

Northern wheatear

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The **northern wheatear** or **wheatear** (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) is a small passerine bird that was formerly classed as a member of the thrush family Turdidae, but is now more generally considered to be an Old World flycatcher, Muscicapidae. It is the most widespread member of the wheatear genus *Oenanthe* in Europe and Asia.

The northern wheatear is a migratory insectivorous species breeding in open stony country in Europe and Asia with footholds in northeastern Canada and Greenland as well as in northwestern Canada and Alaska. It nests in rock crevices and rabbit burrows. All birds spend most of their winter in Africa.

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Taxonomy and systematics

This species was first described by Linnaeus in his *Systema naturae* in 1758 as *Motacilla oenanthe*.^[2] The generic name, *Oenanthe*, is also the name of a plant genus, the water dropworts, and is derived from the Greek *ainos* "wine" and *anthos* "flower", from the wine-like scent of the flowers.^[3] In the case of the wheatear, it refers to these birds' return to Greece in the spring just as the grapevines blossom.^[4]

Its English name has nothing to do with wheat or ears, but is an altered (perhaps bowdlerised) form of **white-arse**, which refers to its prominent white rump.

The following are the subspecies of northern wheatear:

- nominate *oenanthe*
- Greenland *leucorhoa*
- Seebohm's *seebohmi*
- southern *libanotica*
- Cretan *virago*
- Egyptian *rostrata*

Description

Northern wheatear



Male in breeding-plumage

Conservation status



Least Concern (IUCN 3.1)^[1]

Scientific classification

Kingdom:	Animalia
Phylum:	Chordata
Class:	Aves
Order:	Passeriformes
Family:	Muscicapidae
Genus:	<i>Oenanthe</i>
Species:	<i>O. oenanthe</i>

Binomial name

Oenanthe oenanthe

(Linnaeus, 1758)



female

The northern wheatear is larger than the European Robin at 14½–16 cm length. Both sexes have a white rump and tail, with a black inverted T-pattern at the end of the tail.

The plumage of the summer male has grey upperparts, buff throat and black wings and face mask. In autumn it resembles the female apart from the black wings. The female is pale brown above and buff below with darker brown wings. The male has a whistling, crackly song. Its call is a typical chat *chack* noise, and the flight call is the same.

Behaviour and ecology

Migration

The northern wheatear makes one of the longest journeys of any small bird, crossing ocean, ice, and desert.^[5] It migrates from Sub-Saharan Africa in



Non-breeding plumage



Male in Iceland

Spring over a vast area of the northern hemisphere that includes northern and central Asia, Europe, Greenland, Alaska, and parts of Canada.^[5] In Autumn all return to Africa, where their ancestors had wintered.^[5] Arguably, some of the birds that breed in north Asia could take a shorter route and winter in south Asia; however, their

inherited inclination to migrate takes them back to Africa.^[5]

Birds of the large, bright Greenland race, *leucorhoa*, makes one of the longest transoceanic crossings of any passerine. In spring most migrate along a route (commonly used by waders and waterfowl) from Africa via continental Europe, the British Isles, and Iceland to Greenland. However, autumn sightings from ships suggest that some birds cross the North Atlantic directly from Canada and Greenland to southwest Europe (a distance of up to 2500 km).^[6] Birds breeding in eastern Canada are thought to fly from Baffin Island and Newfoundland via Greenland, Ireland, and Portugal to the Azores (crossing 3500 km of the North Atlantic) before flying onwards to Africa.^[7] Other populations from western Canada and Alaska migrate by flying over much of Eurasia to Africa.^[5]

Miniature tracking devices have recently shown that the northern wheatear has one of the longest migratory flights known - 30,000 km (18,640 miles), from sub-Saharan Africa to their Arctic breeding grounds.^[8]

"The Alaskan birds travelled almost 15,000km (9,000 miles) each way - crossing Siberia and the Arabian Desert, and travelling, on average, 290km per day. "This is the longest recorded migration for a songbird as far as we know," said Dr Schmaljohann.^[8]



Eggs, Collection Museum Wiesbaden

Status and conservation

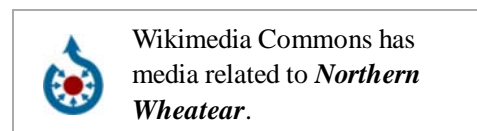
The northern wheatear has an extensive range, estimated at 2.3 million square kilometres (0.87 million square miles), and a large population estimated at 2.9 million individuals in the Old World and the Americas combined. The species is not believed to approach the thresholds for the population decline criterion of the IUCN Red List (i.e., declining more than 30% in ten years or three generations), and is therefore evaluated as Least Concern.^[1]

References

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- "Tiny songbird northern wheatear traverses the world" by Victoria Gill. *BBC Nature* 15 February 2012.[1] (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/17027565>)

External links

- Northern Wheatear videos, photos & sounds (<http://ibc.lynxeds.com/species/northern-wheatear-oenanthe-oenanthe>) on the Internet Bird Collection
- Ageing and sexing (PDF; 4.3 MB) by Javier Blasco-Zumeta & Gerd-Michael Heinze (http://aulaenred.ibercaja.es/wp-content/uploads/336_WheatearOenanthe.pdf)



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