



Latin Name *Motacilla cinerea*

What do they look like?

The Grey Wagtail is not a good name for this brightly coloured bird for, although it has blue slate grey upper parts with black wings, beneath it has a bright yellow breast and rump. The adults have a prominent white eyebrow (the proper name for this is a supercilium), a white moustache and outer tail feathers. It's legs are pink-brown colour and it's bill is grey-black.

The summer plumage of the males is brighter than the females, they also have a black throat. In the winter, the male's yellow breast becomes paler and the black throat less distinct. This winter plumage is very similar to the female's appearance all year round.

Juveniles are similar to the female but the lower bill and throat are pink-buff coloured and they lack the black throat.

The Grey Wagtail has the longest tail of the wagtails and like the others its tail is wagged continually, hence the name. The long tail is important in helping it change direction quickly in the air whilst trying to catch it's food.

How rare are they?

Grey Wagtails have gradually increased their range in the past 150 years and in the UK have expanded into the English lowlands from the northern and western uplands. They do not cope well in harsh winters, and because recently there has been a moderate decline in numbers it is now on the Amber List. If you click on [Amber](#) on the top of the page you will find out what this means.

Where do they live in Healey Dell?



Photograph © Steve Robinson

The Grey Wagtail does not migrate from one part of the world to another to breed but in some places in the British Isles those that breed in upland areas migrate to eastern lowland areas for the winter (this is called altitudinal migration).

However, in Healey Dell you will be able to see them all the year round. In both the summer and the winter they like to live by fresh flowing water (rivers and streams) in the neighbouring woodland and by the waterside shingle or rocks. They also love man-made structures such as bridge supports and waterside ruins and so you will have a very good chance of seeing them all over the Dell. You may even see them in wet ditches along the viaduct.



Photograph © Paul Burrows

Vital Statistics

Eggs: 4-6
Incubation: 11-14 days
Maximum lifespan: 7 years
Length: 18-19cm
Wingspan: 25-27cm
Weight: 14-22g
UK breeding: 38,000 pairs



What do they eat?

They eat insects such as midges and ants, which is why they like to be near water where there are plenty of them to catch. They also like to eat water snails and tadpoles, which they take from the shallow pools you will see all round the Nature reserve.

What do they sound like?

They have a very distinctive high 'tzi-tzi' call; a quiet trilling song. To hear and see them follow the link from the red button or copy the link into a web browser. <http://www.rspb.org.uk/birds/guide/g/greywagtail/gallery.asp>



Where do they nest?

Grey Wagtails usually nest near shallow, fast-flowing streams, waterfalls, mill-races, lakes and canals. They build their nests out of twigs, grass, roots and moss in hollows or crevices either on the ground or high up in the rocks and walls. The nests are lined with hair and feathers.

The female lays four to six eggs. These are smooth, glossy and creamy-coloured with grey-buff spots.

She incubates them by herself for between 11 to 14 days. After the young hatch, they are fed by both parents but within 13 to 14 days they are ready to leave the nest.



Photograph © Merseyside Ringing Group



Photograph © Merseyside Ringing Group

Sources

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/>
<http://www.hlasek.com/> Has pictures of wag tail eggs
<http://www.garden-birds.co.uk/>
<http://www.bto.org/birdtrends2004/wcrgrewa.htm>
<http://www.davidnorman.org.uk/> Photographs above with the kind permission of Merseyside ringing group