

Focus on the Pied Wagtail

The Pied Wagtail is the distinctive British and Irish race of the White Wagtail, a common bird in the rest of Europe. Our birds are blacker than their continental cousins and present all year round, whereas migratory White Wagtails only occasionally pass through our gardens in spring or autumn.

These elegant birds are in constant motion, darting here and there, picking tiny insects from the surface of the grass and indeed wagging their tails. The movement and the black and white plumage make them conspicuous in a garden, but in a more natural habitat, such as the shadows by a flowing stream, they are quite hard to spot. About 10% of our gardens, usually those with larger lawns or ponds, have them as regular garden feeders. This will go up to a third or more in cold winter weather.

Perhaps their most endearing character is an amazing ability to find the warmest roosting sites possible. These often involve man-made sites. The communal roosts in winter often include hundreds of wagtails at a single site. Their gathering behaviour at dusk is very conspicuous, presumably this helps newcomers to find the communal site. Hospitals are popular, having lots of enclosed courtyards with nice shrubs planted in them. These are sheltered and safe and make ideal roost sites. Others include the cooling towers of power stations, machinery in sewage treatment plants, factory roofs, heated glasshouses, trees along major roads in towns and cities (O'Connell Street in Dublin is a famous one) and even motorway service stations. I even discovered that all the White Wagtails on Malta roosted in trees in front of the Cathedral in Valetta. This might have been one of the few places they could use without fear of being shot!

Natural roost sites are generally in reed-beds, where the water below the reeds helps to keep the birds warm and also means that ground predators are kept away. Pied Wagtails flock together to roost for a variety of reasons. A good warm place is hard to find so it makes sense to share it. Also there is safety in numbers if predators appear and, amazingly, the roost acts as an information exchange. Birds which are having difficulty finding food simply follow the birds that are in better condition in the morning and they are likely to be led to good feeding grounds! This does not always work as some birds are territorial in the winter and defend their feeding sites. Some of these do allow 'satellites' to share their plots while the food supply is good, as long as they help with its defence.



Pied Wagtail photograph by Tommy Holden © BTO

In the breeding season many of the Pied Wagtails that winter in our more southerly and low-lying areas return to the uplands and Scotland to breed. However, the nesting birds are still widely distributed. Many farms have a pair traditionally associated with them. Larger sites, like sewage treatment plants, may have six or eight pairs and there have been some very successful nest box projects. You may even be very lucky and get them to use an open box partly concealed by ivy or creepers in your garden. *Chris Mead*

Pied Wagtail Fascinating Facts

Cheese beats the Freeze

Pied Wagtails are insect-eating birds and hence they are very vulnerable to cold weather. Quite a few may die in prolonged frosty spells. They rely on insects found in the open and there are precious few of those available once frost has the land in its grasp. This is why wagtails often gather at sewage works, where warm water and bacterial activity keeps insects breeding even in cold weather. Otherwise, you can help by scattering finely minced hard cheese where you see hungry Pied Wagtails trying to feed. In our recent warm winters, survival rates should have been quite good.

Waste Buds

Conflicts between birds and humans occur in many surprising ways but even I was astonished to find an industry in which the inoffensive and popular little Pied Wagtail is considered an economically important pest. Occasionally, commercial carnation growers find wagtails flocking into their greenhouses to roost. The weight of a sleeping Pied Wagtail, added to that of a fat flower bud, is the straw to the camel's back - it breaks! Years ago I was called upon to fetch large numbers of birds from greenhouses in Hampshire, bringing them home to Hertfordshire in roosting boxes. We were amazed to find that many of the adult birds made it back to where they wanted to be very quickly. Most of the birds were young and went elsewhere.

Brave Breeders

Nesting Pied Wagtails show little fear of human activity. In fact they regularly use buildings, piles of pallets or other junk, tiny shrubberies outside busy offices and even active machinery for breeding. I have come across nests in working tractors, lorries and earth movers whilst visiting farms and gravel pits for ringing. One pair, whose chicks I ringed, were nesting where the power wires of an excavator entered the body of the machine. While it was filling the lorry with sand, the parents waited with food for the young. Each time the excavator stopped, the wagtails quickly nipped in and fed their brood.