MOTACILLA YARRELLI.

J. Gould & H.C. Fisher, del. et lith.

Water, Imp.

MOTACILLA YARRELLI, *Gould.*

Pied Wagtail.

Motacilla Yarrelli, Gould, Birds of Europe, vol. ii. List of plates, p. ii, note.

I APPREHEND that no one with a spark of love for our indigenous birds can fail to admire the Pied Wagtail as it trips over the lawn, or runs before him during his rambles by the river-side. Whether engaged in pursuit of insects, or in performing its dipping flight from one place to another, its presence gives life to the landscape, and adds much to the attractions of the scene. It is a bird which America may well envy us, and which Australia would gladly give much in exchange to possess; for in neither of those countries does it or any member of its genus occur. It is not a little singular that a bird so common and so universally dispersed over the British Islands should have remained without a specific appellation until 1837, when I proposed for it that of *Yarrelli*, and that all English ornithologists should have failed to perceive that it is distinct from the *Motacilla alba* of Linnæus. Neither is it less remarkable that a mere strait of only some thirty miles across should form a boundary over which the two species rarely pass. To say that neither of them ever visits the other's territory would be to state what is untrue; for such an occurrence does occasionally take place; but these are merely exceptions to the rule, and, moreover, are so rare that a person might live at Dover from childhood to old age without seeing a *M. alba*, or at Calais without once meeting with *M. Yarrelli*. The only part of the world out of our own islands whence I have received the Pied Wagtail is Heligoland; and I now question if I had not myself been deceived when I stated, in my paper on the species of the genus *Motacilla*, published in the 'Magazine of Natural History' for 1837, that I had seen it from Norway and Sweden. Why the habitats of some birds should be restricted, and others extensive, is beyond our comprehension. One would naturally suppose that if any Wagtail migrated in summer to Norway, Sweden, and Iceland, it would be the one common in Britain; instead of which it is the more southern *M. alba* that extends its summer journey to these almost Arctic countries. Over Britain the *M. Yarrelli* is so abundantly dispersed, that it matters not whether we visit the Land's End, in Cornwall, Cape Wrath, in Scotland, or the Orkney Islands; everywhere this pretty pied bird will be met with; in the vale and the higher lands, wherever man with his flocks are found and husbandry is carried on, the certain accompaniment is the Pied Wagtail. The shepherd knows the bird as well as his sheep, for they are almost inseparable; the herd-boy finds it the daily companion of his charge; and the maid, when she goes to the mead, sees it jump up and dash about for insects around the cow she is milking; and the farm-labourer has it ever before him, both in winter and summer the stack-yard and the midden being among its favourite places of resort.

The Dishwasher, as the Pied Wagtail is familiarly called in some parts of the country, is one of the most peaceful of our little birds; for it interferes with none; and if the coarse, hopping sparrow attempts to tilt with it, it readily trips before him with the most light-footed agility, or darts away with amazing quickness. On the water's edge it readily evades this or any other insectorial bird, by running breast high into the stream, and leaping on a floating leaf, a stone, or any water-plant or projecting object that may present itself therein; along the roof of a house it passes with equal nimbleness, so that here again the pugnacious Fringilline is once more nonplused. Its wings being long and ample, its flight is vigorous, but peculiar; and it dips away over the river, or from one part of the mead to another, with the utmost rapidity, and, on settling, throws up its tail and keeps it in constant motion; its legs and toes are so delicately formed as to render its progress over the ground as facile as possible; in like manner its cylindrical bill is as admirably adapted for taking minute insects as its full black eye is for discovering during the period of summer the gnats, aphides, and other tiny kinds which are then to be found among the various grasses, while at other seasons it as readily secures the small mollusks and the host of soft insects upon which it then subsists.

In addition to its other attractions, the Pied Wagtail sings, during the early part of spring, a short but sprightly and pretty song, which may occasionally be also heard in June, when the female is sitting on her second laying of eggs. The situation of the nest is very variable; its most frequent sites are the hole in a wall, on a beam in an outhouse, the head of a pollard willow, under the eaves of a hay-rick, &c. Wherever it may be, it is one of those most frequently selected for the place of deposit of the egg of the parasitic Cuckoo; but how this is effected is still a mystery, though Mr. Alfred Newton informs me that the old Cuckoo has been seen to carry its egg in its bill, and drop it into the nest. However this may be, a more sedulous fosterparent than the Pied Wagtail could not be found; for it defends its charge with a courage and pertinacity truly

surprising, to the entire neglect of its own young, which seldom if ever live more than three days after they are hatched, if the usurper be among the family.

A nest, taken from a hole in a pollard willow near the lock at Maidenhead, in Berkshire, on the 24th of April 1859, was cupshaped, somewhat dense, and formed of dried grasses, fine roots, and shreds of the common barkless bass matting, warmly lined with short cows' hair and a little wool. The eggs were four in number; their ground-colour light olive grey, minutely freckled all over with purplish brown, but especially at the larger end. The construction of this nest was commenced in the first week of April, and the first egg was laid about the 15th. Another, taken in May 1860, from a beam under the roof of a boat-house at Formosa, near Maidenhead, contained four eggs of the Pied Wagtail, and one of a Cuckoo. This nest was rendered singular in appearance by a quantity of scarlet and blue wools, with which it was decorated, and from there being among the materials of which it was composed a shred of purple silk, apparently a fragment from a lady's dress.

During the pairing-season the male performs a number of grotesque and animated motions, and approaches the female with ruffled feathers and outspread wings and tail.

Although the Pied Wagtail is an inhabitant of our island during the whole of the year, I have not failed to notice that it is much more numerous in certain localities at one season than at another, and that, if it be not strictly migratory, it certainly, like other birds, affects a change of situation. Any one who may visit the banks of the Thames during the month of September will find both old and young congregated in thousands, spreading over the margins of the river and roosting on the aits at night. I have myself seen them there at that season in swarms like the Sand-Martin; and that some more or less extensive migration then takes place I am certain, for a short time afterwards their numbers are greatly diminished. Where they go to, no one can say; all we know is that the greater number of them disappear, and that but few remain during the winter. At the period alluded to, the old birds have thrown off the black colouring of the throat (the characteristic of summer) and assumed the white one of winter; the early-spring broods have the throat suffused with yellow, and their backs mottled black and grey; and the later ones are less gaily attired, having the upper surface brown, and the under one grey, with only a trace of the black pectoral band. The sexes are very similar at all seasons, except that the colour of the female is less intense, her back not so black as that of the male, and in some instances grey, but never of so light a hue as in *M. alba*.

The Plate represents a male and a female, of the natural size, in their full summer dress, and a young bird in the first autumn of its existence, when the face and throat are usually suffused with yellow.

Gould, John. 1873. "Pied Wagtail, *Motacilla yarrelli* [Pl. 1]." *The birds of Great Britain* 3, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323893>.

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