GRAY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*): A NEW SPECIES FOR BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Carmanah Point Lightstation, 25 Huron Street, Victoria, BC. V8V 4V9

The Gray Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*) is an Old World species that breeds from the British Isles, southern Scandinavia, central Russia and central Siberia south to northwestern Africa, the Mediterranean region, Asia Minor, Iran, the Himalayas, northern Mongolia, Manchuria, northern Korea, and Japan. It generally winters south of its summer range to central Africa, Sri Lanka, and western New Guinea. In North America it is mainly a casual spring migrant through the Commander and western Aleutians and Pribilof and St. Lawrence islands in Alaska. Elsewhere it is considered accidental (American Ornithologist’s Union 1998).

On 26 October 2004, at 1600 hrs., we spotted a yellow-bellied bird on a small gravel beach on the southeast side of Carmanah Point Lightstation on southwestern Vancouver Island (48° 36’ 52” N, 124° 45’ 37” W). The bird was frequently wagging its tail as it vigorously fed on a huge hatch of kelp flies and smaller midges along the tide line. We watched the bird for about 10 min before it flew, with a strong direct flight, into a nearby Sitka spruce (*Picea sitchensis*) tree. We returned to the lightstation to complete a weather report. In the meantime, we identified the yellow-coloured wagtail, using the National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America, as a Gray Wagtail.

Forty-five min later we returned to the beach to find the bird feeding in the same area. The wagtail walked and snapped insects off the rocks continuing to wag its tail between feeding events. At one point it preened for several minutes. A series of photographs documenting the occurrence were obtained using a digital Nikon Coolpix 4200 camera pressed against a spotting telescope as the bird continued to feed. These images have been catalogued as B C Photo 3059 (Figure 1) and deposited in the scientific photo files at the Biodiversity Centre for Wildlife Studies in Victoria (see Campbell and Stirling 1971).

The Gray Wagtail is an exceedingly rare bird to find in western North America south of western Alaska. Small (1994) lists a single record for California of an immature bird that was present at the mouth of the Salinas River on 9 and 10 October 1988. There are no satisfactory occurrences from the Yukon Territory prior to 2003 (Sinclair et al. 2003), British Columbia prior to 26 October 2004 (Campbell et al. 1997; R. W. Campbell pers. comm.), and Oregon prior to January 1997 (Russell 1997).

Literature Cited


Campbell, R.W., N.K. Dawe, I. McTaggart-Cowan, J.M. Cooper, G.W. Kaiser, and M.C.E. McNall. 1997. The...
LARK SPARROW NESTING IN THE PEACE RIVER REGION OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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The Lark Sparrow (Chondestes grammacus), a widespread breeding species of open habitats across much of western and central United States, reaches the northern limits of its summer range in western North America in the Okanagan and Similkameen valleys of British Columbia (Martin and Parrish 2000; Campbell et al. 2001). The northernmost nesting in the province has been reported from the vicinity of Savona 41 km west of Kamloops.

On 25 June 2004, I spotted an adult Lark Sparrow at Lynx Creek, about 5 km northeast of Hudson’s Hope. The bird was in an open natural meadow with scattered small Saskatoon (Amelanchier alnifolia), western snowberry (Symphoricarpus occidentalis), and wild rose (Rosa spp.) shrubs surrounded by a mixed-age trembling aspen (Populus tremuloides) woodland. The following day I watched the bird as it disappeared behind a bush, suggesting it might have a nest nearby. A short search revealed the sparrow sitting on it. Retreating, I watched until the bird flew from the nest, then inspected it to find two eggs. The nest was on the ground, under a 40 cm tall Saskatoon bush and built mostly of coarse grasses with a lining of finer grasses and hair. The nest was on a south-facing slope at the north edge of the otherwise level meadow.

On 1 July, after watching from a distance until the adult Lark Sparrow left the nest site, I inspected and found it now contained 5 eggs (Figure 1). Over the next two weeks I visited the nest on four occasions (4, 7, 12, and 14 July) and, from a safe distance, watched the sparrow leave and return to the nest. On 17 July I watched the nest from 0800 to 1000 but no Lark Sparrow was seen or heard. I finally checked the nest and found it contained five cold eggs. I water-tested the eggs and found that they all floated vertically, suggesting no embryonic development. At no time during the 22 days of observation did I observe a pair of sparrows (male and female) together.

The full complement of eggs was probably completed by 29 June. The incubation period for this species is 11-12 days (Baepler 1968) suggesting that eggs should have hatched about 10 or 11 July. The last date the adult was observed on the nest was 14 July suggesting an incubation period of at least 15 days. The egg dates for the Lynx Creek nest fall within the nesting chronology (i.e., 12 May to 15 July) for Lark Sparrows in southern areas of British Columbia (Campbell et al. 2001).

This failed, and isolated nesting attempt, extends the potential breeding range in British Columbia at least 590 km north of the known nesting area in the southern portion of the province and represents the most northern nesting attempt in North America. In adjacent Alberta, the most northern breeding occurs in southeastern portions of the province at

Figure 1. Lark Sparrow (Chondestes grammacus) nest containing five eggs at Lynx Creek, BC. 17 July 2004 (Steve Myers). BC Photo 3044.