

## The Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* in Northern Queensland

By H. B. GILL

The morning of Tuesday, November 23, 1965 was fine and bright after a wet night. Anticipating that conditions on the Innisfail aerodrome would attract certain kinds of waders I visited the area at 7 a.m.

Birds were indeed plentiful and a couple of hours were spent on observing the various species frequenting the air-field. Pipits, *Anthus australis*, were present in hundreds and Australian Pratincoles, *Stiltia isabella*, and Little Whimbrels, *Mesoscolopax minutus*, were noted feeding in a section that had been graded the previous day. It was while watching these birds that one of two supposed Pipits turned towards me and it was then seen that its entire underparts were a bright yellow, in addition, the bird had a quite distinct facial pattern. A few moments later both birds took flight uttering a pronounced "Zweep, zweep" call; they rose to a considerable height and were soon out of sight.

The following day, November 24, my son and I had excellent views of a Yellow Wagtail feeding with three Pipits in the same graded area. A description of this bird, taken at the time, reads: back, light grey, crown darker; primaries dark, with two distinct light wing-bars; tail, dark, edged with white; throat, white; breast, white with a slight wash of grey on the abdomen; eye-stripe, white, cheeks, dark; bill and legs, blackish.

We watched this wagtail for some ten minutes while it ran about feeding; it jumped into the air several times to catch flying insects and continually bobbed its tail. Occasionally it rested momentarily on clods of earth. It was inclined to drive away Pipits and Rainbow-birds, *Merops ornatus*, and chased a White-breasted Wood-swallow, *Artamus leucorhynchus*, out of sight, giving, during the pursuit, its "Zweep zweep" call. It was back again in five minutes but remained only a short time before leaving the airfield.

During the next few days many hours were spent in searching grassy areas, small swamps, the local golfcourse, the racecourse and sports-grounds in the district, but it was not until December 1, that a lone Yellow Wagtail was sighted. This bird remained for five days and we walked many miles following it about the airfield. It was difficult to approach and the only time we could get near it was when it was either busily feeding or preening. A description of this second bird is as follows: Upper, grey with slight brownish wash; primaries and tail, very dark, tail edged with white; crown, grey; eye-stripe, white; eye, bill, and legs, dark; wing stripes, cheeks,

grey; throat, creamy yellow and buff with a few dark marks; the rest of the underparts, very pale grey.

Sometimes, when this bird could not be located on the recently graded ground, it would be found in a nearby ploughed paddock, always flying away and calling, if one approached too closely.

It was much more active than the pipits and not nearly so tame.

On December 4, two Yellow Wagtails were sighted on the aerodrome: both were very shy and did not allow close observations to be made. One of these birds had a yellow breast but, apparently, not so bright as that of the first Wagtail recorded on November 23.

The next day we watched the Wagtail with a yellow throat for more than an hour as it fed and preened. We did not see this bird again.

On December 13, four Yellow Wagtails were seen together, they were all in different stages of plumage, none of them were like the two birds described previously. These birds were observed over a period of five days. They were not always to be seen feeding on the bare ground, but could sometimes be found on the grassy areas. They did not chase the Pipits as frequently as did the Wagtails seen earlier, but otherwise their habits were similar. One was seen to perch about twenty feet up in a tree where it preened for half an hour.

The four birds disappeared following two days of heavy rain. It was noticed that the Wagtails were seldom still; they always called when taking off, had a strong undulating flight, gained height rapidly and flew out of sight, but often returned to the same area within five or ten minutes. When feeding they were inclined to walk quickly rather than run, taking long steps, which actions caused a forward and backward motion of the head. The tail was continually "bobbed". Apart from the call-note already mentioned, one bird was heard to give a call sounding like "Zip-zip-did-did-diddt". It was estimated that, over a period of 25 days, at least six Yellow wagtails, in varying states of plumage, were recorded in the area. The Innisfail aerodrome has two runways at right angles, crossing in the middle. Both are about a mile in length and some 300 yards wide. One has a bitumen strip 40 yards wide extending for its entire length. The airfield is, for the most part, covered with grass which is kept mowed, creating what may best be described as a lush meadow habitat.

The plumage patterns of the four birds observed closely between December 13 and December 17 were as follows:

- (a) Head and back, olive; rump, bright golden-olive; eye-stripe, cream; cheeks, grey; wings and tail black, with tail edged with white; throat and breast buff, streaked dusky, rest of underparts a clear, light yellow; wing-bars not present; bill and legs blackish; eyes, dark.

- (b) Differed in having the head and back grey with a slight olive wash. The underparts were creamy with a few dark streaks on the breast.
- (c) Differed in having the crown and back olive, the sides of the neck an even bright yellow and the entire underparts a bright golden-yellow, with a few dark feathers on the breast.
- (d) Differed in having the crown grey, the back brownish-grey with an olive wash and the rump golden-olive. The underparts were cream with some dusky streaks on the breast.

The last wagtail was seen but no description obtained on January 11, 1966.

Previous records for the Yellow Wagtail in Australia relate to a bird collected at Bimbi, on the Dawson River, central eastern Queensland, on June 10, 1905 (specimen in the Australian Museum, Sydney) and an example seen on December 7, 1960, near Derby, north-west Australia (*Western Australian Naturalist*, 8: 36-38).

The Yellow Wagtail has a wide distribution throughout the northern hemisphere where several subspecies are recognized. It is a migratory species and winters in tropical regions.

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*H. B. Gill, M.S.216 Innisfail, North Queensland.*  
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**Crimson Rosella catches insect on the wing.**—At approximately 2 p.m., May 30, 1967, I flushed a flock of Eastern Rosellas, *Platycercus eximius*, and Crimson Rosellas, *Platycercus elegans*, at a farm two miles from Blanket Flat, via Crookwell, N.S.W. The flock was feeding on grass-seeds on the ground and the Eastern Rosellas were predominant, there being only two or three Crimson Rosellas. The birds flew to a nearby Eucalypt of about 40 feet in height and, as I was quite close to it, I began walking over to investigate further. Suddenly a Crimson Rosella in full adult plumage darted out of the uppermost branches of the tree for a distance of about ten feet and flew straight back to the same branches. The movement was in keeping with the parrot's flight—swift and direct. On reaching the tree a few seconds later I saw the bird holding an insect in one of its claws while it proceeded to dismember and eat it piece by piece. I could not determine the species of insect.

It is generally known that the Crimson Rosella eats grubs and various other insects; however, this struck me as being a most unusual method for it, being a member of the Psittaciformes, to obtain this form of food.—TONY STOKES, c/- Mr Rylie, Blanket Flat, via Crookwell, N.S.W.