



Garth McElroy

**21.** Female Black Scoter *Melanitta americana*, Maine, USA, January. Some Black Scoters have straighter bill-base feathering, and are more similar to Common Scoters *M. nigra* in this respect, but the pointed angle to the feathering just above the gape may be a useful feature.

sible overlap between, the two species. Nonetheless, this feature may prove a useful addition to those listed by Garner (2008) in the quest to identify females/immatures of the two species.

In addition to the shape of the feathering, the shape of the culmen may help to identify certain individuals. Some female Common Scoters have a poorly defined knob at the base

of the upper mandible, creating a shape that approaches that of males. In a few (older?) birds, this knob can be as conspicuous as on males. Conversely, some female Black Scoters have a slightly swollen basal half of the upper mandible, faintly resembling that of males (see also Waring 1993). It seems unlikely that these extreme bill shapes overlap between the species. The value of this character is limited, however, as the culmen is essentially straight along its entire length on most birds.

#### References

- Collinson, M., Parkin, D.T., Knox, A. G., Sangster, G., & Helbig, A. J. 2006. Species limits within the genus *Melanitta*, the scoters. *Brit. Birds* 99: 183–201.
- Garner, M. 2008. Common and Black Scoter. In: Garner, M. (ed.), *Frontiers in Birding*: 154–160. BirdGuides, Sheffield.
- Waring, D. 1993. Identification forum: female Black Scoter. *Birding World* 6: 78–79.

*Alexander Hellquist*

*Kungsgårdsvägen 11b, S-392 37 Kalmar, Sweden; e-mail alexhellquist@yahoo.com*

## Identification of Citrine and Yellow Wagtails – a possible identification pitfall

On 10th September 2005, on Inner Farne, Northumberland, RA heard what he thought was a Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* calling. He located the bird as it called a second time, flying towards him then circling quite low overhead. He could see the underwing pattern well and identified the bird as a first-winter Citrine Wagtail *M. citreola* based on the grey-and-white plumage, the white bar across the underwing and the slightly hoarser call compared with that of Yellow Wagtail. The bird flew off without landing, however, and was not relocated. Later that day, a first-winter Citrine Wagtail was found at Alnmouth, Northumberland, about 25 km to the south along the coast, which might possibly have been the bird seen over Inner Farne earlier in the day.

A description of the Inner Farne bird was submitted to the Northumberland and Tyneside

Bird Club and was assessed by their records committee in March 2006, prior to being sent to BBRC. Since no details of the head or upperwing pattern were supplied, however, the local committee felt that a Yellow Wagtail with a Citrine-like call could not be fully excluded and the record was not accepted.

When informed of this decision, RA drew the committee's attention to a feature that he had seen on the bird which he believed established the identification as Citrine: a fairly broad white wing-bar running more or less across the middle of the underwing which, according to Alström & Mild (2003), is diagnostic of Citrine. Alström & Mild stated (on p. 315) that: 'In all plumages, it is separated from White [*M. alba*] (except subspecies *leucopsis* and some *lugens*) and Yellow by showing a rather broad white bar along the centre of the

underwing, created by white bases of the secondaries and inner primaries (less clear-cut and slightly narrower than in Grey Wagtail [*M. cinerea*]).

This potentially diagnostic feature was new to all members of the local records committee, who then examined photographs and additional literature to establish whether Yellow Wagtail, in particular those from the eastern part of the species' range, could be fully excluded using this feature alone. Two plates in Sibley (2000), depicting Yellow Wagtail of the northeast Siberian and Alaskan breeding form *M. f. tschutschensis*, illustrate a white bar extending across the underwing, inferring that Yellow Wagtail can also show this feature. Then, on 20th April 2006, a Yellow Wagtail in an unfamiliar plumage was present at the Beehive Flash, Earsdon, Northumberland, and was photographed by several observers. One photograph showing the bird as it was about to take flight clearly shows the underwing, which features a white stripe extending across some of the underwing-coverts and pale bases to the secondaries, giving the impression of a broad underwing bar. Further evidence that Yellow Wagtail can show a white wing-bar on the underwing was provided when IF caught two juvenile Yellow Wagtails at East Chevington, Northumberland, on 16th August 2006. Photographs of the underwings of both birds clearly show a paler (whitish) base to the primaries and secondaries which, combined with the broad white tips to the underwing-coverts, gives the impression of a large white wing-bar on the underwing.

**Ian Fisher**

74 Benton Park Road, Newcastle upon Tyne NE7 7NB

**Ross Ahmed**

33 Kingsway, South Shields, Tyne and Wear NE33 3NN

**EDITORIAL COMMENT** Adam Rowlands, BBRC Chairman, commented: 'It would be very unlikely for a record of a flight-only first-winter Citrine Wagtail to be acceptable without definitive evidence of diagnostic plumage features (i.e. a convincing photograph of the head pattern). Such evidence would clearly make a very good candidate for the Carl Zeiss Award! There is a precedence for a virtually flight-only adult (the male at Salthouse, Norfolk, on 24th April 2004, which was seen only briefly on the ground, had much of the plumage detail confirmed in flight views), but it is clear that first-winters provide an even greater challenge than spring adults in this respect.'



22. Adult male Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*, showing the underwing pattern, Israel, March 2006.

The Inner Farne record was reviewed, but both the local committee and BBRC felt that it was still not acceptable as a Citrine Wagtail. Clearly, it would appear that Yellow Wagtails can show a whitish bar across the middle of the underwing, perhaps not dissimilar to that shown by Citrine Wagtail in some cases. Further observations by birders at home and abroad would help to clarify whether this feature is shown consistently by all Yellow Wagtails, or whether it occurs only in certain races or age categories.

#### Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Bob Proctor and Mike Hodgson for commenting on an earlier draft of this note and the Northumberland and Tyneside Bird Club Records Committee for valuable discussions. We also thank Colin Bradshaw and BBRC for allowing IF to read the BBRC file on this bird.

#### References

- Alström, P., & Mild, K. 2003. *Pipits and Wagtails of Europe, Asia and North America*. Christopher Helm, London.  
 Sibley, D. 2000. *The North American Bird Guide*. Pica Press, Robertsbridge.