

# The Chat

Vol. 68

SPRING 2004

No. 2



The Quarterly Bulletin of the Carolina Bird Club, Inc.  
The Ornithological Society of the Carolinas

# THE CHAT

Vol. 68

SPRING 2004

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Published by the Carolina Bird Club, Inc

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THE CHAT is published quarterly for \$20.00 by the Carolina Bird Club, Inc., with headquarters at the North Carolina State Museum of Natural Sciences, 11 West Jones Street, Raleigh, NC 27601-1029. Second-class postage paid at Raleigh, NC.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Carolina Bird Club, THE CHAT, 11 West Jones Street, Raleigh, NC 27601-1029. USPS 101-020. ISSN No. 0009-1987.

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## General Field Notes

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*General Field Notes* briefly report such items as rare sightings, unusual behaviors, or significant nesting records; or summaries of such items. Submit manuscripts to the appropriate state editor.

*First, second, or third sightings of species in either state must be submitted to the appropriate Bird Records Committee prior to publication in The Chat.*

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## First Record of White Wagtail in North Carolina

**Karen L. Bearden<sup>1</sup>, S. Jill Froning<sup>2</sup>, and Charles W. Cook<sup>3</sup>**

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On 22 October 2002, at 12:20 pm Karen Bearden and Jill Froning discovered a wagtail along the edge of Falls Lake at the Swim Beach section of Sandling Beach State Recreation Area, Wake County, NC. Our first thought, when viewing the bird without binoculars, was that it might be a Spotted Sandpiper, because the most striking feature was that the bird continuously bobbed its tail. However, with a view through binoculars, the bird seemed to be the approximate size, color, and shape of a Northern Mockingbird. When the bird turned, we saw that the breast had a black V-pattern resembling that of a meadowlark and a unique facial pattern. Jill realized it might be a wagtail (*Motacilla* sp.), but without a field guide, the identity was uncertain. We called Joe Bearden at work to tell him about our exciting find and asked him to consult his field guide as we described the

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\* The note co-authored by Charles W. (Will) Cook was edited by Kent Fiala.

field marks to him. This exchange led us to the conclusion that we most likely had a White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*), probably a first-fall bird. We left Sandling Beach at 1 pm to join a Partners In Flight meeting where we knew there would be other birders and field guides to help confirm the sighting. A look at Sibley (2000) confirmed the bird's identification as a White Wagtail! Karen motioned Will Cook and Jeff Phippen out of the meeting to tell them about the rare, surprise sighting.

We returned to Sandling Beach at 2 pm and were thrilled to see the bird was still present! Fortunately, Will had his Nikon CoolPix 995 digital camera and was able to take over 100 photographs through Jill's Swarovski AT-80 HD scope for documentation of the bird. Others were alerted by phone and through the Carolinabirds email group. The wagtail was cooperative, giving everyone great views as it worked its way back and forth along the shoreline until dusk. By the end of the day 20 people had observed the White Wagtail.



Figure 1. The White Wagtail stretching, showing that the two outermost rectrices are white while the rest are black. The wing coverts are black-based with pale buff edges. The lack of a dark line in front of the eye helps eliminate Black-backed Wagtail and most races of White Wagtail. Photos by Will Cook.

### Physical Description

The overall appearance of the wagtail was gray, white, and black, with a tinge of creamy-yellowish around the face. It had a long black tail with the two outermost rectrices white, black upper tail coverts, gray rump, white

under tail coverts, dark legs, medium-sized black bill, black eye, clean face with faint line behind the eye, creamy-whitish lores, white supercilium, faint black edge on the forecrown above the supercilium, gray-hooded appearance (light forecrown contrasting with a gray crown and nape), pale buffy-white auriculars, faint dark subauricular stripe, pale creamy throat, white breast with thick black V-shaped breast band, white belly with light gray wash on side and flanks, gray mantle and scapulars, dark greater coverts with pale, buffy edges forming two wing bars, blackish remiges with pale edges.

### **Behavior, Habitat, Taxonomy, and Identification**

The bird's behavior impressed us as being different from that of any other species in our experience. The wagtail actively foraged along the shore – running, sometimes darting a short distance after flies, with head down and body horizontal, then standing upright, bobbing its tail, until darting for another fly. Occasionally it hopped up to catch insects in the air like a flycatcher. There were brief moments when the bird stopped and stood still.



Figure 2. A very active feeder, the bird spent its time chasing and catching small flies along the shoreline. More photographs of the bird are available online at <http://www.duke.edu/~cwcook/pix/whitewagtail.html>

The wagtail was first seen on the southeast side of the beach. It worked its way along the shore, actively foraging until it reached the northwest side, then reversing directions and turning back toward the southeast side. It continued walking or running back and forth along the shoreline through the end of the day. At one point when a Red-tailed Hawk flew overhead, the wagtail flew out over the water, making a single call note, then settled back down in the same area of the beach. The vocalization was a short, two-syllable metallic call described as “tzic-tzic” or “ji-jeet.” When a Merlin flew in and perched on a snag close by, the wagtail stopped moving and remained motionless until the Merlin flew away. As it started getting dark, the wagtail

preened. Near dusk, the last two observers saw the wagtail fly away, making about three spirals, higher and higher and flying away to the northeast. Despite an extensive search by many people on subsequent days, the bird was not seen thereafter.

Wagtails spend most of the time on the ground, “where they walk and run actively, constantly moving the tail up and down in a very characteristic manner. The mainly insect food is secured chiefly on the ground or in shallow water or in little aerial excursions after flies or gnats” (Bent 1965).

The area where the wagtail was seen is a narrow, 175-meter long artificial sandy beach along the edge of a large man-made lake. The beach has grasses on both ends and is surrounded by Loblolly Pine (*Pinus taeda*) forest. Wagtails are generally found in open country, around farms, buildings, and cultivations, but prefer areas near ponds, streams, and open water (Bent 1965).

Identification of wagtails can be problematic because of great similarities in plumage, especially in immatures. We identified our bird as an immature (in first basic plumage) because it lacked the black cap and extensive white wing panels that winter-plumaged adults of both Black-backed Wagtail (*M. lugens*) and White Wagtail (*M. alba*) possess. Key features that identify this bird as a White Wagtail instead of the similar Black-backed are the lack of an obvious dark line in front of the eye, the narrow edging on the wing coverts instead of a white wing patch, and the dark-based secondaries (Pyle 1997).

White Wagtail is divided into several subspecies. The Siberian *M. a. ocularis* is the most likely to occur in North Carolina based on the pattern of distribution of past records. It breeds as close as western Alaska, and has been recorded several times in California and once in South Carolina (Behrens 1998). However, the lack of a distinct dark line in front of the eye in our bird eliminates this subspecies. The Pied Wagtail (*M. a. yarrellii*) of Europe also lacks the dark line in front of the eye, but should have distinct mottling on the crown by early October, grayer flanks, and a black upper rump, while our bird had an unmottled crown and a gray rump. Two subspecies have the combination of gray rump and pale lores – the nominate *M. a. alba* of western Europe and *M. a. baicalensis* of Asia. Per Alström, author of *Pipits and Wagtails* (Alström and Mild 2003) saw the photos and commented that “the bird is either *Motacilla alba alba* or *M. alba baicalensis* (these two are indistinguishable in this plumage, but [the] former [is] probably more likely in N. Carolina). As far as I can tell it’s a first-winter bird, probably a female (sexing of first-winter’s is generally not possible, but a bird with so little dark on the crown is more likely to be a female than a male” (pers. comm.). Will Cook posted a query on the Frontiers of Field ID email group asking for opinions on the subspecific identification of the wagtail. The consensus from the twelve replies was that the bird belonged to the nominate subspecies, *M. a. alba*.

### **Significance**

This is the first record of White Wagtail for North Carolina (NC Bird Records Committee, 2003). North Carolina also has a record of Black-backed Wagtail, documented on 15 May 1982 at Cedar Island, Carteret County by John Fussell and Bob Holmes (NC Bird Records Committee, 1990). Black-backed Wagtail was formerly considered to be a subspecies of White Wagtail, and some still consider it to be (e.g., Alström and Mild 2003). In South Carolina, an adult male White Wagtail of the Siberian subspecies (*M. a. ocularis*) was documented at Huntington Beach State Park around the perimeter of a pond on 16–21 April 1998 (Behrens 1998).

The Falls Lake bird was accepted as the nominate European subspecies *M. a. alba* by the NC Bird Records Committee (2003). Though there is a documented record of an adult *M. a. alba* in Quebec on 4 May 2002, as well as a report from Newfoundland on 14 September 1998 (Savard 2002), this is likely the first individual of the nominate subspecies documented for the United States (Sibley, pers. comm.).

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