

European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster* and Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*: the first records for Seychelles

Adrian Skerrett

Un Guêpier d'Europe *Merops apiaster* a été observé le 28 novembre 1998 à North Island, Cosmoledo, un atoll inhabité et isolé dans le sud-ouest de l'archipel des Seychelles. Ceci constitue la première mention de cette espèce soumise au Comité d'Homologation Seychellois (SBRC) et acceptée par celui-ci; une observation non confirmée de deux oiseaux à Aldabra, en avril 1974, a toutefois été découverte récemment. Une Bergeronnette citrine *Motacilla citreola*, observée le 16 avril 1999 à Frégate, l'île des Seychelles située le plus à l'est, constitue également la première mention de l'espèce soumise au SBRC et acceptée. La présence du Guêpier d'Europe peut s'expliquer par les patterns de migration, mais celle de la Bergeronnette citrine est plus surprenante vu sa rareté en Afrique, avec seulement une mention antérieure au sud de l'équateur.

European Bee-eater

In November 1998, BirdLife International's Rare Bird Club visited Seychelles for the first time. I led the party for their visit to the most remote islands, the atolls of Aldabra and Cosmoledo.

Aldabra and Cosmoledo are raised coral atolls within the south-west Seychelles, at c10°S 47°E. They are rarely visited due to difficulties of access, including not just time and expense, but also a shortage of boats that are capable of reaching the islands, accommodating guests and suitable for landing visitors on surf beaches. Aldabra has a small population, based at its Research Station, and sometimes hosts visits by cruise ships and other vessels. However, few people ever visit the uninhabited atoll of Cosmoledo. The arrival in Seychelles, in 1998, of a live-aboard vessel, the *Indian Ocean Explorer*, provided the means required for the Rare Bird Club to seize a rare opportunity.

Having spent several days at Aldabra, we sailed overnight to Cosmoledo. Dawn arrives in Aldabra later than in the main islands of Seychelles and we landed shortly after first light, at c07.45 hr, on North Island, on 25 November 1998. Shortly after our arrival, I was with three members of the group when one, Stephen Eccles, called that he had seen a bee-eater in flight.

Before attempting to gather the rest of the party, I told the members of our splinter group that it would almost certainly be a Blue-cheeked Bee-eater *Merops persicus*, recorded as a vagrant, throughout Seychelles, on 12 occasions. Alternatively, there was a possibility of Madagascar Bee-eater *Merops superciliosus*, which

had not been eliminated in some bee-eater reports submitted to Seychelles Bird Records Committee (SBRC). Madagascar Bee-eater appeared a strong candidate, given that we were less than 300 km north of Madagascar and the possible movement of some individuals between Madagascar and the African mainland. Indeed SBRC has created a category of accepted record 'Madagascar/Blue-cheeked Bee-eater' as a repository for such indeterminate records until a clearer picture emerges.

I advised my group that if it returned we should check the crown colour in particular, bright grass green and concolorous with the upperparts in Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, and brown contrasting with a duller green back in Madagascar Bee-eater. This entirely useless information spread sufficient confusion for me to be able to gather the entire group, return and claim credit for identifying the bird, now perched in the open, as what was obviously a European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*. It was observed, at 40–60 m, as it hawked for insects, catching many large crickets, and perching mainly on branches of sisal, sometimes beating a cricket against a branch. The dense undergrowth prevented closer approach.

Description

A large graceful bee-eater with long wings and pointed central tail feathers. Chestnut cap and mantle, and yellow lower back and rump. Throat yellow, outlined with black and rest of underparts turquoise. In flight, the underwing was observed to be greyish rufous. Upperwing green on outer half, rufous on inner half. The individual appeared to be in fine condition,



European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*, Aldabra, Seychelles, 25 November 1998 (Tasso Leventis)

despite its lengthy ocean crossing, the brightness of the plumage suggesting an adult, probably a male, though we were unable to sex it with certainty.

Distribution

European Bee-eater breeds from south Europe and North Africa east to Kazakhstan, wintering principally in sub-Saharan Africa, with smaller numbers in West Africa¹. There is also a small South African breeding population. Vagrants have reached as far afield as Madagascar, in November 1996². Its occurrence in the Aldabra group is perhaps unsurprising for a species performing migrations of 8,000 km or more.

First accepted record

Details were submitted to SBRC and the record accepted. Subsequently, Michael Betts, Warden of Aldabra, discovered a record card in the archives of the Research Station of two European Bee-eaters at Aldabra in April 1974. No description was appended, but SBRC hopes to trace at least one of the observers for verification. It appears probable that such a distinctive species was identified correctly.



Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*, Frégate, Seychelles, 16 April 1999 (Adrian Skerrett)

Citrine Wagtail

One of the considerable perks of travel writing is the occasional opportunity to sample the tourist lifestyle without actually paying for it. So it was that on 16 April 1999, with my wife and daughter, having inspected the recently constructed five-star facilities on Frégate Island for a new guidebook, we settled into our seats on the veranda of the Plantation House Restaurant to enjoy a five-star meal. With those agonising choices over the mouth-watering delicacies on offer dispensed with, it was time for a little fantasy. I gazed at the island owner's US\$25 million yacht anchored in the harbour, the type of transport I regarded as normal. I laughed in the face of hotel bills of US\$1,000 per night and regularly quaffed vintage wine at a similar price per bottle.

It was my wife who dragged me back to reality, pointing out a wagtail on the lawn. Now this really was interesting! I reached for my binoculars, knowing that White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*, Grey Wagtail *M. cinerea* and at least three races of Yellow Wagtail *M. flava* had been recorded as vagrants to Seychelles. However, this did not appear to be any of those

species. My instant reaction was Citrine Wagtail, though I had never seen this species before, based on a hazy recollection of books depicting a combination of grey upperparts, yellow head and underparts, white vent and broad, double wing-bars. Initially I had nagging doubts concerning yellow-headed races of Yellow Wagtail, notably *lutea* (recorded in Seychelles) and *flavissima* (not recorded and unlikely, as it winters principally in West Africa). Between starter, main course, dessert and coffee, I stalked it on hands and knees for photographs, much bemusing the other diners, making notes and completely blowing my cover as a visiting 'fat cat'.

Description

Typical wagtail shape, but tail much shorter than Grey Wagtail, although difficult to quantify, on a lone bird, whether different in length to Yellow Wagtail. Stance appeared more horizontal, less upright, than Yellow Wagtail and tail-wagging much more frequent than latter. Uniform ash-grey mantle, rump and uppertail-coverts, with a hint of brown; ash-grey crown and ear-coverts, with some brown admixed. No hint of olive on any of these areas. Broad yellow supercilium encircled ear-coverts to meet yellow throat and underparts. Yellow brightest on head and upper breast, paler below, with undertail whitish, washed greyish brown on flanks and breast-sides. Pale lores and pale yellowish-white forehead. Broad double white wing-bars. Tertials also edged white. Blackish tail with white outer tail feathers. Bill blackish. Long, blackish legs. Buoyant, undulating flight. Call in flight, a harsh, monosyllabic *tseep*.

Grey Wagtail was easily eliminated on the basis of the double white wing-bars, obvious even at rest, while the undertail was much paler than the rest of underparts and the tail much shorter than that species. Yellow Wagtail could be eliminated on the basis of the concolorous ash-grey upperparts, including

rump/uppertail; the underparts not as uniformly yellow as in Yellow Wagtail; the striking head pattern, as no race of Yellow possesses such a broad supercilium encircling the ear-coverts; Yellow lacks a pale forehead, which was obvious in this individual; and the wing-bars were broad and white, without any hint of yellow as in Yellow Wagtail.

Distribution

Citrine Wagtail breeds from central Europe to Central Asia, wintering principally in the Indian subcontinent and south-east Asia. There are few African records, mainly from the north, though it may be overlooked in north-east Africa³, and there is a remarkable record from South Africa, in May–June 1998. This last record and three from Australia are probably instances of reverse migration⁴. They are also the only other Southern Hemisphere occurrences, apart from that on Seychelles.

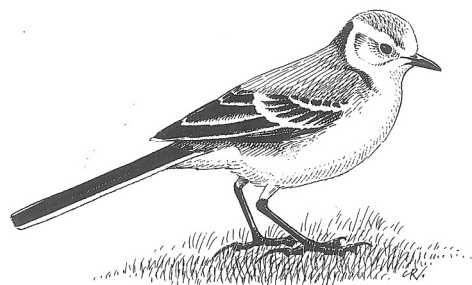
First accepted record

The record has now been accepted by SBRC as a female Citrine Wagtail, probably adult, and the first record for Seychelles. I may not have the pleasure of owning a US\$25 million yacht, but a five-star sighting such as this is something money cannot buy. ☺

References

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3. Schollaert, V. 1998. Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola* in Ethiopia and its status in Africa. *Bull. ABC* 5: 129–130.
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Hazeley Brook, Keele Road, Keele, Staffordshire ST5 5AL, UK.



Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*
by Craig Robson