

Yellow Wagtail : showing characters of *Mf cinereocapilla* ('Ashy-headed').

Observer: A. Curry.

Other Observers: C. Bradshaw.

St Mary's Island, Whitley Bay, Northumberland.

29th April 2010.

Time: 1530-1730, though apparently present for the remainder of the day.

Distance from bird: at best, 30m.

Optics: 30x scope.

Weather: Brisk westerly, mainly overcast.

Previous experience: A few in the dark and distant past, of little value.

Similar species: Familiar with most European and Asian forms somewhere or other.

Photographs: Yes, Colin Bradshaw (decent) and Alan Curry (poor).

Circumstances: The wagtail was present on the wetland from at least mid-afternoon until early evening but was never particularly showy and mainly remaining hidden amongst the juncus along the eastern margin. Initially picked up on call and seen briefly in flight at a range of about 100m when it displayed an essentially all dark blue-grey head without any detectable supercilia. Coupled with the seemingly bog-standard '*flava*' flight call, this led me to believe it must be a '*thunbergi*' (Grey-headed) even though the date was exceptionally early for this form. However, at one stage the wagtail appeared at much closer range calling from the top of a juncus stem, when the extensive sharply defined white throat induced a complete re-evaluation of its possible identity.

Description:

- The head was predominantly a dark blue- grey becoming almost black around the lores. The nape and ear coverts being a shade paler than the crown.
- There was a small pale fleck just above and to the rear of the eye.
- It had a white lower eye-crescent.
- The chin and throat were extensively gleaming white, with a sharply demarcated contour with the yellow upper breast. This feature was very apparent when facing head-on.
- The upperparts were an unexceptional drab greenish-brown.
- The median and greater upperwing coverts had large expansive pale tips that appeared much whiter than what would be expected on a *flava* wagtail but without the gleaming quality of the throat. Similarly, the tertials were also broadly fringed off-white.
- Outer two tail feathers essentially white.
- The underparts including the undertail coverts were bright yellow.
- Call: initially when heard in flight at the North end of the wetland, it sounded pretty much as I would expect a '*flavissima*' to sound like – a strident 'tsree'. Later it appeared at much closer range and sang briefly from the top of a juncus stem, the song sounding pretty much like a collection of strung together flight notes.

Discussion:

The combination of dark blue-grey head and extensive white throat look absolutely spot-on for an 'Ashy-headed'. Having investigated the issue of the small pale mark on the rear of the supercilium (*prime reference – Pipits and Wagtails, Alstrom et al*) it seems that this should not be too much of a problem and can frequently occur. Which leaves the call as the main stumbling block. Personally, I have little experience with 'Ashy-headed' and have no opinion on calls either way, so can only judge on sourced information. The calls heard, most certainly did not have the rasping quality of eastern forms (unlike the recent Cresswell 'Black-headed' that sounded fine to my ears) and thus if you take current belief at face value then it renders the possibility of this being a good 'Ashy-headed' as being redundant. However, the afformentioned reference does state that '*.....cinereocapilla* now and then give *flava*-like calls', so perhaps that is the 'get out of jail' card we need!

Unless of course some smart Alec whispers the dreaded 'hybrid' word.....

Alan Curry

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BBRC Secretary asked Colin Bradshaw if h had anything to add. Here is his reply:

I don't really have anything other than the photos. It looked like Ashy-headed to me. It [apparently] called when I was there but I couldn't hear it – the curses of being older. I spent my time trying to get the best photos I could of it

Sorry, Colin







First two pictures – A Curry. Last three pictures - C Bradshaw