

## Pied Wagtails

Most of you will be familiar with Pied Wagtails – dapper little birds who walk busily around on the ground wagging their long tails. Their tail-wagging (actually not wagging from side to side like a dog but dipping up and down) has led to many nicknames, for example Willy Wagtail, Polly Wagtail and Molly Washdish. My father's version was Polly Dishwasher. In the summer they can be found mainly in farmyards, villages and by rivers and damp meadows where they nest on a handy ledge in an outbuilding, or a gap in a wall. They will also nest in places like old tractor engines and



sometimes in farm equipment that is actually in use! Pied Wagtails are also particularly fond of roofs – as they often nest in a man-made environment a roof is a suitable high place from which to sing and call. A south facing roof is also a really good place to find nice big fat flies sunbathing,

In the winter they can be found in the same kind of places, but also on beaches and bizarrely, in car parks, where they risk life and limb feeding on the ground amongst the moving cars and picking dead insects off the radiator grills.

Pied Wagtails have a very sweet little song, but you do not hear it often. They seem to establish their territories and pairings without much fuss so maybe not much song is required. More often heard is the call which they make in flight. This is usually rendered “chis-ick” – in certain birdwatching circles the Pied Wagtail is therefore nicknamed the Chiswick Flyover. (Possibly a joke only comprehensible to Londoners of a certain age!)

Our Pied Wagtail is in fact a sub-species of the White Wagtail which breeds throughout Europe. Whereas the male Pied Wagtail has an all-black back, which makes him a very smart and dapper bird, the male White Wagtail has a grey back. We see White Wagtails here in Pembrokeshire in the autumn when small flocks migrate through the area and can be seen feeding on sand-hoppers on the tideline. Unfortunately identification of females and juveniles is more difficult in the autumn and they often team up with Pied Wagtails which makes it worse! However, if you see a flock of about 10 grey and white wagtails, and there is no male with a black back, they are probably White Wagtails. It is worth noting the plumage of juvenile Pied Wagtails can be confusing – the area around the face can look distinctly yellowish.

One other feature of Pied Wagtails which makes them rather endearing is their habit of roosting communally in the winter in all kinds of strange locations, for example, inside greenhouses and factories, and in trees in the centre of shopping areas. Really it can be anywhere that is nice and warm but I suppose our local wagtails don't need to do this as it never gets very cold here! I wonder if they roost in cattle sheds – can any of the farmers out there tell me if they do?

*Rosemary Royle*