

FIRST RECORD OF WHITE WAGTAIL (*MOTACILLA ALBA*) FOR TRINIDAD AND SOUTH AMERICA

G. FRANK OATMAN, JR.

PO Box 618, Arroyo Hondo, NM 87513, USA; e-mail: frankjon@taosnet.com

Abstract: On 26 December 1987, I found a White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*), apparently a male of the nominate race, at the Aripo Agricultural Research Station at Waller Field, Trinidad. The bird was photographed by a member in my group. It was subsequently relocated by a group led by Richard French on 2 January 1988. This record represents the first for Trinidad and South America. The only previous record from the region was a male (possibly the same individual?) in Bridgetown, Barbados, on 28 January 1987, which remains the only record from the West Indies.

Key words: distributional record, *Motacilla alba*, Palearctic vagrant, South America, Trinidad, White Wagtail

Resumen: PRIMER REGISTRO DE LA LAVANDERA BLANCA (*MOTACILLA ALBA*) PARA TRINIDAD Y AMERICA DEL SUR. El 26 de diciembre de 1987, encontré una Lavandera Blanca (*Motacilla alba*), aparentemente un macho de la raza nominal, en la Estación de Investigaciones Agrícolas Aripo, en Waller Field, Trinidad. El ave fue fotografiada por un miembro de mi grupo. Esta fue subsecuentemente localizada por un grupo guiado por Richard French el 2 de enero de 1988. Este registro representa el primero para Trinidad y América del Sur. El único registro previo para la región fue un macho (posiblemente el mismo individuo) en Bridgetown, Barbados, el 28 de enero de 1987, que constituye el único registro para La Antillas.

Palabras clave: accidental Paleártico, América del Sur, *Motacilla alba*, registro de distribución, Trinidad

Résumé: PREMIERE OBSERVATION DE BERGERONNETTE GRISE (*MOTACILLA ALBA*), POUR TRINIDAD ET POUR L'AMERIQUE DU SUD. Le 26 Décembre 1987, j'ai observé une Bergeronnette grise (*Motacilla alba*), apparemment un mâle de la race nominale, à la station de recherche en agriculture d'Aripo à Waller Field, Trinidad. L'oiseau a été photographié par un membre de mon groupe. Il a ensuite été retrouvé par un groupe mené par Richard French le 2 janvier 1988. Cette donnée représente une première pour Trinidad et l'Amérique du Sud. La seule observation connue pour la région était un mâle (peut-être le même individu) à Bridgetown, Barbados, le 28 janvier 1987, unique donnée pour les Antilles.

Mots clés : répartition, *Motacilla alba*, espèces erratiques Paléarctiques, Amérique du Sud, Trinidad, Bergeronnette grise

A variety of species of birds breeding in the Palearctic have dispersed as vagrants to the New World. Kenefick and Hayes (2006) recently summarized data on 14 species of Palearctic birds occurring as trans-Atlantic vagrants in Trinidad and Tobago, plus records of individuals derived from Palearctic populations of two widespread boreal species. Three additional species of Palearctic vagrants reported from the country were considered by Kenefick and Hayes (2006) to be inadequately documented, including a White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*) which had been widely reported in the ornithological literature (e.g., French 1991). In this note I present details and photographic documentation for the first record of White Wagtail in Trinidad and South America.

On the afternoon of 26 December 1987, while leading a Field Guides birding tour group at the cow pens area of the Aripo Agricultural Research Station at Waller Field, Trinidad, I located a White Wagtail feeding on the ground. A guard at the gated facility

had warned us that he would be locking up soon, so we had just 15 min in which to record some basic notes on the bird. One of my tour members (name lost) had a camera with 350–500 mm telephoto lens; at my urging, he exposed about 50 color transparencies of the bird, of which only two turned out and those sadly not at very high magnification (see Fig. 1). The bird was studied and photographed in excellent light without obstructions. Members of my tour group had no previous familiarity with the species and were not aware, before being told, of its rarity and thus are not listed in this report.

At the time I had acquired extensive experience with several races of White Wagtail during the 3 yr I lived in Europe (principally in West Germany and Spain, but traveling very widely elsewhere in Europe and North Africa during those years, and on subsequent trips). I immediately knew the bird to be a White Wagtail and, I thought, a male in basic plumage. I strongly suspected at the time that this



Fig. 1. White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*) male at the Aripo Agricultural Research Station at Waller Field, Trinidad, on 26 December 1987. Name of photographer lost.

represented a new record for Trinidad and likely for larger regions as well.

We studied the bird for approximately 15 min with 8–10× binoculars at a distance of 25–30 m as it fed on the ground. We did not see it fly. Our group later went out with local Trinidad birding leader Jogie Ramlal, to whom I reported the find, so that the observation became more widely known in Trinidad. On the morning of 2 January 1988, Richard ffrench and a group of 10 birders located the bird again in the same area of Waller Field. As he and his group had more time to study the bird, I quote extensively from Mr. ffrench's letter to me dated 14 December 1988 (my shorter field notes essentially echo the observations and conclusions quoted below):

“When we went down to see the bird at Waller Field, we already believed that it had been officially ‘seen’ and recorded; so nobody was particularly concerned to collect evidence. In fact nobody on the group had an adequate camera. However, I am very familiar with the species, especially the subspecies *yarrelli*, which breeds all around my home and is also present during the winter. I have also seen quite a lot of the nominate race during various visits to the continent. We also saw the bird well for several minutes under excellent conditions.

“I am therefore quite certain of the specific identification as *Motacilla alba*, and virtually certain that the bird was a male of the subspecies *alba* in non-breeding [basic] plumage. Perhaps I should add for

the record that our party of ten persons (only one of whom had encountered the species before, apart from me) visited the agricultural station at Waller Field on January 2, 1988 in the morning. We found the bird feeding in the open yard of the cattle shed and watched it for several minutes at distances down to about eight meters, using binoculars of 10× power. Light conditions were excellent. I identified the bird as being of the race *alba* on the basis of the grey, as against blackish, rump. Perhaps I cannot be certain about the sex, but the clean demarcation between nape and upper back leads me to think it was a male.

“We returned on Jan. 3 in order to try to include the species on the list for our Audubon Society Christmas Count, but were unable to find it; nor was it seen there again, to my knowledge.”

I subsequently reported the sighting as well to William Murphy; and through him and Mr. ffrench, both very active in Caribbean ornithology, the report received fairly wide notice (e.g., ffrench 1991). However, this is the first time the record has been published with proper details and a photograph. Although this bird represented the first for Trinidad and South America, a male (same individual?) of the nominate race was seen the previous winter, on 28 January 1987, by H. Haines Fenimore at Bridgetown Harbour, Barbados (Norton 1987), which remains the only record from the West Indies (Buckley *et al.* 2009).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Martyn Kenefick, William L. Murphy, Rose Ann Rowlett, and John L. Rowlett for reviewing a draft of this article, and Floyd E. Hayes for helping to put it in final form.

LITERATURE CITED

- BUCKLEY, P. A., E. B. MASSIAH, M. B. HUTT, F. G. BUCKLEY, AND H. F. HUTT. 2009. The birds of Barbados: an annotated checklist. British Ornithologists' Union Checklist no. 24. British Ornithologists' Union, Peterborough, UK.
- FFRENCH, R. 1991. A guide to the birds of Trinidad and Tobago. 2nd ed. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.
- KENEFICK, M., AND F. E. HAYES. 2006. Trans-Atlantic vagrancy of Palearctic birds in Trinidad and Tobago. *Journal of Caribbean Ornithology* 19:61–72.
- NORTON, R. L. 1987. West Indies region. *American Birds* 41:334–335.