

# THE SEPARATION OF WHITE AND PIED WAGTAILS

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Illustrated by Raymond Scally



*Male White Wagtail (Pete Hadfield)*

The White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* breeds widely across continental Europe and in Iceland and the Faroe Islands, whilst the Pied Wagtail *Motacilla yarrelli* breeds in Britain, Ireland, and locally on coasts of western continental Europe (in Denmark, Holland, Belgium and northern France). The latter is largely sedentary whilst *alba* is highly migratory, wintering from the Garonne Valley in France south through central Iberia to Morocco. Birds from Finland and Norway winter from Algeria and Tunisia to Israel and the Nile Valley in Egypt.

The British Pied Wagtails are largely resident, although birds from north of the range in Scottish Highland and the Islands move south in winter. A number of juveniles disperse into continental Europe, with some reaching Brittany in France, western Iberia and even Morocco.

The few White Wagtails that breed annually in eastern Greenland move almost due east in autumn to Iceland and then proceed with the Icelandic population SSE to Ireland, Britain and western Iberia to winter in West Africa. The spring passage through Britain begins at the end of February and then continues in earnest from the third week of March. Numbers peak throughout April and into the first two weeks of May. Return passage begins in mid August, then peaks throughout September, with a drip-feed of later migrants in October through to mid November.

Every year, a few White Wagtails remain to breed in Britain (mainly Scotland) but in England, mixed Pied/White Wagtail pairs are occasionally encountered.

Following the PSC concept, the *UK400 Club* treats White and Pied Wagtails as separate species, along with a number of other black and white wagtails that occur across North Africa and the Arabian peninsula and across Asia.

## **IDENTIFICATION**

The identification of White and Pied Wagtails in spring is relatively straightforward but in autumn, it is highly problematic. This paper attempts to clarify a few of the finer points of separation and is published as a guide to those that wish to attempt it.



*White Wagtail, Portland Bill Bird Observatory, Dorset, 29 March 2009* - always a quality capture, this was the first spring White Wagtail handled at Portland for many years. This individual struck us as being a fairly obvious first-summer male although that might not be immediately apparent in these photos which were taken in blazing sunshine (subtle moult contrasts etc always seem to photograph so much better in flat light); in life the retained, faded brown, juvenile flight feathers and median/greater coverts were certainly conspicuous. Wagtails are one of those families that you have to be careful with since their partial pre-breeding moult can introduce moult-limits into the wing-coverts of adults as well as first-summer. This individual looks to have three generations of feathers in the greater coverts (which it ought to have; an adult would have just two) although assigning each individual feather to the juvenile, post-juvenile or pre-breeding generation isn't at all straightforward - **Martin Cade**.



Adult male Pied Wagtail, photographed above by Mike Lawrence, has a black back and concolorous black mantle, back, rump and uppertail. It also has a black crown, black chin and throat, breast-sides and very dark grey flanks, contrasting heavily with the gleaming white underparts.

Male White Wagtail on the other hand (pictured on the following page on migration in spring at Portland Bill by Martin Cade) is black on the crown and nape, chin, throat and upper breast, but has pale grey mantle, back, rump and uppertail coverts and only a light grey wash on the flanks and sides – giving it a very white appearance on the sides at distance. Female White Wagtails are also quite similar, with the black on the crown fading in to the grey hindneck and nape and even cleaner, white and relatively unmarked flanks. On male Whites, the black on the crown is clearly demarcated from the mantle whereas on the female it is less clearcut, often with grey admixed. On some first-summerers, the black is reduced or even lacking.



*White Wagtail, Portland Bill, Dorset, 20 March 2009 (Martin Cade)*



*White Wagtail, Portland Bill, Dorset, 20 March 2009 (Martin Cade)*

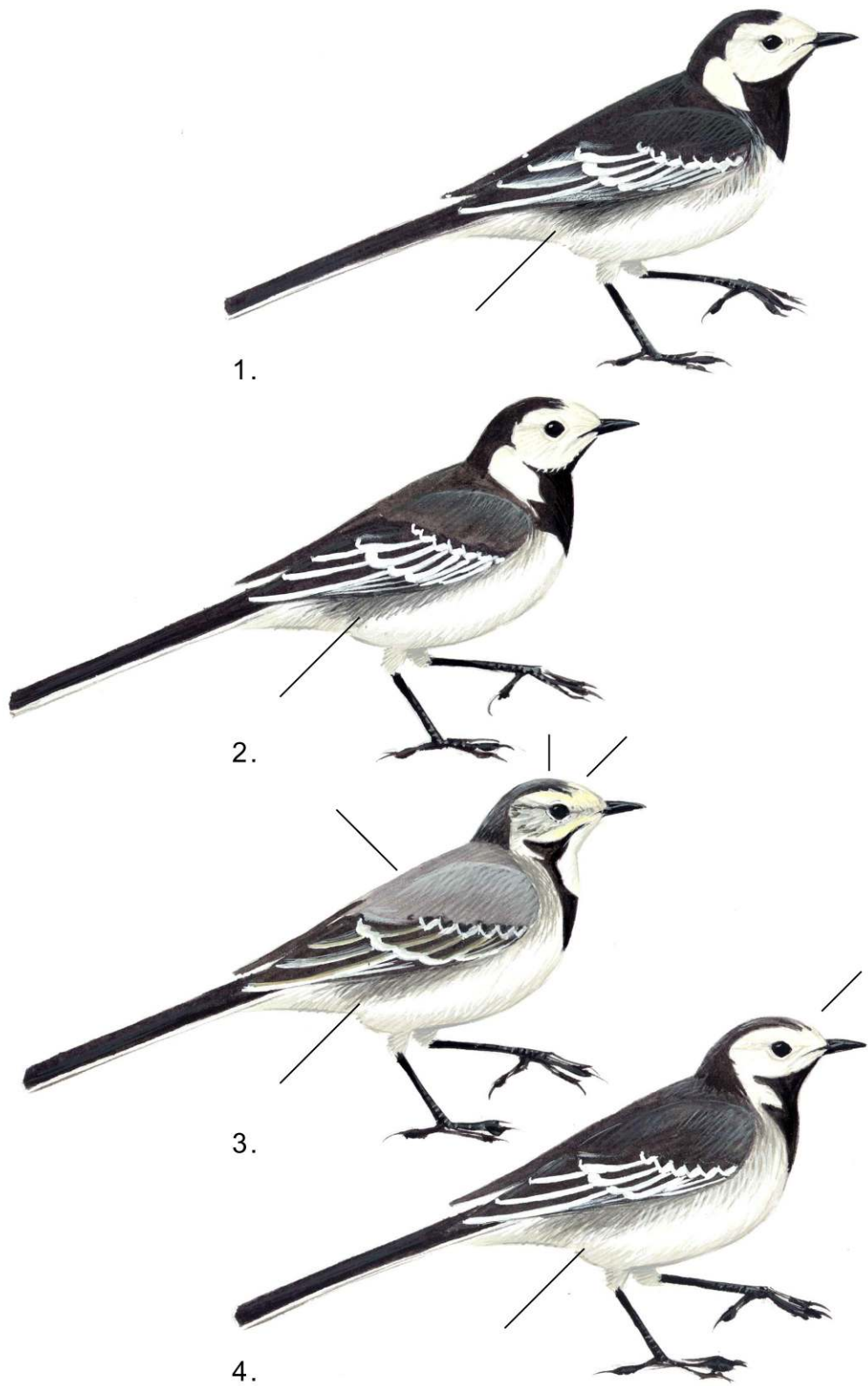


White Wagtail trapped and ringed at Portland Bill Bird Observatory on 18 March 2010 (Martin Cade)

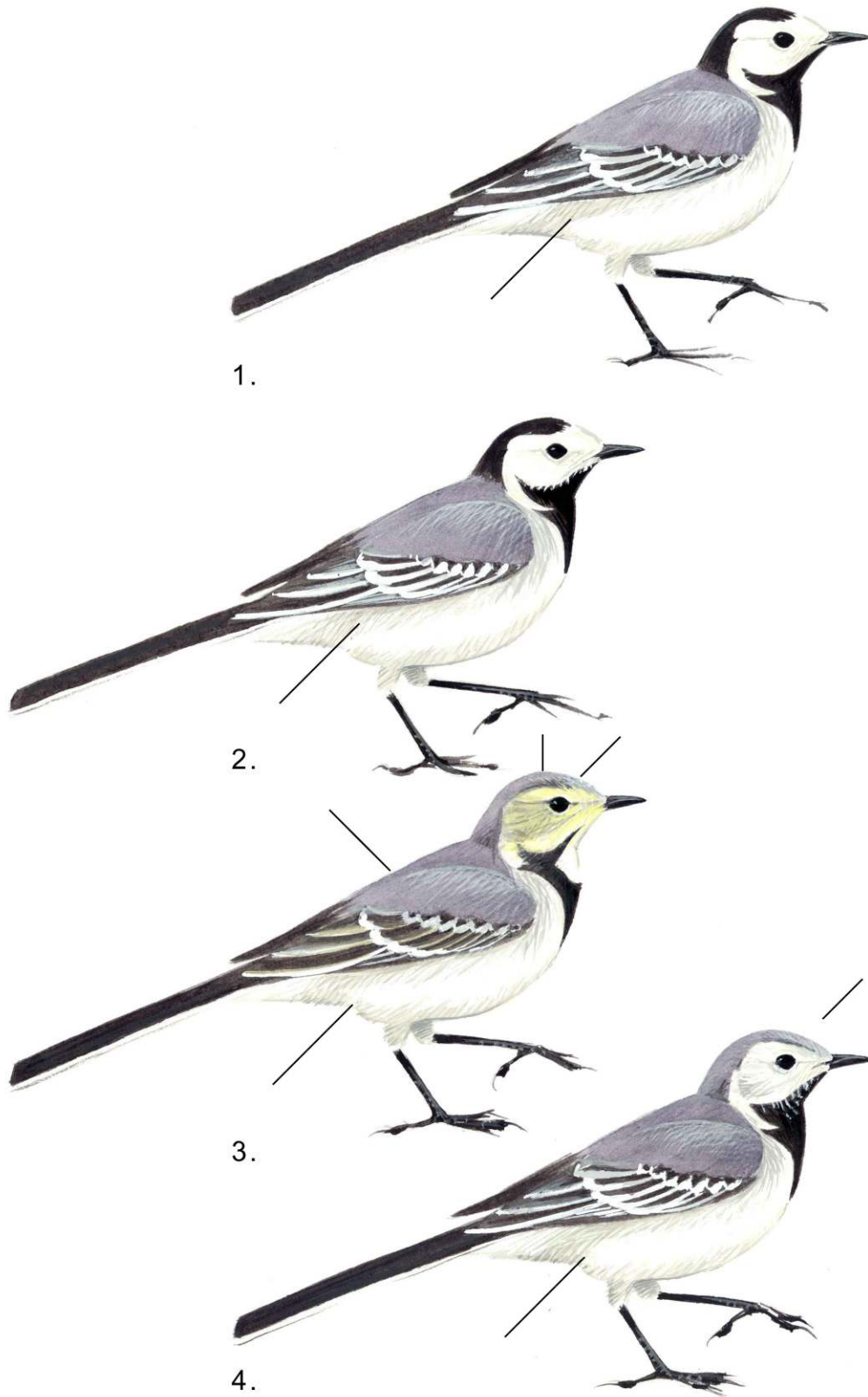


Male Pied Wagtail trapped and ringed at Portland Bill Bird Observatory on 18 March 2010 (Martin Cade)

Obviously, the main differences are the bold black coloration of the male Pied Wagtail and the contrasting pale grey upperparts of the male White Wagtail. Note however the differences in the upperwing patterning.

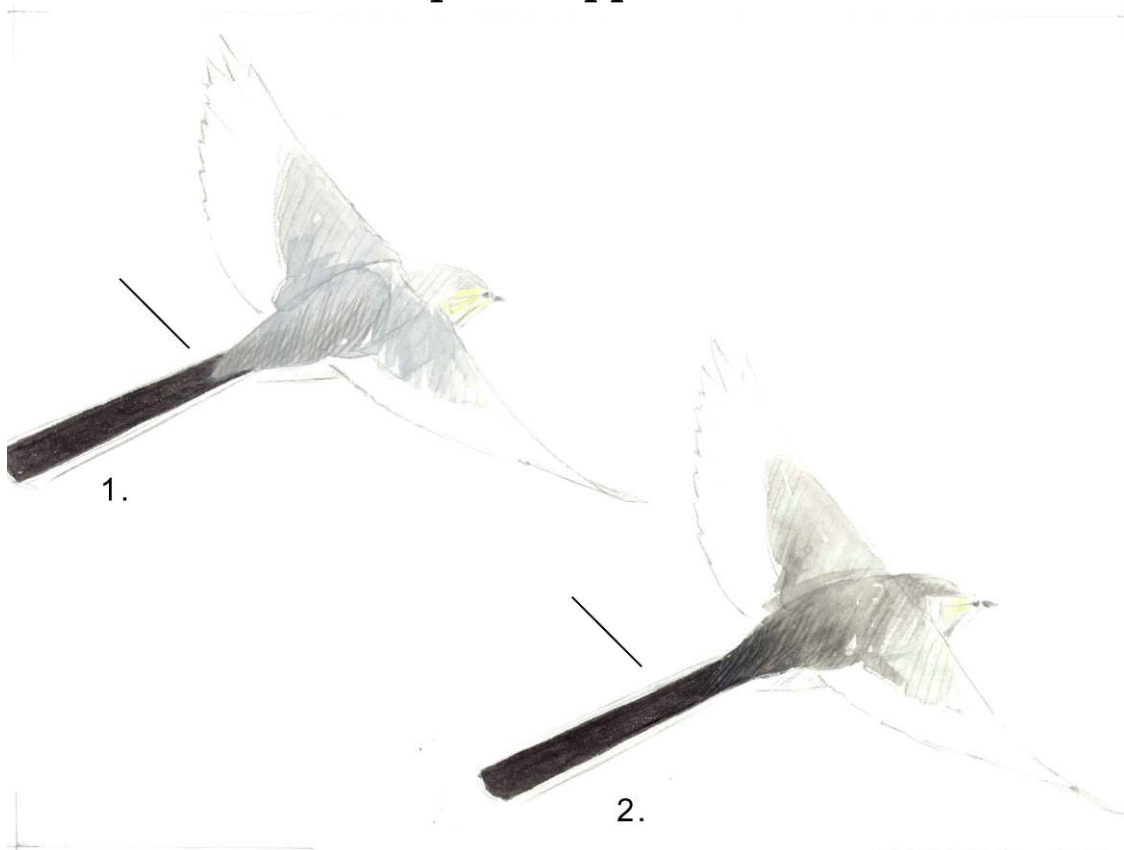


Pied Wagtails – adult male, adult female, first-winter and autumn male (Raymond Scally)



White Wagtail – adult male, adult female, first-winter and winter male (Raymond Scally)

## The Rump and Uppertail coverts



A great flight shot captured by Pete Saunders at Portland showing a putative first-winter White Wagtail. This individual could dispel the myth that all White Wagtails have contrastingly pale grey rumps and uppertail coverts.. However, Peter Adriaens has commented “this individual shows a very dark rump, particularly on the lower part. In addition, the white tips to the greater coverts are wide and very prominent, and the upperparts are very dull grey. These characters suggest Pied Wagtail rather than White, even though the crown and forehead look grey (but note the black upper border to the speculum)”





Autumn *albas* at Portland Bill, 3 September 2008 (Martin Cade). The grey streaks on the belly, almost blackish rear flank feathers, and very dark grey mantle all point unequivocally to *yarrellii* (Peter Adriaens)



Autumn-plumaged *Alba* Wagtails at Portland Bill, 8 September 2008 (Martin Cade)  
Peter Adriaens has commented “the bird in the foreground looks quite White Wagtail-like, with its pale rear flank, clean white belly and grey crown and forehead”



White Wagtail, Portland Bill, Dorset, 15 September 2009 (Martin Cade)  
In autumn, first-winter White Wagtails tend to retain ashen grey in the crown with less contrasting black; they also often show a yellowish wash to the face, a much paler grey rump, much cleaner flanks and less pale-fringed wing and covert bars.



Juvenile Pied Wagtail (Mike Lawrence)

Juvenile Pieds are typically olive-grey on the crown and mantle, the breast-sides and flanks, with a somewhat messy gorget across the breast and soon attain at least some black on the forecrown and crown-sides like this bird.

In general, after the autumn moult, both adult Pied and White Wagtails appear very much as they do in spring, although the full black bib is replaced by a narrow necklace of streaks. One important feature though is that Pied Wagtail is clearly much more sedentary by nature. As such, like many other essentially resident species, it has a rather protracted moult. To confirm this, *BWP* states that, in a non-migratory population of Pieds in southern England, the average duration of primary moult was estimated at 76 days, with an average commencement date of 16 July and an average completion of 30 September. Body moult started with the shedding of p2 but ended with p10. In contrast, White Wagtails in northern Finland commence moult on average on 8 July but critically take only 46-48 days to complete – virtually half the time of Pieds. This enables them to complete the moult prior to migration. Hence, in late August or September, White Wagtails with their immaculate plumage can be easily separated from the rather scruffy and dishevelled post-breeding or post-juvenile Pied Wagtails. As far as the young birds are concerned at this period of time, first-winter White Wagtails will be very clean-looking, fresh and immaculately-plumaged birds, whereas the young Pied Wagtails will be retaining significant amounts of juvenile feathers.

## KEY CRITERIA

### PIED WAGTAIL

- 1) Upperparts dark grey to jet-black in adults, with most importantly and critically, DARK GREY FLANKS and breast-sides. First-winter Pieds often have upperparts as pale as White Wagtail;
- 2) The rump and uppertail coverts are invariably BLACK whilst on White, these feathers are dark grey, with only the longest uppertail coverts being black;
- 3) Adult Pied Wagtails have broad white wing-bars and greater coverts;
- 4) Adult males always retain jet-black upperparts, even in winter;
- 5) Adult female generally very dark grey, much darker in shade than in White Wagtail;
- 6) First-winter Pieds have a dark crown and hind-neck

### WHITE WAGTAIL

- 1) Upperparts ash-grey in all plumages;
- 2) In spring, adult male has sharply contrasting black crown and hindneck and white forehead;
- 3) In spring, adult female is less contrasting, with grey encroaching in rear crown;
- 4) In first-winter Whites, female has a uniform ash-grey crown, whilst the male has some black on the crown and a white forehead;
- 5) First-winters also invariably show a yellowish wash to the face and diffuse dark ear-coverts
- 6) Flanks and sides essentially white with limited pale grey washing; Pied Wagtails are always much blacker or dark grey on the sides.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to both Keith Vinicombe and Chris Heard for making invaluable comments to the draft and to Ray Scally for providing the excellent plates that adorn the text. I am also indebted to Peter Adriaens who made additional invaluable comments upon the text.

## ADDITIONAL NOTES

Peter Adriaens has very kindly provided me with a further selection of White Wagtail images photographed in Belgium and France. That showing the rump variation is particularly instructive -:



Plate 1: White Wagtail, Adult male *alba*, Visé, Liège, Belgium, 10 January 2009 (*Peter Adriaens*).

When fluffed out, flank feathers can look quite extensively grey, but note clean white belly and largely grey rump (check between middle pair of tertials).



2) White Wagtail, 1w *alba*, probably male, Port-La-Nouvelle, France, 27 Dec 2010 (*Peter Adriaens*).

All greater coverts and upper two tertials are still juvenile feathers, as evident from their brown centres. Head pattern and medium grey upperparts might suggest *yarrellii*, but note rather pale grey nape and clean belly. This bird had a grey rump.

Identification of first winter birds can be very tricky if not all characters are critically assessed.



3) White Wagtail, Adult *alba*, Sète, France, 27 Dec 2010 (Peter Adriaens).  
All wing coverts and tertials of adult type. Upperparts and flanks paler than in *yarrellii*; belly clean white.



4) White Wagtail, Juvenile *alba*, Maasvlakte, Rotterdam, Netherlands, 24 June 2011 (Peter Adriaens).  
A very typical individual, with very pale flanks and pale grey crown lacking dark upper border to supercilium. Many juveniles, however, are somewhat duller grey, and pretty much identical to juvenile *yarrellii*.



5) White Wagtail, Male *alba*, Zeebrugge, Belgium, 11 May 2010 (Peter Adriaens).

Difficult to age as not all greater coverts are visible. Sexed by clear-cut black nape (though a few adult females can look identical). Typical *alba* in all respects.

**RUMP PATTERNS** (below)

Rump patterns of *alba*. All birds photographed near Antwerpen, Belgium, in March 2008 by Rudy Verlinden. Rump varies from medium to dark grey in *alba* (sometimes with a few blackish patches admixed), while uppertail coverts are usually blackish (as in *yarrellii*).

