MOTACILLA ALBA, Linn.

J. Gould & H.C. Richter del. et lith.

Walter, Imp.

MOTACILLA ALBA, Linn.

White Wagtail.

Motacilla alba, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 92.

——— *cinerea*, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 961.

——— *albeola*, Pall. Zoog. Ross.-Asiat., tom. i. p. 506.

——— *albida*, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 77.

——— *Brissoni*, Macgill. Man. Nat. Hist. Orn., vol. i. p. 160.

IN size this elegant species differs but little from the Pied Wagtail, so common in our islands; but a little attention to the colouring of adult examples in their summer dress will, I am sure, convince any one, however sceptical, that the two birds are distinct, and not identical as has been affirmed. Had I seen any variation in the colouring of continental specimens of *Motacilla alba*, or an approach to *M. Yarrelli*, in the dark hue of their backs, or found any of our own birds assuming a delicate grey tint in that part of their plumage, I should have come to a different conclusion. It is true that young examples of *M. Yarrelli* may be found with a clouded grey upper surface; but I never saw one of so light a hue as a specimen of the same age of *M. alba*, or so coloured that I could not at once unhesitatingly pronounce to which species it belonged. In the investigation of this matter I have been greatly aided by the study of the Wagtails of India, whose affinities ally them to each other in a similar way as those of Europe; among them I find the differences which exist are constant, and that a similar law prevails with the *Motacillæ* of both countries. Nothing like a cross appears ever to take place among these nearly allied species—a circumstance which, indeed, rarely occurs among birds in a state of nature. We have, then, but two alternatives—to keep them all as one, or separate them according to their specific characters, however slight they may be. I shall follow those of my contemporaries who adopt the latter view, not only in this group of birds, but in all others in which I find certain characters are constant and unchanging.

The winter and summer changes of plumage of the *M. alba* are precisely similar to those which occur in *M. Yarrelli*. Both have the throat black in summer, and white in winter. I must remark, however, that the fully adult examples of the former, at any period of the year, more closely assimilate in colouring than do the adults of the latter, the females of which may be known by their back being of a lighter hue than the male's. It cannot be denied that there is a great difference in the habits and economy of the two species, the *M. Yarrelli* being stationary, and the *M. alba* regularly migrating to Norway and Sweden in spring, and returning to more southern climes in autumn. In those countries the inhabitants regard its arrival with joy as the harbinger of spring, and raise their hats to the first example that makes its appearance there, just as people do in this country to the first Swallow they observe. Norway and Sweden, however, do not constitute the limit of its migration northwards; for we learn from Walker's "Ornithological Notes of the Voyage of the Fox," published in the 'Ibis' for 1860, that it visits Greenland; and Mr. Alfred Newton states, in his 'Notes on the Ornithology of Iceland,' that "the White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*) is not quite so common as the Wheatear, but from its more familiar habits is more frequently observed, arrives at the end of April, leaves in September." Now is it not strange that a bird whose principal winter home is the southern portion of Europe and North Africa, should only pay an occasional visit to the British Islands, and rarely, if ever, remain to breed therein, when we know that it resorts for this purpose to countries much further north? Is it because it finds our islands already occupied by another species, and that there is no room for a second, and that, if it were to remain, it would be an interloper and interfere with nature's intentions? as would be the result if foreign species were to be introduced into our island, or any other country where nature had not placed them. Efforts respecting the re-introduction of such extirpated birds as the Capercailzie and the Bustard are praiseworthy; for they were formerly inhabitants of this country, and the attempts will be successful provided its physical condition remains unaltered.

I have never yet seen a true *Motacilla alba* from India, its presence there appearing to be supplied by the *M. Dukhunensis*. It frequents, however, most of the countries along the shores of North Africa, bordering the Mediterranean, and thence westward as far as the island of Madeira. It is also generally dispersed over every part of Europe, but is most numerous in France, Holland, and Germany. That it winters on the European shores of the Mediterranean is certain; for I possess a specimen collected by my son, Dr. Franklin Gould, during that season at San Remo, in the Maritime Alps. The following note was penned by myself during a visit to Norway in 1856:—" *Motacilla alba* is numerous in all but the higher parts of the country; is very tame in its disposition, and a great favourite with the inhabitants; not so sprightly in its actions as the English *M. Yarrelli*, and does not throw up its tail so violently." In England I observed a beautiful freshly

moulted specimen, in full plumage, while walking round one of the bays of Poole Harbour on the 31st of March 1861. It was exceedingly tame, evinced little or no fear, and allowed me to approach within ten feet of it. It appeared to have just arrived from the Continent, and was busily engaged in catching insects. Its back was a light silvery grey, and its throat and the back of its head were as black as jet. I have no doubt that, at this time of the year, examples frequently occur along all parts of our southern coast; but they must be regarded as birds blown out of their course during their migration, or as individuals that are passing over our islands to the distant north. That the *M. alba* has been frequently seen in other parts of England and Scotland I am well aware; for we have numerous recorded instances of its occurrence; but these countries are not its natural home. If any of my readers should wish to see the bird in a state of nature, and yet do not care to make a journey to the rugged shores of Norway, or the sunny clime of Italy, they may gratify their desire by visiting France or Holland. There they will meet with it in all situations similar to those frequented here by our well-known Pied Wagtail, from which it differs but little, either in habits or economy; but it always appeared to me to be somewhat tamer in disposition, and a little less sprightly in its actions. It will scarcely be necessary for me to describe these minutely; for they have been fully detailed in my account of *M. Yarrelli*. Insects and their larvæ, small worms, and minute shelled mollusks constitute its principal food; and watercourses, gardens, and homesteads are the places of its resort. Every village on the Continent of Europe has the accompaniment of one, two, or more pairs during summer; and with every flock of sheep, or herd of cattle, the bird may also be seen. In spring it arrives singly, or in pairs; in autumn it departs southward in flocks, or flights of tens or even hundreds, for a more genial climate, where insect life is abundant, and where they remain until the return of spring, when they instinctively retrace their steps to the old quarters where they have bred, and the young to the neighbourhood of the sites in which they have been reared.

The nest is constructed of materials similar to those used by the *M. Yarrelli*; it is deposited sometimes on the ground in meadows, or on a ditch-bank, in the hole of a wall, in the crevices of rocks, the holes of trees, and is frequently fixed in the side of a wood-stack, but always near water. A nest sent to Mr. Hewitson, which was said to be of this species, and had been taken from a reed-stack on the fen near Whittlesea Mere, was ill-constructed, and composed of a large quantity of very coarse grass and roots, lined with wool and hair mixed together; while a nest from Holland was much more symmetrical, was outwardly composed of the stalks of plants, dry grasses, bits of moss, and a large quantity of fine roots, followed inwardly by wool, and then thickly lined with hair; the central cavity large.

The eggs are four or five in number, of a greyish white, thickly freckled with minute spots and streaks of grey or brown. Mr. Yarrell describes them as nine lines in length, and seven in breadth; but Mr. Hewitson says that the eggs of both *M. Yarrelli* and *M. alba* differ much in size, some being one-third less than others.

The Plate represents both sexes in the summer plumage, and of the natural size. The pretty British plant accompanying them, which was kindly sent to me by the Rev. H. Harper Crewe, is the *Pyrola minor*, and the Butterfly is the Common Peacock (*Vanessa Io*).

Gould, John. 1873. "White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba* [Pl. 2]." *The birds of Great Britain* 3, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323894>.

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