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FOUR RECORDS OF CITRINE WAGTAIL *MOTACILLA CITREOLA* IN SOUTH AFRICA: THE BIGGER PICTURE

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Citrine Wagtails *Motacilla citreola* have a vast breeding range in central Eurasia. In the west, this range extends from Finland via Poland to Turkey and covers roughly the eastern half of Europe, and it continues eastwards to about half way across Asia; the range extends from roughly the Himalayas in the south to Siberia in the north (Tyler 2004). The breeding range is expanding westwards across Europe (Tyler 2004). In contrast to the breeding range, the non-breeding range is a relatively small area of southern Asia, mainly a narrow band south of the Himalayas from Pakistan through northern India to Vietnam (Tyler 2004). The global population size is estimated at between 2.6 million and 31 million birds (BirdLife International 2015). There are multiple records of vagrancy in this species; this is clear from an examination of the collection of references for Citrine Wagtail in Hobbs (2013); a large proportion of the literature for this species consists of reports of its occurrence as a vagrant. Records of eastward vagrancy, i.e. birds moving east from Asia across the Pacific Ocean, include two from North America: one in Mississippi, USA, January 1992 and one in British Columbia, Canada, November 2012 (Toochin s.a.). Westward vagrancy consists of a series of records in Iceland, presumably of birds that are part of the population that breeds in eastern Europe (Pétursson and Kolbeinsson 2013).

Fig 1 – The Citrine Wagtail at Strandfontein Sewage Works. – 29 April 2015
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The checklist of the African Bird Club (http://www.africanbirdclub.org/resources/checklist/intro, last updated in March 2010) described the status of the Citrine Wagtail in Africa as "vagrant", with records in Ethiopia and the northeastern corner of Africa, Cameroon, South Africa, Tenerife in the Canary Islands and the Seychelles. The image library of the African Bird Club also has photographs taken in Senegal (see http://www.africanbirdclub.org and Gruwier *et al.* 2001). The three records with photographs in the image library are all of juvenile birds and were made in October, November and January. (http://www.africanbirdclub.org/afbid/search.php?func=searchresult&af_bs_id=1214).

There are four records of Citrine Wagtails in South Africa:
1. Gamtoos River estuary, 27 April 1998 (Branch 1998),

2. Kleinmond Sewage Works, 11 April 2009 (pers. obs., http://vmus.adu.org.za/?vm=BirdPix-1422)

3. Urikaruus Waterhole, Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, 3 May 2014 (Lance Robinson, http://www.sanparks.org/assets/docs/groups_birders/public_sightings/2014-other.pdf)

4. Strandfontein Sewage Works, 25 April 2015 (reported by Ethan Kistler to CapeBirdNet on 25 April 2015, http://vmus.adu.org.za/?vm=BirdPix-17349, Fig 1).

With a sample of size four, it is dangerous to make inferences. There is a hint of a suggestion that the records are getting more common, with gaps of 11 years, then five years and finally one year between them. Whether this is because there are more birders or because more birds are arriving as vagrants is unknown. It is likely that both are true.

The safest inference is that the period 11 April to 3 May is the prime time to be on "Citrine Watch" in South Africa. It is also striking that all four of the records to date appeared to be of birds in (or approaching) breeding plumage. In contrast, the records farther north in Africa consisted of birds aged up to about six months, and are in juvenile plumage.

The fact that all the South Africa observations to date were in this 23-day window supports the suggestion made by Piper (2005) that these records are cases of "reverse migration" – birds which start migration at the right time, but go south rather than north. But if reverse migration is taken to mean that the birds go in the opposite direction to what they intended, i.e. a 180° shift, then this is unlikely to be correct. There is a good discussion of reverse migration in Gilroy and Lees (2003).

The subspecies of Citrine Wagtail visiting South Africa is the nominate race (Piper 2005) and is a long distance migrant (Toochin s.a.). This is the subspecies occurring in eastern Europe. These birds migrate southeastward towards Pakistan, and areas further east, in the northern autumn. If these birds intended to return to the breeding grounds in the northern spring they should have flown to the northwest. If they underwent a 180° migration shift, they would have flown southeast and turned up in Australia, and not South Africa. If the four birds which have reached South Africa did in fact spend the non-breeding season in Pakistan, they would have needed to set out with a 90° shift and flown southwestward to reach Africa, and then turned south to reach South Africa. The distance from the nearest part of the non-breeding area to South Africa is far longer than the longest distance to the breeding grounds in Europe, in Finland. This seems an unlikely scenario.

As an alternative hypothesis, it is possible that as Citrine Wagtails breed farther west in Europe, the southeasterly route ends in Africa (eg Ethiopia), rather than southern Asia. This is consistent with the handful of reports of juveniles across north-central Africa in the past two decades. By March, these birds would have moulted into adult plumage. If some of these birds were to undertake a reverse migration, they would end up in South Africa. They would arrive in April, and the distance flown would be similar to the distance to the breeding grounds.

Finally, it is worth noting that at least three of the four Citrine

Wagtails in South Africa were not recognized as such in the field. They were identified subsequently, from photographs. Everyone with photographs of "yellow wagtails" should re-examine them, and maybe we will discover that the Citrine Wagtail is not as vagrant as it appears to be.

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