

IDENTIFICATION : WAGTAILS

Three species of wagtail breed in the UK: the Pied Wagtail, which is not uncommon in towns and cities, the Grey Wagtail, which can be found anywhere near water, and the Yellow Wagtail, which is more commonly found on farmland. Of these, the Pied Wagtail and Grey Wagtail may be found in and around gardens. In adult breeding plumage all three are easily recognised, although the bright yellow on the Grey Wagtail can sometimes lead to them being identified as Yellow Wagtails. However, young birds can be a little more problematic. All of the wagtails show the classic long tail which is habitually pumped up and down, or 'wagged'.

All three breeding species of British wagtail are insectivorous and can be seen chasing flying insects or searching on the ground for invertebrate food. During the winter months Grey Wagtails can sometimes be seen feeding around the edge of garden ponds. Yellow Wagtails only rarely venture into gardens and are summer visitors, wintering in Africa.

Pied Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

The British race, *Motacilla alba yarrelli*, is a race of the White Wagtail *Motacilla alba alba*, which occurs in continental Europe (see opposite page). Our race is a more strongly marked bird. The legs and beak are black in all ages and the call is a disyllabic 'chisick'.

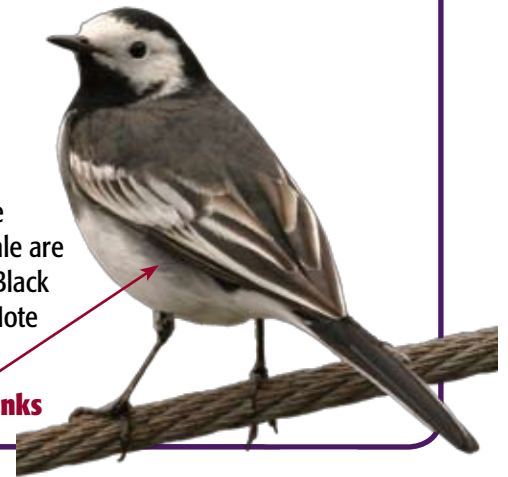
Adult female (right): Has a white face, like the male, but the black upperparts of the male are replaced with mid- to dark-grey feathering. Black crown and bib not as extensive as in male. Note white outer tail feathers.

black back



Adult male (left): Largely black above, with a white face and white below with a large black bib and black throat; during the winter this is much reduced. Long black tail, with white outer tail feathers, which is pumped up and down regularly.

smudged flanks



black bib

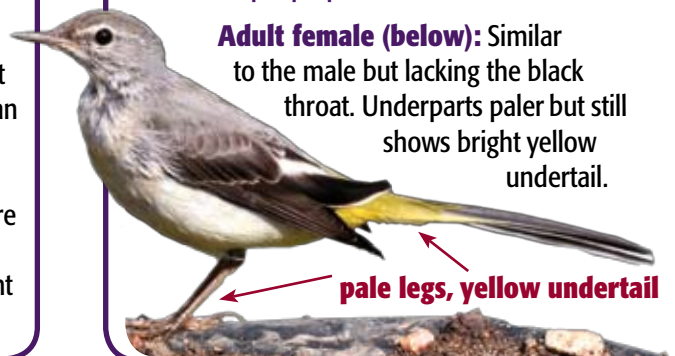
Juvenile (left): Similar to adult female but even greyer. Face can show a mix of grey and yellow, often causing confusion with Yellow Wagtail. Clinging feature on juvenile Pied Wagtail is the black bib, which is never present on Yellow Wagtail.



This is the longest tailed wagtail and probably the most distinctive. The very bright yellow undertail identifies this wagtail in all ages and plumages. While the bill tends to be black, as in other wagtails, the brownish-pink legs are a useful identification feature. Call a sharp 'tip-tip'.

Adult female (below): Similar to the male but lacking the black throat. Underparts paler but still shows bright yellow undertail.

pale legs, yellow undertail



Images by John Harding, Ron Marshall, Chris Mills, Jill Pakenham and Steve Round

Next issue: 'Green' finches: Greenfinch, Siskin and Canary

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*

The British race, *Motacilla flava flavissima*, is rather different in appearance from most other the European races, many of which are more strongly marked (e.g. Blue-headed Wagtail). The legs and beak are black in all ages. Call, a high-pitched drawn out and thin 'fseeoo'.

Adult male (left): Upperparts are a fairly bright olive-green; underparts, from the throat to the undertail, are bright lemon-yellow. Tail is shorter than Pied's and is dark olive above but still shows the white sides.

Adult female (below): A duller version of the male. Dull olive-green above and a paler lemon-yellow below, brightest on the undertail, palest on the throat (which is sometimes white).

no bib

Juvenile (left): Dull and washed out appearance. Can resemble juvenile Pied Wagtail. Identifying features are the lack of a black bib and the presence of a pale lemon yellow wash on the underparts, which always distinguishes even the dullest of Yellow Wagtails from Pied.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

Adult male (below): Slate-grey upperparts contrast with black wings. The throat and upperbreast form a black bib contrasting with the bright yellow underparts, which are very bright on the undertail. Grey Wagtail also has a distinctive white stripe (supercilium) over the eye, a dark stripe (eyestripe) through the eye and a white 'moustache', running along the upper edge of the black bib. Black throat and bib lost in winter.

Juvenile (not shown): Very similar to the adult female, with the slate-grey upperparts. Underparts much paler, almost white. Undertail is bright yellow like adults.

black bib

The **White Wagtail**, of which our Pied Wagtail is a distinct race, occurs as a passage migrant to Britain. Individuals can be seen in spring and autumn. It is a neat bird and although the various age and sex classes are similar in appearance to those of the Pied Wagtail, there are some key differences. All plumages show a grey back, palest in the adult male, and clean white underparts, lacking the smudged grey flanks of the Pied Wagtail.



White Wagtail by Chris Mills (www.norfolkbirding.com)

TEST YOUR SKILLS

Try to work out what these birds are (answers on Page 22).



By Paul Stancliffe
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