

# Birds in the Backyard

## Wagtails



Wagtails are ground-feeding insectivorous birds, often found at the edges of streams. As might be guessed from their name, they frequently move their tails up and down. They show considerable morphological variation even within species and have been the subjects of taxonomic and phylogeographic studies.

The **White-browed Wagtail** (*Motacilla maderaspatensis*) is common and a resident breeder across most of India south of the Himalayan foothills. It has black upperparts and breast, and white underparts, wingbar, and stripe above the eye. Like the Magpie Robin featured recently, females and immatures have duller plumage than breeding males.



The **Grey Wagtail** (*Motacilla cinerea*) breeds in the Himalayas and winters in the rest of India; they reached southern India last month

(see <https://www.instagram.com/youngbirdersvalparai/>). This species has a grey head and back, brownish or dark wings and tail, and a yellow belly and vent. The breeding male has a black throat whereas wintering males and females have whitish throats.

Wintering birds may return to specific sites year after year. The Common Cuckoo (see article by R. Gadagkar in this issue) is known to parasitise grey wagtail nests on rare occasion. There have been several early studies on the foraging ecology, territory defence, and communal roosting of wagtail species, but not much work has been done on these two species.

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Grey wagtail: Shuba Bhat