaps, we shall get whatever weather pattern is needed to bring rarities such as Hoopoe Lark *Alaemon alaudipes* pouring northwards to us from the deserts of North Africa.'

### **Identification and ageing of White-crowned Black Wheatear**

When identifying a wheatear with an all-black body, there are three species that need to be considered: Black, White-crowned Black, and Eastern Pied *O. picata* of the race *opistholeuca*. It is not intended to discuss the finer details of identification of all three species here: a paper on wheatear identification is to appear in a forthcoming issue of this journal, and I am grateful to P. Clement and Dr L. Cornwallis for letting me see a draft copy of the relevant parts of the paper, upon which the following notes on the main points separating Black and White-crowned Black Wheatears are based.

Any wheatear with an all-black body and white crown and tail (except for central feathers) is instantly identifiable as White-crowned Black. The situation is somewhat different where immatures and non white-crowned adults are concerned, and it is then necessary to see the tail to be certain of identity: on Black, this has a broad terminal band similar to that of Wheatear; this band is lacking on White-crowned Black, which has the outer feathers completely white with or without a variable amount of small black markings at the tips. Other points on White-crowned Black are the extension of white above the rump onto the lower back, and onto the ventral area below. These lesser, but valid, characters are useful only when used in conjunction with the tail pattern, but could conceivably eliminate confusion with a Black Wheatear showing an abnormal, damaged or badly worn tail (the tips of the Kessingland wheatear's tail feathers looked dark when wetted by dew from the grass early in the morning). I have not found any mention of the amount of white on the rump and lower back in the dozen or so books that I have been able to consult, but some do illustrate it (especially Etchécopar & Hüe 1967 and Heinzel *et al.* 1972) while others do not (e.g. Gallagher & Woodcock 1980). The Greek *leucopyga* (white rump) and the species' old name of White-rumped Black Chat do seem to imply that the amount of white in that area is significant. This is, in fact, diagnostic in the case of White-crowned Black and Black. The amount of white on the rump is, however, exceeded by Hooded Wheatear *O. monacha* and equalled by Hume's Wheatear *O. albomiger*, but as both of these have predominantly white underparts no confusion between them and the species under discussion exists.

In the past, there has been great confusion, and speculation, as to what the presence or absence of a white crown indicates. Individuals are found with all-white or all-black crowns, or any mixture between the two. Some authors have stated that this is related to age and/or sex, or even race, but breeding pairs occur in which either one or both of the sexes show a black or a white crown.

Any individual with a white crown is certainly adult, but those with black crowns may be adults or first-years. To determine which, one has to look for the bluish gloss (or lack of it) on the black parts of the plumage. On adults, all the black areas are glossy, but this gloss is usually confined to the breast, mantle and coverts on first-years. In worn plumage, first-years also look more sooty-brown above, and then show a greater resemblance in this respect to Black Wheatear. All wheatears retain juvenile primaries, secondaries, tail feathers and some wing-coverts throughout their first year, until the first complete moult which takes place in the autumn of their second calendar-year. The faded, brownish coloration of the Kessingland bird's wings (contrastingly paler than the rest of the body), as well as the lack of any bluish gloss on the body, strongly suggest that it was a first-summer individual. In June, it seems likely that the wings of an adult would not be so faded and contrastingly pale, and that the body would have been more glossy, bluish-black.

White-crowned Black Wheatear is noticeably larger than Wheatear, and only slightly smaller than Black Wheatear, which is the biggest of all

wheatears. Such a small difference in size would, however, be of little use in the field unless White-crowned Black and Black were seen together.

### **Distribution and habitat**

There has been, and in some respects still is, a lack of knowledge of the exact distribution of the White-crowned Black Wheatear, with some authors contradicting others. The following account has been compiled from Harrison (1982), Jennings (1981), Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1957) and Vaurie (1959).

In North Africa, the species ranges from the Western Sahara in the west to Sinai and the Red Sea coast in the east. It does not quite reach the Mediterranean coast in the north. The southern limit is difficult to identify, but the species is certainly found around the oases of the southern Sahara. In the east, it occurs south to central Ethiopia and the northern tip of Somalia. There is a patchy distribution across Saudi Arabia north to Israel, Jordan and Iran.

Within this range, the White-crowned Black Wheatear frequents the most inhospitable areas. To quote Harrison (1982), it is 'resident in dry subtropical zones. It occurs in desert areas of very sparse herbage, where broken terrain occurs, on rocky outcrops, talus slopes, and in wadis and hill ravines. It also uses ruins and buildings and occurs in desert villages.' Where it nests near human habitation, it is said to be very tame and confiding.

The species winters within its breeding range, and is 'mostly sedentary' (Gallagher & Woodcock 1980). Could this last statement indicate that some movement occurs? There are very few cases of vagrancy: records of individuals in Malta on 18th April 1872 (Sultana & Gauci 1982), in Cyprus on 17th March 1970 (Bannerman & Bannerman 1971; the bird was actually present from 11th to 24th), and of two at the Reserva Biologica de Doñana, Spain, on 28th May 1977 (Valverde 1978) are the only ones known. I would suspect, however, that black-crowned individuals of White-crowned Black Wheatear might have been misidentified as Black Wheatear in south European areas where the latter species is more familiar. The Kessingland bird could easily have been accepted as a Black Wheatear had we not seen the tail. A 'Black Wheatear' in Ireland in June 1964 is on record with the proviso that White-crowned Black was not eliminated (*Irish Bird Report* 12: 32).

### **Subspecies**

Two subspecies of White-crowned Black Wheatear are recognised by most authors. That found in Sinai, southern Israel and southern Jordan, *O. l. ernesti*, is distinctly bluer-black, and some individuals have more black on the tips of the tail feathers; in the hand, its bill is slightly longer than on nominate *leucopyga*. The nominate race occurs across the rest of the range, but some authorities split this in two, assigning the North African population to the race *aegra*. Wardlaw-Ramsey (1923) described *aegra* as having a slightly smaller bill and, judging from the measurements given, a marginally, but not diagnostically, shorter wing. Meinertzhagen (1954) doubted

the validity of this subspecies, describing it as a synonym of *leucopyga*, and it was not mentioned by Vaurie (1959), but Howard & Moore (1980) included it in their checklist.

### Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Peter Clement for letting me see a draft of his forthcoming paper, and for reading and commenting on the present paper; without this, the identification section would have been greatly curtailed. I also thank Peter Grant for commenting on an earlier draft, and the editor of the *East Anglian Daily Times* for allowing me to quote from their weather review.

### Summary

A White-crowned Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucopyga* was present at Kessingland, Suffolk, on 4th and 5th June 1982, and almost certainly for a few days previously. This was the first record of this mainly sedentary African and Middle Eastern species for Britain and Ireland; it was probably a first-summer individual and probably of the nominate race. The species' natural distribution and habitat are summarised and its identification and ageing discussed.

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