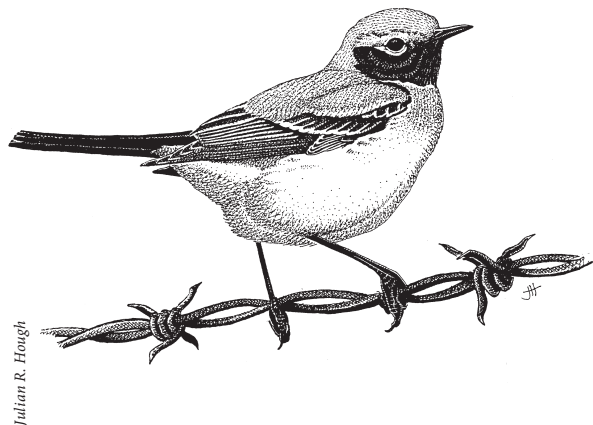


## Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti*



(Temminck, 1825). Breeds widely but discontinuously across arid and desert regions of North Africa from Morocco to Middle East, north to the south Caucasus, and across central Asia from central Iran and northern Pakistan to Mongolia and northern China. Some African birds are resident, but many winter in Sahara and Sahel region from Mauritania east to Ethiopia and Somalia. Asian breeders winter from Arabian Peninsula to north-west India.

Polytypic, four subspecies but Svensson (1992) and HBW merge *atrogularis* with *deserti* and consider only three races to be valid. British records have been attributable to three subspecies.

There is one record of *deserti* (Temminck, 1825), of the Levant, a male shot on Fair Isle on 6th October 1928. There have been four records of *homochroa* (Tristram, 1859), of North Africa, the first of which was a female shot at Spurn on 17th October 1885. There has been one record of *atrogularis* (Blyth, 1847), from the Caspian Sea and Iran east through Kazakhstan and Afghanistan to Tien Shan, Altai, and Mongolia, a male killed at Pentland Skerries, Orkney on 2nd June 1906. No other records have been attributed to race. Differences between the subspecies are largely clinal with only western race *homochroa* and eastern *oreophila* distinct, others variably intermediate (BWP). Two subspecies, *homochroa* and *deserti*, were included in the study by Aliabadian *et al* (2007) and found to be indistinguishable in DNA sequence.

Rare but increasingly regular late autumn vagrant from central Asia and North Africa.

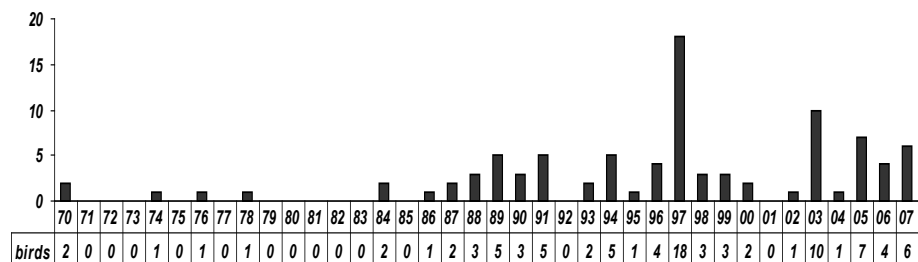


Figure 36: Annual numbers of Desert Wheatears, 1970-2007.

**Status:** A total of 108 records had been recorded by the end of 2007, 104 in Britain and four in Ireland.

**Historical review:** There were nine prior to 1950, the first a male at Gartmorn Dam, Forth, on 26th October 1880. Five of the eight that followed were in Scotland, two in East Yorkshire and one in Norfolk. Seven fell in the expected months of October and November, plus one in December. There was a spring bird in 1906, a male killed at Pentland Skerries Lighthouse, Orkney, on the very late date of 2nd June. Remarkably, a bird attempted to winter at Gorple Reservoir, West Yorkshire, from 12th November 1949 to 22nd January 1950.

*The week commencing November 7th, 1949, was a period of high winds and rain which developed into a full gale by the morning of November 12th. On this date a reservoir keeper in the Halifax area reported that on November 9th he had picked up the half-eaten remains of a Little Auk (Alle alle) and had also seen "a wheatear." The latter bird, he said, had been about the reservoir embankment for several days and showed no inclination to continue its migration. I visited the reservoir on the following day expecting to see perhaps a late Greenland Wheatear, but failed to see the bird, although within an hour of my departure the keeper saw it again.*

*No further reports were received, and it was not until December 18th, when A. M. and P. C. A., both junior members of the Halifax Zoological Group (now the Ornithological section of Halifax Scientific Society), visited the reservoirs that they learned from the keeper that the wheatear was still present. They soon located it on the reservoir embankment feeding on insects, but unfortunately it was standing with its back towards them and took flight while they were still some distance away. However, they noticed through their field-glasses that the rear plumage pattern consisted of a buff-white rump and an almost completely black tail, instead of the normal pure white rump and black tail with half white outer tail-feathers of the Common Wheatear. While these two boys were having lunch in the keeper's house, and unknown to them, R. C. (also of the junior H.Z.G.) arrived and located the bird himself. He was fortunate enough to see the bird at close range and at once noticed its black face and throat and also the tail pattern and light markings on the closed wing. He then met the others, and together they took very full notes and made numerous sketches throughout the remainder of the daylight hours. That same evening they consulted The Handbook and came to the conclusion that the bird was a Desert-Wheatear, then brought the sketches and notes for me to see. These were sufficiently accurate for me to say conclusively that the bird was indeed one of the forms of Desert-Wheatear, so the following day (December 19th) A. M. and I visited the reservoir and had excellent views of the bird from a few feet distance and often up to the focusing limit of the x 9 binoculars.*

*A few days later Mr. R. S. R. Fitter was able to add his confirmation to the record on December 24th. The bird was seen between Christmas and New Year by several members of the Yorkshire Naturalists' Union, and also by P. A. D. Hollom, but while the bird was definitely established as a Desert-Wheatear, it was obviously impossible to determine the subspecies without first procuring the bird. Two methods of doing this were open to choice*