

Turvey Wagtails

This is prompted by a recent article in the Guardian highlighting the decline of all three British breeding wagtail: the Pied, the Grey and the Yellow.

My first introduction to the Pied wagtail was on an airport parking area where two were typically dashing around after insects attracted by the hot tarmac, with tails wagging and bills clicking. My introduction to the fact that our British subspecies is quite distinct from the European race took place a few years later where both species were busy chasing insects on a stretch of city turf in Norway - the black-capped and black-backed 'British' subspecies and the greyer European 'White' Wagtail. We occasionally get both together here in Bedfordshire, especially on spring migration when the birds head north. Pied Wagtails are also notable for congregating in the slightly warmer centres of towns and cities during the winter nights, sometimes numbering several hundred. Small groups pass over Turvey on autumn migration southwards, their 'chirrup' call giving them away from a distance. A pair bred over the chapel door a few years ago but, alas, not since and there's been a decline in breeding birds of at least 11% since 1995.

The Grey Wagtail also occurs in Turvey and has bred by the mill on the Ouse in the past. It's a delightful mix of yellow and white below and grey-blue above, while the male has a magnificent black throat. It's also an insect feeder and is usually found on fast flowing streams and mill-races where it either flycatches or runs after its prey. It also haunts the Turvey sewage farm and in winter comes to our lichen-clad roofs where insects remain in the more sheltered spots. It too has decreased, this time by as much as 32% since 1995.

Lastly, my favourite wagtail the Yellow. This still clings on in the neighbouring arable fields, which was a great surprise to me when I first came to Turvey having always associated them with wet meadows on the south coast. Some ten or so years ago singing birds could be readily located in fields of Field Beans or even Winter Wheat, and given away by their sweet song and vivid yellow breasts. This race too, like the Pied, is almost unique to Britain. Other races of Yellow Wagtail are mostly without the full yellow head. Our nearest neighbouring Yellow Wagtail, in France, having a Blue head with a white eyestripe. These can turn up in Bedfordshire on migration and have been known to interbreed with the Yellow. There is then a cline of colours eastwards and southwards through Europe ending up with both Grey and Black-headed birds.

When I first saw a British Yellow Wagtail I couldn't believe we had such exotic birds in Britain. They associate with cattle on migration just as in their sub-equatorial wintering grounds in Africa they associate with such herbivores as Wildebeest and Zebra, rushing in between their legs to grab insects as soon as they are disturbed. September is the time to see small flocks of these birds among the cattle in Abbey Park. Sadly they too have declined, by as much as 43% since 1995.

All three species seem to be in decline because of agricultural change, particularly through the extensive use of chemicals to control weeds and insects, and also the intensity of land management which gives little time and space for insects and birds to breed. The Yellow Wagtail may also be suffering from habitat change on its wintering grounds in Africa. So, make the most of them while they are here.