

**FIRST RECORD OF THE EASTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL
(*MOTACILLA TSCHUTSCHENSIS*)/ YELLOW WAGTAIL
(*MOTACILLA FLAVA*) FOR ALABAMA**

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On 29 September 2003 at about 1130 hrs, Robert Duncan, Cecil Brown, and David Dortch were walking among the dunes south of the main fort at Fort Morgan, Baldwin County, Alabama, when Dortch spotted a passerine perched on a low bush on a dune ridge about 30 meters away. Duncan immediately recognized it as a wagtail by its gray and white coloration, pipit-like appearance and long tail. All three observers had excellent views of the bird through a 20x Swarovski telescope, under a clear sky and with the mid-day sun to the left. The bird flew before photographs could be made, but the observers were able to follow it several times and get off and on observations over a 30 minute period. Each time it flushed, it flew low to the ground, calling as it flew. Returning to their car, a field guide (National Geographic Society 1987) was consulted, and it was concluded that the wagtail was an immature Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*). A call was made to other birders, and between 1420 and 1715 hrs the bird was intermittently observed by Lucy Duncan, Howard Horne, Venetia Friend, Larry Gardella, Anabel Markel, Phil and Carolyn Snow, John Porter, and Laurie Bailey. All observers agreed it was a wagtail.

The bird was slightly larger than the Palm Warblers (*Dendroica palmarum*) that were in the vicinity. The top of its head, nape and back were uniform gray. Its tail was long, the top of which was black with white outer rectrices. Its wings were gray with two distinct white wingbars. The throat was white and bordered on the sides by a diffuse, dusky grayish olive. Its bill was thin and black. A bold white supercilium and bold white malar streak were dominant features of the face pattern, with the supercilium tapering to a point both anteriorly and posteriorly and not curving downward to the rear, nor crossing the forehead. The side of the face was about the same color as the nape and back, solid and unflecked, and did not have a "surround" (i.e., white border surrounding auriculars). The bird's underparts were white with drab yellow undertail coverts, the yellow extending forward along the lower flank to the legs, which were black and long for a bird its size. We concluded it was a first winter Yellow Wagtail due to retention of dark sub-malar marks and the lack of significant yellow. Each time the bird flew it gave a sweet call

somewhat like the overlapped notes of an Eastern Kingbird (*Tyrannus tyrannus*). Its flight was undulating and the bird sometimes landed on the ground or in low shrubs. Additional references were consulted including Astrom et al. (2003), and commercial recordings of the Yellow Wagtail were similar to the calls of the bird we heard at Fort Morgan.

The Yellow Wagtail is a morphologically complex species widely distributed in the Old World, breeding in the Palearctic from the British Isles across Eurasia to the Kurile Islands and south from northwest Africa across the Mediterranean region and central Asia. It winters from North Africa, India, southeast Asia, eastern China and the Philippines south to southern Africa, the East Indies and rarely to northern Australia. In North America it breeds across northern and western Alaska, but does not winter in the New World (Badyaev et al. 1998). During the course of review by the Alabama Bird Records Committee, the North American breeding sub-species (*Motacilla flava tschutschensis*) was given full species status (Banks et al. 2004) and given the name the Eastern Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla tschutschensis*). However, immatures of this species are inseparable in the field from birds of the western Palearctic *Motacilla flava*.

There are sight records of the Yellow Wagtail complex from California, but this is the first record of the complex east of Nevada (Banks et al. 2004). Details of the Alabama sighting were submitted to the Alabama Bird Records Committee (04-101), and it was accepted as the first record of this complex for the state (McConnell 2006).

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