

# Field identification and status of black-headed Yellow Wagtails in Western Europe



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**T**he male Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* of the black-headed race *feldegg* (Sammalisto 1961) in adult breeding plumage is a distinctive bird. Descriptions and illustrations in most field guides, however, are inadequate, and of little help in distinguishing it from other dark-headed races of the Yellow Wagtail. This has resulted in misidentifications. In our opinion, most records of *feldegg* in western Europe probably result from confusion with the grey-headed race *M. f. thunbergi*.

In this paper, adult breeding plumage, bare parts and calls of these two races are described and compared. Distribution and migration of both races are reviewed, and the status of *feldegg* in western Europe is discussed.

## Plumage and bare parts

According to Bruun & Singer (1978), Heinzel *et al.* (1979) and Peterson *et al.* (1983), males of the black-headed race *feldegg* in adult breeding plumage can be distinguished from those of the grey-headed race *thunbergi* by the head pattern. The race *feldegg* has a black forehead, crown, nape, lores and ear-coverts; *thunbergi* has a grey forehead, crown and nape, contrasting with black or almost black lores and ear-coverts. These features, however, are not completely diagnostic. Sammalisto (1961) demonstrated the existence of *thunbergi* with characters of both *feldegg* and other dark-headed races; moreover, of about 2,600 *thunbergi* which Sammalisto (*in litt.*) studied in Finland during 1955-80, three had a head pattern identical with that of *feldegg*.

Adult breeding plumage and bare parts of males of the two races are described and compared in table 1. This is based on an examination of skins of 13 *feldegg* and 28 *thunbergi* at the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie in Leiden and the Zoölogisch Museum in Amsterdam; on field studies during 1978-84 in Cyprus, Greece and Turkey; and on the existing literature (e.g. Bub 1981; Dittberner & Dittberner 1984; Herroelen 1982; Sammalisto 1961; Smith 1950; Svensson 1984). Male *feldegg* can normally be

**Table 1. Plumage and bare parts of male Yellow Wagtails *Motacilla flava* of black-headed race *feldegg* and grey-headed race *thunbergi* in adult breeding plumage**

Feature	Differences are shown in italics	
	Black-headed <i>feldegg</i>	Grey-headed <i>thunbergi</i>
<b>HEAD</b>		
Forehead and crown	Black or almost black; <i>not contrasting</i> with lores and ear-coverts	<i>Grey to dark grey</i> , rarely black; <i>normally contrasting</i> with lores and ear-coverts
Nape	Wholly (including sides) black or almost black; <i>not contrasting</i> with lores and ear-coverts	Sides of nape <i>grey to dark grey</i> , rarely black; central nape <i>grey to dark grey</i> , <i>paler towards mantle</i> , very rarely black. Sides <i>normally contrasting</i> with lores and ear-coverts; centre <i>often contrasting</i> with forehead, crown and sides of nape, and nearly always with lores and ear-coverts
Lores and ear-coverts	Black or almost black	<i>Dark grey</i> to black, very rarely <i>grey</i>
Supercilium	None (in hybrids, often white to <i>yellow</i> supercilium or pre- and post-ocular stripes or flecks)	None (in hybrids, often white supercilium or pre- and post-ocular stripes or flecks)
<b>UPPERPARTS</b>		
Mantle, scapulars, back and rump	<i>Brighter</i> olive-green, generally with <i>blackish</i> tinge: <i>distinct</i> contrast with wings	<i>Duller</i> olive-green, generally with <i>greyish</i> tinge: <i>no distinct</i> contrast with wings
Wings	Dark brown to <i>black-brown</i> ; edges to tertials, median and greater coverts normally white, with or without yellow tinge, and <i>wide</i>	<i>Brown</i> to dark brown; edges to tertials, median and greater coverts normally white, with or without <i>olive</i> to yellow tinge, and <i>narrow</i>
Tail	Dark brown to <i>black-brown</i> , outer rectrices with white outer edges	<i>Brown</i> to dark brown, outer rectrices with white outer edges
<b>UNDERPARTS</b>		
Chin and throat	Yellow (in hybrids, often with white)	Yellow (in hybrids, often with white)
Rest of underparts	Yellow to deep yellow; breast band of olive or dark olive markings often <i>absent</i> or strongly reduced	Yellow, not uncommonly deep yellow; breast band of olive or dark olive markings often <i>present</i>
<b>BARE PARTS</b>		
	Blackish-brown to <i>black</i> . Bill averages <i>somewhat longer and more slender</i> ; hindclaw averages <i>somewhat shorter</i> (Sammalisto 1961)	Blackish-brown. Bill averages <i>somewhat shorter and more stumpy</i> ; hindclaw averages <i>somewhat longer</i> (Sammalisto 1961)

Heading drawing: Yellow Wagtails *Motacilla flava* of grey-headed race *thunbergi* (left) and black-headed race *feldegg* (two at right) (Killian Mullarney)



70. Male Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* of black-headed race *feldegg*, Romania, June 1979  
(Lubomir Hlšek)

71. Male Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* of black-headed race *feldegg*, Israel, April 1982 (Bertil  
Bretje)



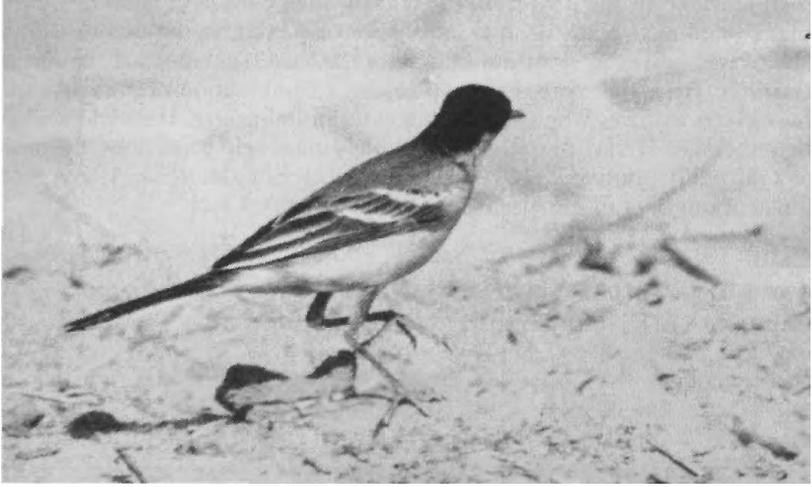
distinguished in the field from the dark-headed variant of *thunbergi* by the black or almost black central nape (often reaching to the mantle). This character, however, does not eliminate the rare black-headed variant of *thunbergi*. It is, therefore, essential to use a combination of plumage and bare-parts features when identifying extralimital *feldegg*. It should always be remembered that, even under seemingly good field conditions, the head of a normally plumaged *thunbergi* may look black or almost black. For good illustrations of both subspecies, see Jonsson (1979, 1982).

### **Calls**

The black-headed race *feldegg* has a distinctive call note. It can be transcribed as a loud and harsh 'tsee-rr', sometimes recalling the flight call of Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*. In our opinion, this call is a useful additional feature of *feldegg*. It can, however, be confused with the call note of *thunbergi*, which can be transcribed as 'rssli' or 'rslu' (Schüz 1956). For more information, including sonagrams, on the calls of both subspecies, see Bergmann & Helb (1982) and Dittberner & Dittberner (1984).

**72.** Male Wagtail *Motacilla flava* of black-headed race *feldegg*, Yugoslavia, June 1978  
(K. J. Carlson)





73. Male Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* of black-headed race *feldegg*, Israel, April 1982 (Bertil Breife)

### **Distribution and migration**

The black-headed race *feldegg* breeds in southeast Europe and southwest Asia, including western Yugoslavia and Albania, and the Kalmuck Steppes and the Transcaspien region, where hybrid populations occur (Sammalisto 1961). Its European range was fairly constant during the first half of the 20th century, but it has expanded northwards in the second half (Keve 1978). It winters mainly in eastern Africa, from Sudan and Eritrea to northeastern Zaire and northern Tanzania, west to Lake Chad (Zink 1975). The spring migration is from February to April (Curry-Lindahl 1958; Zink 1975).

74. Male Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* of grey-headed race *thunbergi*, Finland, July 1958 (Eric Hosking)





75. Male Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* of black-headed race *feldegg*, France, June/July 1980  
(Jean-Philippe Sibley & Olivier Tostain)

The grey-headed race *thunbergi* breeds in northern Europe and winters mainly in Africa south of the Sahara (Sammalisto 1961; Zink 1975). The Norwegian and northern Swedish population winters in western Africa, and has little or no contact with *feldegg* during winter and on migration; the northern Finnish population probably has more contact (Zink 1975). The spring migration is from March to June, most European individuals returning in May (Curry-Lindahl 1958; Zink 1975).

For more information, including references, on the distribution and migration of both subspecies, see Dittberner & Dittberner (1984).

### **Status in western Europe**

The black-headed race *feldegg* has been recorded in several west European countries, including Belgium, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Sweden and West Germany (British Ornithologists' Union 1971; Commissie voor de Nederlandse Avifauna 1970; Herroelen 1982; Keve 1978; Rogers *et al.* 1980; Sibley & Tostain 1984; Sveriges Ornitologiska Förening 1978). For the following two reasons, we are of the opinion that most of these records are probably the result of confusion with *thunbergi*.

(i) Most descriptions of *feldegg* recorded in Britain and the Netherlands fit the dark-headed and black-headed variants of *thunbergi*, or do not exclude the possibility of the latter. This applies also to *feldegg* recorded in Belgium (Herroelen 1982).



**76.** Male Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* of black-headed race *feldegg*, but showing some hybrid characters (white pre- and post-ocular stripes and white on chin and throat), Yugoslavia, May 1975 (*Karel A. Mauer*)



**77.** Male Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* of black-headed race *feldegg*, but showing some hybrid characters (white pre- and post-ocular stripes), Israel, April 1982 (*Bertil Breife*)

(ii) Of 22 accepted records of *feldegg* in Belgium, Britain, the Netherlands and Sweden during 1958-78, 18 were in May and early June; the remaining four were in late June (two), July and October. This striking temporal coincidence with the main spring migration period of *thunbergi* in western Europe is unlikely. In theory, one would expect the majority of *feldegg* in (March and) April, when most Yellow Wagtails of the blue-headed race *M. f. flava* and of the mainly British race *M. f. flavissima* return to western Europe. This applies especially to adult males, which return well before the other age and sex categories.

In June and July 1980, a male *feldegg* successfully bred near Montereau, Seine-et-Marne, France (Sibley & Tostain 1984). Judging from the photographic evidence, it was probably a first-summer individual. The

racial identity of the female could not be established. This constituted the first breeding record for France and for western Europe.

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### Summary

Plumage and bare parts of adult breeding male Yellow Wagtails *Motacilla flava* of the black-headed race *feldegg* and the grey-headed race *thunbergi* are described and compared. The race *feldegg* can be distinguished in the field from the dark-headed and black-headed variants of *thunbergi* by a combination of plumage and bare-parts features. The call note of *feldegg* is considered a useful additional feature. The authors are of the opinion that most records of *feldegg* in western Europe are probably the result of confusion with *thunbergi*.

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The Rarities Committee is currently reviewing the accepted records of *M. f. feldegg*. The results of these reassessments will be published in due course. EDS