The Amur Wagtail in County Durham – a new Western Palearctic bird

Stephen Addinall

On the afternoon of 5th April 2005, I went on an exploratory stroll in my new local patch in Seaham, County Durham. I walked past an area of wasteland on the site of the old Vane Tempest Colliery, and noticed an unfamiliar-looking black-and-white wagtail, which showed much more white than the Pied Wagtails it was accompanying. It had a completely white throat and face, and a large white patch on the wing coverts, and it also appeared to have more white in its flight feathers than Pied Wagtail. My immediate assumption was that it was a partially albino Pied Wagtail (the black upperparts ruling out White Wagtail). Nevertheless, it was a very attractive bird, so I watched it for a while and made a brief field sketch, and then continued birding the local area.

I refound the wagtail on my way home. This time, it was at the side of a small pool in the same area, and it was much closer. I noticed that its greater coverts, which appeared all white from a distance, had faint grey centres and the bird's bare parts were essentially dark. I also saw that, apart from the black bib on the chest, the underparts were completely white; it lacked any sign of the smoky-grey flanks of Pied Wagtail. Finally, I noted that the bird was similarly marked on both sides; there were no obviously asymmetrical white patches. Although I was still fairly sure that I was looking at a partial albino, these intriguing features made me curious as to whether there were any forms of *alba* wagtail that looked like this bird.

On returning home, I was surprised to find illustrations of the form *leucopsis* in the *Pocket Guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent* (Grimmett *et al.* 1999) and *A Field Guide to the Birds of Japan* (Wild Bird Society of Japan 1982) which looked very much like my unusual bird. Unfortunately, there was very little information about this form in either book. I turned to the internet, and was shocked to find a photograph of an adult male *leucopsis* which appeared almost identical to my bird. The picture had been taken in Korea, but I still could not find any particularly useful information on the identification, distribution or migration patterns of this Asian form.

Plate 1. Male Amur Wagtail *Motacilla (alba) leucopsis*, Seaham, Co. Durham, April 2005 (*Chris Bell*). The first to be documented and photographed in the Western Palearctic.

Plate 2. Male Amur Wagtail *Motacilla (alba) leucopsis*, Seaham, Co. Durham, April 2005 (*Chris Bell*).
The purity of this individual's plumage indicates that it is a male. Both first-winters and adults undergo an extensive pre-breeding moult, therefore accurate ageing, especially of males (which replace more feathers than females at this time), is difficult or sometimes impossible, even in the hand.

I telephoned Tim Cleeves and described the bird to him. Tim confirmed that my description matched an illustration of adult summer male *leucopsis* in *A Field Guide to the Birds of Korea* (Woo-Shin Lee et al. 2000) and he suggested that I should go back and try to take some photographs of the bird. So I snatched up my wife's digital camera and headed back out into what was now fading light. The bird was still present and I was able to get some pretty awful pictures.

Next morning dawned with heavy rain and very strong winds, so I waited until the rain had stopped before checking if the wagtail was still present. As soon as I had done so, and found that it was, I returned home and telephoned John McLoughlin of Birdline North East. I described the bird to John and e-mailed my photographs to him, together with a sketch of the bird. During my discussions with TC and JM, none of us came up with a conclusive way to rule out partial albinism, and I could not help wondering which was the more likely scenario: a simple plumage aberration making a common bird look like a form unrecorded in the Western Palearctic, or that form turning up on my doorstep! I decided to return to the bird with my telescope, while JM studied the pictures.

As I studied the wagtail with a telescope for the first time, JM telephoned me on my mobile phone and asked me to confirm the presence of grey centres to the greater coverts, which I was able to do. I was also able to describe the dark grey legs, black eye and the dark bluish-grey bill. As a result of these observations (effectively eliminating an albino), we decided that news of the bird should be released. Some 90 minutes later, birders began arriving.

The general feeling appeared to be that, whatever it was, it was beautiful! I had to agree as I studied some of the bird's more subtle features. These included fine silvery-white feather fringes along the top of the shoulder (between the mantle and the scapulars) and similar fringes interrupting the upper border of the black bib on the bird's breast.

It was a strikingly white-faced, white-bodied wagtail, with a black cap, black 'breast-plate', black back and shoulders, broadly white-edged tertials and tail, and virtually wholly white wing coverts. The face was pure white, isolating the dark eye, and the white neck-sides sometimes kinked back into the nape, depending on posture. The white-headed look was enhanced by the reduced black cap and the black chest gorget being limited to just an isolated 'shield', surrounded by white feathering. The crown, nape, mantle, back, rump and tail centre appeared jet black, except in the very strongest sunlight when there might have been a sheen or hint of very dark grey. A brief wing-stretch revealed clean white underwing-coverts. Additional feather detail included broad white fringes to the uppertail-coverts and fine white fringes to the primaries and primary coverts, while prominent white 'tongues' extending three-quarters of the way along the inner webs of the primaries were visible when the bird was preening. In flight, the wings were strikingly white-looking (thinly 'laddered' with black on the primaries). The underside of the tail looked white (the outermost pair of feathers appearing wholly white). The bird seemed slightly larger than the nearby Pied Wagtails (a feeling perhaps enhanced by its very striking plumage patterns) and was very belligerent, quickly 'seeing off' any Pied interlopers. It was also very vocal, emitting various sharp, rasping calls and excitable, disyllabic "zreet-zreet" notes in flight.

The bird spent almost the entire day alongside the small pool, but flew off north late in the evening. Unfortunately it was absent the following morning, and it never returned.

The best birders I know always expect the unexpected, and I try to do the same. However, never even in my most optimistic moments did I think that I would find a bird new to Britain, of a form that I had never heard of, on a building site within 100 yards of my new house!

Stephen Addinall, County Durham.


Plates 3-8. Male Amur Wagtail *Motacilla (alba) leucopsis*, Seaham, Co. Durham, April 2005 (*Chris Batty*, above left, *Chris Bell*, above right, and *Steve Gantlett*). Amur Wagtail is unique in being black-backed, yet white-throated in summer plumage. The black on the breast is reduced to an isolated black 'breast-plate' surrounded by white. Note also the pure white flanks: the black of the mantle does not extend onto the 'shoulder' in front of the wing, and there is no grey wash along the upper flanks. Note also the wholly white wing panel, formed by the virtually pure white coverts (only a few grey feather centres show through on the larger greater coverts), broad white tertial edges and white fringes to the secondaries. The primaries and primary coverts are also fringed narrowly with white, while the longest uppertail-coverts are fringed broadly with white. Plates 1 & 2 show the wing pattern well.




The Seaham wagtail was a stunning-looking bird. Indeed, to visiting birders familiar with South American birds, its extreme appearance and strange facial expression conjured up visions of Pied Water Tyrant as much as it did Pied Wagtail!

It was obviously a member of the *alba* wagtail complex and, once any sort of albino had been eliminated and its plumage patterns noted, only one form could account for it – *leucopsis*. This form is identifiable in all plumages, and readers are urged to consult *Pipits & Wagtails of Europe, Asia & North America* by Per Alström and Krister Mild (2003; the primary reference for all wagtails of the northern hemisphere) for a detailed analysis of the identification criteria.

The Seaham bird was broadcast on Birdline at the time as a 'Chinese Black-backed Wagtail' (because the form is sometimes lumped with Black-backed Wagtail, form *lugens*) and elsewhere as 'White-faced Pied Wagtail' (because Alström & Mild use this name in their book – white-faced being the literal translation of the scientific name). However, the appropriate English name for *leucopsis* is actually Amur Wagtail (see Sangster *et al.* 1998).

Amur Wagtail breeds in central and eastern China, eastern Russia (Amurland and Ussuriland), Korea and SW Japan, and winters from northern India to South East Asia (Alström & Mild 2003) but, in addition to the sighting in County Durham, vagrants have occurred in at least Australia and Oman (see Plate 9 below).

Several other wagtails showing characters of eastern forms of the *alba* complex have been reported in Britain in the last 25 years (*eg* on the Isles of Scilly in October 1981 and October 1986), but none of these has been documented. The Seaham bird is the first well-watched, documented and photographed Amur Wagtail for the Western Palearctic.

Plate 9. Male Amur Wagtail *Motacilla (alba) leucopsis*, Al Ansab lagoons, Oman, 24th February 2005 (*Adrian Hayward*). The first Amur Wagtail for Oman. This videograb of an apparently out-of-range *leucopsis* was taken during a Bird Holidays tour.

The *alba* wagtail complex occurs from eastern Greenland, across Europe and Asia to westernmost Alaska. Eleven forms are recognised by Cramp (1988) and del Hoyo *et al.* (2004), but two of these ('*dukhunensis*' and '*persica*') are regarded as invalid by Alström & Mild (2003). The systematics of the group has been much debated during the last hundred years, and all the various forms have been subjected to a number of different treatments, ranging between a complete 'lump' (*eg* Cramp 1988) and a total 'split' of nine species (Sangster *et al.* 1998). Some authorities (*eg* Clements 2000) have adopted a two-way split, with *leucopsis* (along with *alboides*) separated from *Motacilla alba* and grouped with Black-backed Wagtail *M. lugens*. Others (*eg* Cramp 1988, Stepanyan 1990, Sibley & Monroe 1990 and del Hoyo *et al.* 2004) have suggested other groupings, but arguably such 'halfway houses' do little to clarify the situation. Although they treat the complex as a single polytypic species in *Pipits & Wagtails* (2003), Alström & Mild (2004) cogently argue the advantages of classifying all least-inclusive taxa as species, and illustrate that the *alba* wagtail complex can be classified (using at least two different species concepts) as comprising nine separate species. These are the same as those listed by Sangster *et al.* (1998), namely White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*, Pied Wagtail *M. yarrellii*, Moroccan Wagtail *M. subpersonata*, Masked Wagtail *M. personata*, Himalayan Wagtail *M. alboides*, Black-backed Wagtail *M. lugens*, East Siberian Wagtail *M. ocularis*, Amur Wagtail *M. leucopsis* and Baikal Wagtail *M. baicalensis*. Of these, only four (Himalayan, Black-backed, East Siberian and Baikal) have yet to be recorded in Europe, but it is surely just a matter of time before they too are discovered here as vagrants.

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