General Field Notes

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White Wagtail in South Carolina: First Record on US Eastern Seaboard

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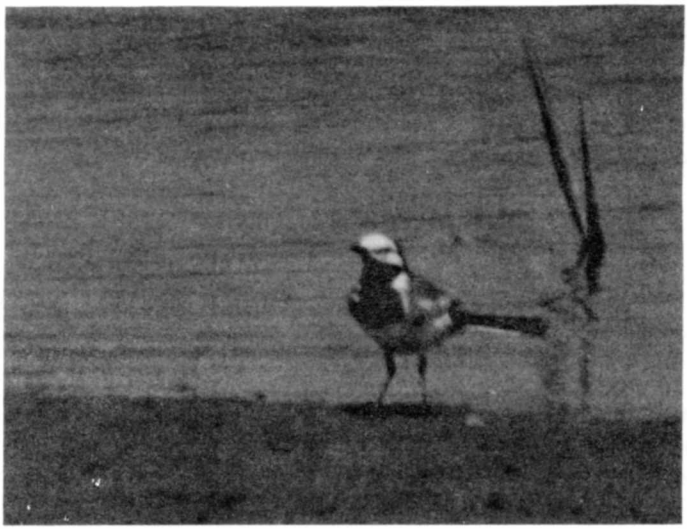
On 16 April 1998, during a visit to Huntington Beach State Park, South Carolina, I went for an early morning walk to the jetty. At 7:40 AM, I caught sight of an unusual bird at the edge of the pond to my left just before I reached the jetty. I saw the bird through my 8 x 40 Nikon binoculars. It was a passerine about 7" long, and its behavior was unusual. The bird seemed to have a large black breast patch that stood out from the white covering much of the rest of the body. Even from about 150' away, I could tell that it was something different. As I got within 50', I became more and more surprised by what I was seeing.

From bird studies and hours of wistfully looking through the field guides, I was familiar with wagtails. I knew that three or four species were found in North America and that none of them should be anywhere near the east coast! Soon, I realized that I was looking at a wagtail species. Knowing how rare wagtails are, I began trying to observe everything I could.

The first behavior I noticed was the way the bird constantly wagged its long tail up and down. It had a thin beak and slim shape. As I looked at the bird's plumage, I saw an incomplete black cap that continued to the base of its neck, along with a thin eye stripe. Extending from the bird's chin to its lower breast was a black patch, roughly in the shape of a diamond. Its bluish-gray back was another distinctive feature. Since I didn't have a field guide with me, it was only later that I learned that this feature distinguishes it from the Black-backed Wagtail. Later in the day I also noticed its bluish-gray rump. The



White Wagtail at Huntington Beach State Park.
Photo by Phil Turner.

bird's wings were black and white. The secondaries were bright white, while the primaries were black with white streaks. Its tail was black with distinctive white edges. The belly of the bird was white, and it had black feet. The first time I saw it, I couldn't make out bill color, but later in the day I determined that it had a grayish beak. I also noticed that it bobbed its head when walking.

The wagtail appeared to be eating insects as it made its way around the perimeter of the pond. It would flap its wings and run along the ground, snapping them up. This behavior was almost nonstop and was entertaining to watch.

The weather conditions were good, and full sun was shining on the bird. I watched the wagtail for approximately 20 minutes the first time, and for another full hour at other times. I never heard the bird call.

After I had been watching the bird for several minutes, my father, Paul Behrens, walked up. He is only a casual birder, but even so, when I showed the bird to him, he knew that it was something different. I didn't have either pencil and paper or a field guide along with me, so my father and I tried to remember everything we could about the bird so that I could draw it later. We observed it carefully for about 15 more minutes and then quickly returned to our camper in the park.

Back at the camper I immediately sketched an outline of a bird and then filled it in with the marks we'd seen. Then I looked in National Geographic's *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. The observations my father and I had made, and the sketch I had drawn, matched the illustration of the White Wagtail. There was simply nothing else it could be. I also quickly noted that there were no wagtails in Peterson's *Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern and Central North America* and none on the South Carolina State Checklist. The White Wagtail was described in the National Geographic field guide as being "uncommon to rare in Alaska." This was a rare bird indeed!

With the news of the bird's identity, my father and I found Jerry and Carolyn Barnhart, birders we had met in the park several days earlier. We also found Steve Roff, the Huntington Beach naturalist. The Barnharts and Steve Roff called several people before going to the jetty to investigate my report.

We were able to relocate the bird, and Phil Turner and Jerry Barnhart were able to photograph it. It was then that I finally let myself relax. Other birders had seen the wagtail, and pictures had been taken of it. What a relief!

Very quickly, Phil Turner got the word out, and within the next few days, approximately 150 birders came to see the bird.

White Wagtails are common in the Old World, ranging across Eurasia. They are only seen regularly in North America in western Alaska, where they are known to breed. There have only been 5 previous confirmed White Wagtail sightings from the lower 48 states — two from California, two from Washington, and one (quite recently) from Louisiana. In addition to these confirmed White Wagtail records, there are 10 Black-backed/White Wagtail sightings. In winter plumage, these two species are quite difficult, if not impossible, to separate. One of the Black-backed/White Wagtail reports came from Michigan, while the other nine are from the west coast states. A Black-backed Wagtail was seen in North Carolina in 1982, and very recently a Citrine Wagtail was seen in Mississippi.

This sighting was the first White Wagtail on the east coast, and aside from the Louisiana record, the only one from east of the Rockies. It is also only the second wagtail record of any species from the entire U.S. eastern seaboard.

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Northern Fulmar Collected in South Carolina: Southernmost Verified Occurrence for Atlantic Coast

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A juvenile light-phase Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis)* of undetermined sex was found on the beach at Kiawah Island, Charleston County, South Carolina, on 27 February 1998 by Higgins. It had been dead for several days. The specimen (ChM 1998.13.010) was prepared as a standard study skin, with the left wing detached and extended. A partial skeleton was preserved. The bird was determined to be a juvenile by the presence of the bursa of Fabricus. As the internal organs had deteriorated, it could not be sexed with certainty, although it was probably a female. No broken bones were found, and the cause of death could not be ascertained. The bird was emaciated (concave pectoral