

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*, a vagrant to Barbados, Trinidad and French Guiana

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White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* is mainly an Old World species, widely distributed as a breeder from south-east Greenland over the entire Palearctic and south-east Asia to north-west Alaska. In winter its range also extends south to central Africa and southern Asia (Alström & Mild 2003). In North America White Wagtail is represented by two subspecies, *M. a. ocularis* and *M. a. lugens* (Alström & Mild 2003, Tyler 2004). *M. a. ocularis* breeds in westernmost Alaska and has wandered south to California and Baja California in Mexico, whilst *M. a. lugens* occasionally breeds in coastal Alaska and is a rare vagrant south to western North America. Both subspecies have also been recorded in south-east North America, in North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida and Louisiana (Howell & Webb 1995, AOU 1998, Buckley *et al.* 2009). Palearctic *M. a. alba* is also a rare vagrant to Florida (March), Québec (May) and North Carolina (October) (Buckley *et al.* 2009). In early 1987, *M. a. alba* was recorded on Barbados, and at the end of 1987 probably also in Trinidad (Ingremeau 1991, Kenefick *et al.* 2007, Buckley *et al.* 2009, Oatman in prep.).

We report here one observation substantiated with photographs of a White Wagtail of the subspecies *alba*, and a brief view of another White Wagtail, from French Guiana, the first for this species on the South American continent. We also discuss a recent White Wagtail on Trinidad, together with an overview of earlier records on Barbados and on Trinidad.

Observations in French Guiana

One morning between 10 and 15 September 2009, M. Clément (pers. comm.) saw a White Wagtail in his garden at km 10 along the road to Apatou (c.05°25'N, 54°04'W), south of Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni in western French Guiana, and c.50 km inland. It flew low over the lawn on leaving the bank of a small pond in the backyard. Its greyish upperparts, whitish underparts, long tail and undulating flight, 1.0–1.5 m above the ground, were unmistakable. However, the observation was not submitted to the French Guiana Rarities Committee (Comité d'Homologation de Guyane, CHG), and therefore could not be evaluated.

On 26 October 2009, TL & PI were travelling with a group of birders on the Approuage River in eastern French Guiana. As they passed Îlet Léopard (c.04°09'N, 52°23'W), c.90 km inland and c.225 km from the site where the wagtail was seen in September, they saw three birds foraging amongst low weeds on a gravelly sandbar in the middle of the river. One was a Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularius*, another a White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis*, but the third was clearly a wagtail—a small, tall-legged passerine, walking with



Figures 1–2. White Wagtail *Motacilla a. alba*, Îlet Léopard, Approuage River, French Guiana, 26 October 2009 (Patrick Ingremeau)

a long wagging tail while bobbing its head. Its grey upperparts, white underparts, two white wingbars and an obvious black breast-band are typical of *M. a. alba*, a form with which most of the observers were familiar in France. Although it proved shy, PI was able to photograph the bird (Figs. 1–2); it was not seen subsequently. The absence of a black eyestripe or a 'white shoulder' eliminates *M. a. ocularis* and *M. a. lugens* respectively, whilst the white flanks and grey rump eliminate *M. a. yarrellii*, which is essentially resident in the British Isles (Alström & Mild 2003). Its uniform greyish forehead, crown, nape and mantle indicated a first-year or an adult in winter plumage, probably a female. It was accepted by the CHG as the first White Wagtail for French Guiana.

Vagrant *Motacilla alba* on Barbados and Trinidad

On 28 January 1987, a first-year or adult male White Wagtail of the nominate race *M. a. alba* was found at Bridgetown Harbour (c.13°05'N, 59°37'W) on Barbados (Norton 1987). The combination of plain white face and throat plus a black crown and breast-band eliminated *M. a. lugens* and *M. a. ocularis* (Buckley *et al.* 2009).

On 26 December 1987–2 January 1988, a White Wagtail was seen and photographed at Aripo Agricultural Research Station (c.10°38'N, 61°14'W) in northern Trinidad by a group of birders led by F. Oatman. It was not identified to subspecies (French 1991, Kenefick & Hayes 2006, Kenefick *et al.* 2007), but was accepted by the Trinidad & Tobago Rare Bird Committee as the first *M. alba* for South America (Hayes & White 2000), though Kenefick & Hayes (2006) preferred to consider the record as hypothetical. Recently an original photograph turned up and is set to be published (Oatman in prep.).

On 27 September 2009, a group of British birders led by experienced local guide M. Ramlal observed a wagtail at the same agricultural research station where the White Wagtail was seen in 1987–88 (S. J. Tyler pers. comm.). Ramlal had also seen that wagtail, and all observers were familiar with the British subspecies *M. a. yarrellii*. Although they could not identify the subspecies involved, there is no doubt as to its identity as a White Wagtail.

Discussion

As Barbados is usually considered part of North America, the 1987 record on Trinidad was the first for this species in South America (Hayes & White 2000, Oatman in prep.). Although the White Wagtail is not yet included in the main list of the birds of South America, the photograph of the wagtail at the Aripo Agricultural Research Station is mentioned in the South American Classification Committee's 'Hypothetical list' (Remsen *et al.* 2010). The Approuague bird thus constitutes the first confirmed record of White Wagtail for continental South America.

The White Wagtails seen in 1987 on Barbados and in 2009 in French Guiana were identified as *M. a. alba*, which breeds in continental western Europe. Northernmost populations migrate in September and October to their winter quarters in south-west Europe and northern Africa (Alström & Mild 2003). The occurrence of White Wagtails in the southern Lesser Antilles and north-east South America in September–January is consistent with migrants being diverted west by strong north-east trade winds prevailing over the Atlantic Ocean at that season (V. Kousky pers. comm.; Kenefick & Hayes 2006).

The cluster of Trinidad and Guiana records in 2009 is striking in being distributed over a relatively small area, relative to the distances travelled by the birds. Moreover, there is no reason to assume only one individual was involved. Rather, since wagtails usually migrate in small parties, it is more likely that such a party was diverted during migration in autumn

2009 and those individuals then wandered between the southern West Indies and French Guiana.

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