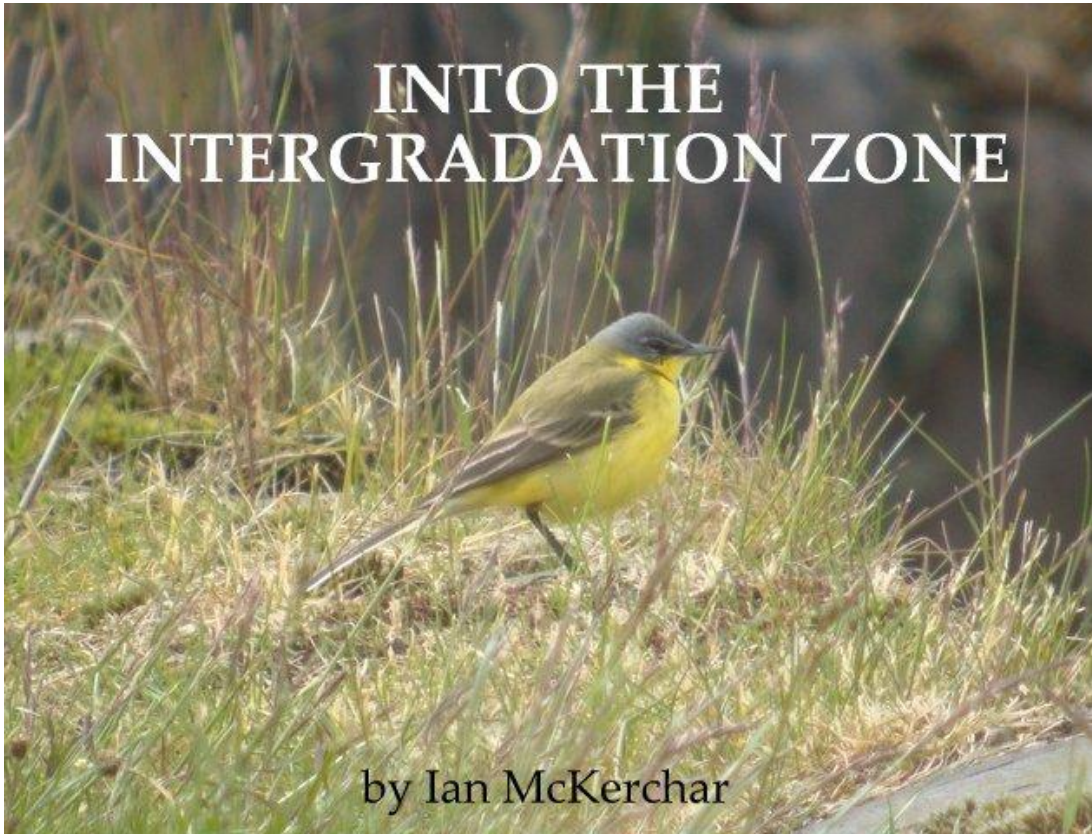


INTO THE INTERGRADATION ZONE



On the 15th May 2012, Brian Fielding found an interesting *flava* wagtail at Elton Reservoir in Greater Manchester. Initial identification of the bird varied but by the morning of the 16th it appeared tentatively settled at being a Grey-headed Wagtail (*Motacilla flava thunbergi*) and clearly such an intriguing and potentially rare bird in the county demanded more attention. I visited the site on the 16th and eventually obtained very good views of the wagtail and though it was patently a very handsome bird indeed, closely resembling Grey-headed Wagtail, certain features seemed at odds with what I had come to expect from *thunbergi* and overall the bird fell short of my expectations. I had little doubt that the bird was in fact most probably an intergrade between Grey-headed Wagtail (*M. f. thunbergi*) and Blue-headed Wagtail (*M. f. flava*) but either way it was an excellent and energising bird to study.

The systematics of Yellow Wagtails is complicated to say the least, with considerable intergradation between the races and birds not quite fitting a particular race are common place. Indeed, according to Alstrom and Mild (2003) *thunbergi* has a 'wide zone of intergradation with *flava* in northern Europe' and I suggest that it is here the Elton Reservoir bird originates from. Yellow Wagtails seem highly dynamic in their evolution and identification of many individuals is very difficult, if not only ever speculative, due to intergradation but if we are to attempt to identify certain races then surely we should only be accepting only those which meet the full identification criteria?



Above (image by Ian McKerchar): In this image and indeed on similar field views, the bird looks all the more like a true *thunbergi*. The hue of grey on the head was an attractive slate-grey, the lores blackish-grey and the 'necklace' of conspicuous large brownish spots is apparent. The subtle features which cast doubt on its true identify require close observation though and here they are all but invisible. One can only wonder how many claims of *thunbergi* (amongst other races) nationally may lack similar close scrutiny and presumptuous identification as might be inferred from this single image.



Above (image by Ian McKerchar): Here, the features which cause concern for this individual as a pure *thunbergi* become determinable and fall into the following points: -

1. Narrow but conspicuous at close range, pale and complete supercilium running from the base of the bill to just behind the eyes.
2. Forehead and anterior ear coverts which are the same hue as the rest of the head and thus too pale for *thunbergi*.
3. Small pale area on the ear coverts just below the eye.
4. Incomplete white lower eyerings.



Above (images by Ivan Ellison): the pro-intergrade features of the head show well again here. The lores were clearly the darkest part of the birds 'face', being blackish-grey but in true *thunbergi* it is never as restricted, spilling onto the forehead and more rearward on the ear coverts. This, along with the presence of the pale supercilium, lower eye ring and mark on the ear coverts, seem to be clear *flava* characteristics. The grey hue of the crown and nape appeared identical to that expected on *thunbergi* though and clearly darker and greyer than any pure *flava*. Similarly, the dark 'necklace' too fits *thunbergi* well.



Above (image by Dennis Atherton): the conspicuous dark brownish 'necklace' of spotting is well portrayed here and merges to form a large area in the centre of the breast.



Above (image by Adrian Dancy): In the end, this wagtail falls short of being a pure *thunbergi*. Though clearly portraying some features of that race, other features which can be attributed to *flava* are also present and should clearly not be present on any *thunbergi*. None of this detracts from just what an attractive or educational bird this was of course, nor that was it anything but ordinary and so very well worth seeing and documenting.

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to photographers Dennis Atherton, Adrian Dancy and Ivan Ellison who worked hard to procure the images utilised in this article.

References

Alstrom, P., Mild, K. 2003. *Pipits and Wagtails of Europe, Asia and North America*. Helm.

Ian McKerchar, May 2012

manchesterbirding.com



Apparent Grey-headed x Blue-headed Wagtail hybrid, Elton Reservoir, Greater Manchester, May 2012 (Ian McKerchar)