

# IDENTIFICATION GUIDE TO AUTUMN WAGTAILS

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This guide is to help ringers separate **Pied Wagtails** (*M.a.yarrellii*) from **White Wagtails** (*M.a.alba*) in the hand. It is of greatest use in the autumn and early winter periods.

Our project began in September 1999 and, like most other ringers and birders, I was unfamiliar with the winter plumage of White Wagtails. We were catching good numbers of Pied Wagtails at roost and were using Svensson, to age and sex the birds, when the penny suddenly dropped! The pale, grey crowned first winter birds were not *funny looking* female Pieds but were White Wagtails. The full details are written within Svensson but his guide is aimed at ringers already familiar with the species being handled and we are not! With the benefit of hindsight we had been ringing White Wagtails for some weeks.

With the project not just continuing but now expanded to other parts of Scotland and southern England we are now able to produce this guide to help other interested ringers identify these birds correctly.

At peak times, September and October, up to 80% of **ALL** these wagtails will be Whites and I am now beginning to change over from picking the Whites out of the Pieds to the opposite. At these times it is safer to assume that the bird you have is a White Wagtail until you can identify it as a Pied Wagtail.

Please use this guide, be as critical and thorough as possible and I can guarantee that you will begin to identify the Whites and be left wondering how you managed to miss them in the past. We all have!

## **STEP 1.**

Take bird out of bag and ring it!

## **STEP 2**

Age it. Be very aware of the juvenile plumage. Fig. 12. Early on in the season (July) juveniles are fairly easy as the plumage is soft and “fluffy”, with bare areas on the belly and flanks when blown (as normal), and the gape flange can be prominent. As the season goes on the birds undergo a partial post juvenile moult resulting in a first winter plumage, with the expected contrasts between moulted and unmoulted wing feathers. Depending upon the stage of this moult some birds can be assigned to one race or the other when several feathers – key for identification - have been replaced (see below). The main pitfall here is late in the season, perhaps after having handled a few first winter female **Whites**, that you forget about the juveniles and jump in too soon, when there may still be late juveniles around.

Remember juveniles have a dirty looking upper body and chest with pale greyish/off white tone and an untidy, narrow, pale blackish chest band. I record all juveniles as

**Pied Wagtails**, not yet able to tell the two races apart in this plumage. (Although biometrics show that juvenile White Wagtails are present in our roost.)

### STEP 3

#### First winter birds.

Having first aged a bird as a first winter I then look at **head** pattern as follows:-

**Pied Wagtails:** All birds have a black crown, generally sharply demarcated from the white/yellowish forehead. The vast majority also have the pure black extending back onto the nape, with the exception of a few females that have some dark grey edges to these feathers. The face is almost always mainly white, extending down the chin and throat. Some have a lemon yellow wash over this white, which tends to be uniform. The upper chest has a broad, jet black necklace, often very deep in the centre. The chest and lower abdomen are white bordered by dark smokey-grey flanks. The mantle colour is generally a dark grey with blackish background. The extent of the black varies, with males probably being blackest. The rump (area above the upper tail coverts, covered by the closed tertials) is invariably black in males, and dark blackish grey in females. The upper tail coverts are always black.

**White Wagtails: Fig 1,2,3,9+10** Head pattern of these birds is significantly different from **Pieds** and is the main feature in separating the two subspecies. Females have a completely olive grey nape and crown extending to the forehead, which is generally a small narrow band of pale white with a marked olive wash. Males tend to have black showing through particularly on the fore crown with more concealed, but many are between these two and have to be left unsexed (Svensson). The ear coverts are greenish white with a patchy, almost olive, appearance Fig 9. The chin and throat are mainly white with an olive wash. There is also a pale supercillium not unlike a Yellow Wagtail's. The upper chest has a variable black band typically thin and narrow Fig 2, but can be almost as wide as **Pied**'s on a few males Fig 3. The rest of the chest, vent and under tail coverts are spectacularly white, almost wader like in brightness. The flanks are a pale grey, contrasting sharply with the chest. Some females show a few faint brownish streaks parallel to the flanks Fig 3. The mantle is a pale grey with a marked olive wash Fig 1+9, (**absolutely nothing like the spring birds**), this colour extending down to the rump, which is slightly darker grey, never black Fig 10. The upper tail coverts are usually black but a few birds have the mantle colour extending all the way down to the tail.

#### Adults

**Pied Wagtails.** Fig 7+8

The two sexes have completely black napes, crowns and very white foreheads and faces. I have found no exceptions to this. The majority of females have dark grey admixed with black mantles only a tiny minority <2% have pale grey mantles. The

males are the familiar black backed, occasionally with grey mixed, black lesser coverts and broadly white tipped median and greater coverts.

### **White Wagtails.** Fig 5+6

Have a very odd appearance. Every time I catch one they just don't look like anything you would expect! They are primarily grey. The females have a grey nape and crown (the black is mainly concealed below (as with winter male Reed Bunting)) and with a narrow whitish forehead. Some females have no black on their crowns at all. Some males show more black on the crown and a whiter forehead. The face is white but with a speckled, almost black, wash over-lying. In the autumn of 2003 we caught one out of 20 that had a typical spring type head plumage, how common this is has not been established yet (probably <1% of adults.) Figures 5 and 6 are of adult males. The pictures show more contrast between the black and white on their heads than you will see in the hand. The grey edges on the nape Fig 6 are often more widespread than this picture suggests.

### **Other general features.**

#### **Wing coverts.**

**White Wagtails:** Lesser and median coverts have a neat, broad grey edge and dark grey centres e.g. Fig 9. Those on **Pieds** are usually edged grey on the lesser coverts, and mainly white on the median coverts with black/ish centres esp. in males. In **Whites** the greater coverts are dark grey edged pale grey/greyish white, with whitish tips e.g. Fig 11. In **Pieds** the greater coverts are usually black with a marked white edge, except in first winter females where they can be grey edged also.

### **In Summary**

#### **First winter birds.**

#### **Pied Wagtails**

Black nape and crown with a neat edge to the white forehead and face. Many with lemon yellow wash. Black chest band wide, especially in the centre. Dark smokey grey flanks, dark grey mantle without olive wash, black /dark grey rump and black upper tail coverts. Greater coverts edged white, or grey in females.

#### **White Wagtail**

Grey nape, crown, mantle, with an overall olive wash. Face and throat yellowish with olive wash. Narrow black chest band and pure white chest vent and under tail coverts. Wing coverts mainly grey with darker centres, greater coverts edged greyish with whitish tips. Pale grey flanks, darker grey rump and occasionally grey upper tail coverts (not common). Females' crowns are mainly grey with a narrow white/olive

forehead and males have some/moderate amounts of black, edged olive grey, showing through.

### Adults

Often still have outer primaries in pin. No contest! **White Wagtails** have mainly grey crown in females with black concealed, males have more black showing and much concealed with a white forehead. They have white faces but are slightly mottled and lack the pure white faces of the **Pieds**. They also have very noticeable wide grey edges to greater coverts and tertials.

### Biometrics (personal data)

#### Pied Wagtails

	<u>Wing length</u>	<u>Weight</u>
<u>Adults</u>	89-96mm, mean 91.9mm (n=26).	21.0-26.7g, mean 23.9, (n=33).
First Winter	87-94mm, mean 90.3 (n=84).	21.6-28.0g, mean 23.7 (n=79).

#### White Wagtails

	<u>Wing length</u>	<u>Weight</u>
<u>Adults</u>	86-91mm, mean 88.0mm (n=12).	21.0-25.0g, mean 22.6(n=12)
First Winter	82-92mm, mean 86.8(n=92).	18.7-23.6g, mean 21.7(n=76).

All weights are roost weights to nearest 0.1g. all wing lengths taken by IL.

### Problems

I have difficulty with a few pale first winter female **Pieds** with heavily yellow washed faces and grey edges to nape feathers, similar to male **Whites**, with much black showing through the crown. I leave these as Pied Wagtails usually but make a note in my notebook. These account for less than 2% of birds.

There can be a temptation to dwell on the difficult individuals and pick holes but I would suggest looking at the big picture. You will soon be able to identify at least 90% of the Whites which is a massive improvement on the current situation and in time the vast majority will be put to one race or the other. The BTO have altered IPMR so that these races can be recorded so that future analysis of recoveries will be more accurate.

Good luck.

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# **'ALBA' WAGTAIL PHOTOGRAPHS**



Fig 1: White Wagtail - 1<sup>st</sup> winter October 17<sup>th</sup> 2004



Fig 2: White Wagtail - 1<sup>st</sup> winter female October 17<sup>th</sup> 2004



Fig 3: White Wagtail – 1<sup>st</sup> winter male October 17<sup>th</sup> 2004



Fig 4: Pied Wagtail – adult female November 1<sup>st</sup> 2004



Fig 5: White Wagtail – adult male November 1<sup>st</sup> 2004



Fig 6: White Wagtail – adult male November 1<sup>st</sup> 2004



Fig 7: Pied Wagtail adult female November 1<sup>st</sup> 2004



Fig 8: Pied Wagtail – adult male December 5<sup>th</sup> 2004



Fig 9: White Wagtail – 1<sup>st</sup> winter female December 5<sup>th</sup> 2004



Fig 10: White Wagtail – 1<sup>st</sup> winter female December 5<sup>th</sup> 2004



Fig 11: White Wagtail – 1<sup>st</sup> winter female December 5<sup>th</sup> 2004



Fig 12: Pied Wagtail – juvenile – July 2005



Fig 12a: Pied Wagtail – juvenile – July 2005

**All photographs by Steve Hales**