

NESTING AND OCCURRENCE OF WHITE WAGTAILS IN ALASKA

By LEONARD J. PEYTON

White Wagtails (*Motacilla alba*) have been observed frequently but seldom collected along the western coast of Alaska bordering the Bering and Chukchi seas (fig. 1). Because the wagtail is wary and secretive it is difficult to collect. Hersey (1916:32) wrote of the White Wagtail that "my failure to secure specimens was due to the excessively restless habits of the birds." My own experience with this species indicates that it is easily disturbed and difficult to approach and collect. When the bird is alarmed it will usually fly a great distance before landing.

Nelson (1887:205) reported that the first specimen of the White Wagtail collected on the North American Continent was "a young bird in summer plumage, [collected] by Captain Kellett and Lieutenant Wood in 'Northwest America,' as recorded in the Brit. Mus. Cat. Birds, X, 473." Turner (1886:178) saw a single White Wagtail on May 14, 1881, on Attu Island, the western tip of the Aleutian Chain. Nelson (1887:205) was of the opinion that this bird probably belonged to the subspecies *M. a. lugens*, found commonly on the Commander Islands. Tucker (*vide* Bent, 1950:13) expressed the same opinion. Bishop (1900:91) saw a flock of six birds at the Aphoon (now spelled Apoon) mouth of the Yukon River on August 28, 1899, but he was unable to collect one. Hersey (1916:32) reported that "at Chamisso Island, on August 1, a pair of birds . . . [was] carrying food into a crevice in the rocks at an inaccessible point on the cliff." He also observed several individuals between Kotzebue Sound and Cape Lisburne, and at the latter locality shot a bird that fell on the tundra on the far side of a stream where it could not be found. Bailey (1948:284) reported seeing a single bird near the native school at Wales on June 23, 1922.

Dr. Francis H. Fay (Fay and Cade, 1959:129) collected the first adult White Wagtails in Alaska and established the first authenticated nesting record of this species for North America. He collected a pair of breeding birds and five young on July 10, 1953, at Gambell on St. Lawrence Island. The nest was located in an old stovepipe on a vacant building. Dr. Fay also observed several adult birds accompanying fledged young, from August 5 to 8, 1957, at Boxer Bay on St. Lawrence Island and collected one adult male and one young.

Francis S. L. Williamson and several of his assistants observed a pair of White Wagtails at Cape Thompson, northwestern Alaska, during the summer of 1959. One of the men, Max Thompson, collected the male on August 6. The remaining bird was seen again in the same area on August 11 but was not reported after that date. Although the men were at Cape Thompson again in the summers of 1960 and 1961, they did not see White Wagtails in that area either year. Williamson expressed the opinion that the pair of birds observed in 1959 possibly nested on one of the small rocky cliffs present in the area. However, the lateness of the season and distance from the central base of operation precluded a concentrated effort to find the nest or young.

In June, 1960, Dr. Laurence Irving and I spent a week at Tin City on the Seward Peninsula in central western Alaska. On June 17 we saw a single White Wagtail fly along the beach of the Bering Sea and disappear into an area where there were some abandoned buildings.

On June 23, 1961, in company with Donald J. Nicholson and Sidney B. Peyton, I saw a White Wagtail fly along the edge of a small lake near Teller, Alaska. The bird landed among the tussocks and bordering bushes and an unsuccessful attempt was made to collect it.

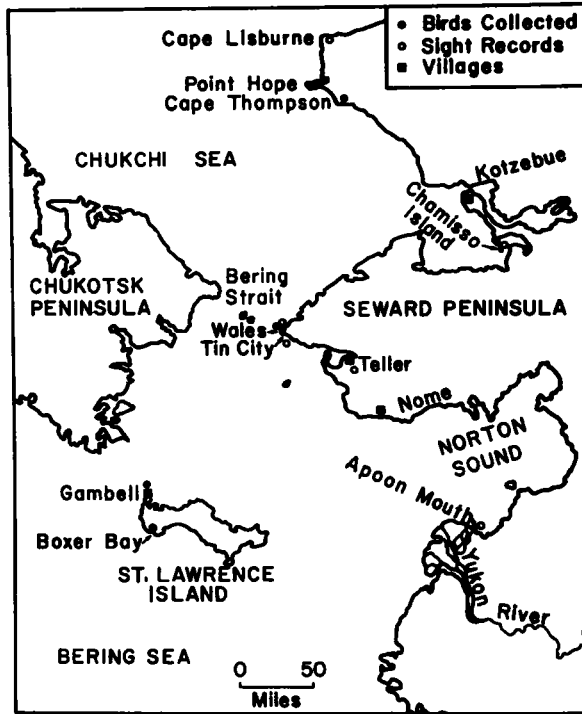


Fig. 1. Map of western coast of Alaska showing location of sight records and collected specimens of White Wagtails (*Motacilla alba*).

On June 27, 1961, I saw a single White Wagtail feeding near the post office at the south end of the village of Wales. Postmaster Dwight Tevuk, a former associate of Dr. Alfred M. Bailey in collecting in arctic Alaska, said that this species was seen around the village almost every year. On June 28 I saw a White Wagtail fly out of a

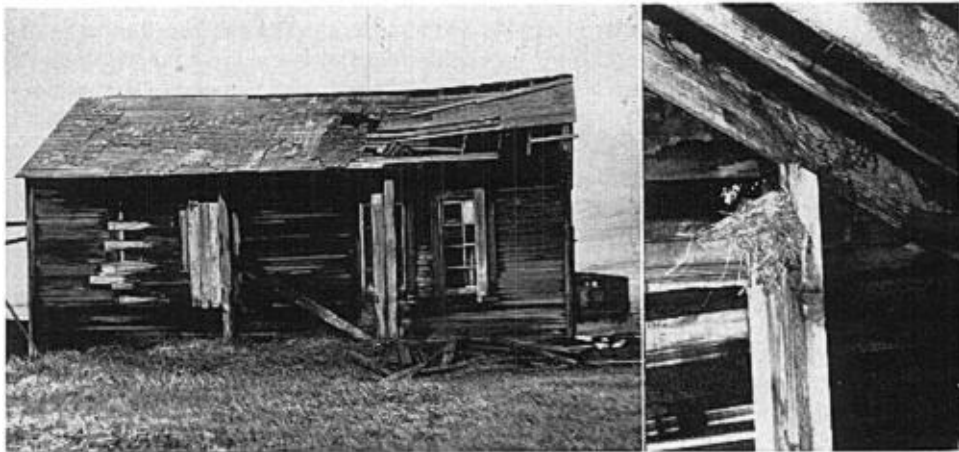


Fig. 2. Left, abandoned house in which the White Wagtail nested in Wales, Alaska. Right, nest of the White Wagtail showing its location on the attic wall.

hole in the roof of an abandoned house (fig. 2) at the north end of the village and, upon investigation, found the nest containing three fresh eggs.

The nest (fig. 2) was located about four and one-half feet above the attic floor on top of a 2×4 used as a frame for the boarded-up attic window. The nest had been placed in the corner formed by the top of the window frame and a gable stud, and it was within about six inches of a rafter supporting the roof. Access to the attic was through the large hole in the lower right hand corner of the roof as shown in figure 2. When the nest was observed on the afternoon of June 30, it contained five eggs.

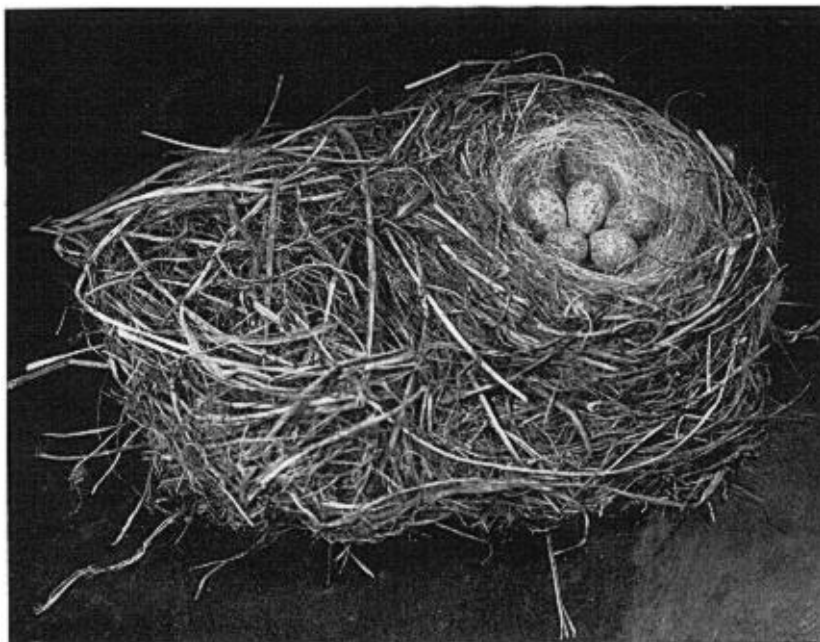


Fig. 3. Nest and eggs of the White Wagtail.

The eggs were heavily spotted (fig. 3) with the greatest concentration of spots on the large end. The background color was light cream with a very slight bluish green or turquoise tint. The spots were reddish brown with a grayish overcolor. The measurements in millimeters of the 5 eggs are as follows: 20.59×15.58 , 20.91×15.43 , 21.45×15.26 , 21.60×15.31 , and 21.62×14.93 .

The nest (fig. 3) was constructed of dry grass from the sand dunes on which the village of Wales is built. Considerable sand still adhered to the grass, making the nest very sandy when it was collected. The nest was lined with coarse dog hair and reindeer hair that could have been obtained anywhere in the village from the many shedding work dogs staked out around the houses and from reindeer skins which had been scraped nearby.

While I was at Wales, the nest of the White Wagtail was kept under observation whenever possible, and only one bird was observed around the nest. Possibly the mate of this bird spent most of its time around the south end of the village where I saw a wagtail several times during my stay.

On July 2 I was scheduled to leave Wales and a final check of the nest revealed that it still contained only five eggs. I collected the bird, nest, and eggs at that time. The

nest and eggs are in the oological collection of Sidney B. Peyton at Fillmore, California. The bird was a female (weight 27.5 gm., moderately fat, brood patch present, ova to 2 mm., 5 collapsed follicles) and was identified as *Motacilla alba ocularis* by Dr. Charles Vaurie at the American Museum of Natural History. It is now in the ornithological collection at the Arctic Health Research Center, Anchorage, Alaska. The specimens collected by Fay and Thompson were also identified as belonging to this race.

White Wagtails are not common in Alaska and, from all indications, they occur as scattered individuals or in pairs along the western coast between the mouth of the Yukon River in the south and Cape Lisburne in the north. Wagtails have been collected and identified from four different localities. Eight other sight records have been reported with definite localities given for six of these. All records are from areas within one-half mile of the sea coast. Breeding probably occurs each year somewhere in this area wherever suitable habitat is found.

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