

Observer Name	Michael Slater
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Address	Street Address: 4411 New Holland RD City: Mohnton State / Province: PA Postal / Zip Code: 19540 Country: United States
Other observers who saw the bird	Ken Lebo, Matt Wlasniewski, Matt Spence, Jim Eckert, Jarrod, Derr, Chuck Chalfant, plus many more.
Species (Common Name)	Northern Wheatear
Species (Scientific Name)	Oenanthe oenanthe
Subspecies (if known)	
Number of individuals	1
Have you submitted this to eBird?	
Age(s) and Plumage(s) and Sex (if known)	Adult female
Observation Date and Time	10-04-2012 10:30 AM
Location (City, Borough, Township)	Reading PA
Exact Site (E.g. Name of park, lake, road)	Between Franklin St and Chestnut St along the railroad tracks on the campus of RACC
GPS coordinates of sighting	40.3344174,-75.9356233
Habitat	little used railroad track (single track) with a lot of bare gravel and many weedy plants. next to a student parking lot at the Community College.
Distance to bird	varied, I probably was within 30 feet when I first saw it naked eye during the fire drill. Most of my observations were from a distance of 50 to 100'.
Viewing conditions	clear and Sunny
Optical equipment used	Alpen 7x35 bins and then several spotting scopes belonging to

other people, models unknown.

Description

The overall color was light brown, the breast was pale buff and the top of the head and the back were light brown. The bill and legs were black. There was a dark line from the gape of the bill through to slightly behind the eye. The eyes were black. The secondary and tertiary feathers of the wings were black with broad buffy edges. The primaries appeared dark with pale tips.

Photos attached by Ken Lebo, Chuck Chalfant, Jarrod Derr and Russ Hoffman.

Behavior (be as detailed as possible about what the bird was doing)

It would hop down from a low perch and search on the ground among the low annual weeds for insects. It usually caught something in a minute or two. On photo show it with a field cricket in its bill. It would eat its catch and then fly to a low perch on a discarded railroad tie, gravel pile or low branch in an Ailanthus tree. Occasionally it ate two insects before preening. It would sit for 15 or 20 minutes (presumably to let its meal digest a little, and then forage again. It was always in the on block long section of the tracks.

Separation from similar species (How you eliminated others)

The white rump and inverted black "T" pattern of the tail eliminated all other local birds of similar size and shape. The behavior on open ground and buffy breast lacking any dark marking or spots separates it from all other thrushes.

The following is the Article I wrote for my regular column about the sighting for the Reading Eagle (May be going behind a paywall soon): [Link-
http://berkscountry.readingeagle.com/rare-bird/](http://berkscountry.readingeagle.com/rare-bird/)

Discussion – anything else relevant to the observation that will aid the committee in evaluating it:

Text of Article:

On Thursday, Oct. 4, I was working at Reading Area Community College in Berks Hall when the fire alarm sounded around 11:30 a.m.

So I joined staff and students who grabbed their things and headed for the stairs. I was at the south end of the building due to a recent office relocation and headed south across Franklin Street into the south parking lot, which I rarely use. As I waited for the "all clear" to return to work, I strolled over to the railroad tracks that cross RACC's campus to look for butterflies among some blooming white asters.

A northern wheatear spotted on the campus of Reading Area

Community College. The sighting is rare for this area. That's when I noticed a bird on the gravel between the rails about 30 feet away. The way it crouched it didn't look like any bird I expected to see in the city and my internal "bird alarm" began to tingle a little bit. Lacking binoculars, I slowly walked toward it. The bird took off and flew up to the top of the fence by Schuylkill Hall. I could see it was a brownish bird, smaller than a robin sporting a white rump. The tail had a broad black band and there was a black stripe running partway up its center. "Wow," I thought. I was pretty sure only one bird in eastern North America has that tail pattern - a northern wheatear. So here I was standing in a parking lot at work looking at only the third wheatear of my life without binoculars or camera.

A northern wheatear grabs a cricket meal on the campus of Reading Area Community College. Northern wheatears nest on the arctic tundra, above the tree limit, and their nesting range is nearly circumpolar. Their main range is northern Asia and Europe, but over thousands of years since the end of the Ice Age they have spread eastward from Siberia into Alaska and northwestern Canada, and westward from Scandinavia into Greenland and the eastern part of arctic Canada.

But there is a gap between the ranges. The eastern Canadian and western Canadian birds do not meet. Most wheatears migrate to Africa for the winter. A recent tracking study with miniature radios confirmed the wheatears from Alaska and the Yukon fly west across Asia and down into eastern Africa for the winter. The Greenland and Baffin Island wheatears fly east across the Atlantic to Europe and winter in western Africa. They are true globetrotters.

Every year a few wheatears appear in southern Canada and the eastern U.S., where they are eagerly sought by birders. When they come south they avoid trees, preferring gravelly places where they can find insects, usually along the seashore but sometimes inland, too.

I got on my cellphone and called Ken Lebo from the Baird Ornithological Club. Ken is the go-to guy for rare bird sightings in Berks County and he swung into action. He texted a number of birders who have asked to be on his rare bird alert list, then called Drew Weber, a coordinator for E-Bird, and

asked him to put an email alert out on the PA-birds email list. Ken arrived at RACC about noon with binoculars and we found the bird about 50 feet farther down the tracks. It was quite brown above and fawn colored below, indicating it was an adult female. After about 20 minutes Ken went home to get his camera and I kept an eye on it as it alternately hunted and rested along the tracks. Local birders who had gotten the alert then started to arrive.

Matt Spence and Matt Wlasniewski arrived and got good looks. Ken returned with his camera and got some pictures to document the sighting, which turned out to be only the fifth documented sighting of a northern wheatear in the state, according to the Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee. And no reports of wheatears are listed in *A Century of Bird Life in Berks County*, edited by Reading Eagle photo editor and columnist Bill Uhrich. The most recent nearby sighting, also a female, was near Lickdale in Lebanon County on Oct. 7, 2011. That bird stayed around for several days. The first northern wheatear I ever saw was at Cape May, N.J., on Sept. 27, 1981.

While we watched, we saw the bird catch and eat an insect about every 15 or 20 minutes. We saw it eat a grasshopper and a field cricket. Between meals it rested on a gravel pile. It was mostly on the ground along the tracks or perched on a rock, fallen branch or gravel pile. The area didn't look much like Baffin Island to me, but the bird seemed right at home in south Reading on the RACC campus. It was last seen about 6:30 p.m. and I know of at least 20 birders who rushed to Reading to see it, including some from as far away as Downingtown, Philadelphia, State College and Lancaster.

We hoped it would stay around for a few days like the one in Lebanon, but it was last seen at dusk on Thursday and was nowhere to be seen Friday morning.

There were a number of disappointed birders, but without modern technology I would have been unable to share my discovery and even fewer people would have seen it.

Why are they called wheatears? According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, the name is probably derived from the colloquial *"white-arse"*, referring to their bright white rumps, and evolved into wheat-ear over time. The first recorded use of the word *"wheatear"* was in 1591, so

people in Europe have been watching wheatears for a long time and I was lucky enough to spot one here in Reading, too. â ,

Mike Slater is a naturalist who lives in Brecknock Township, where he is an active member of the Mengel Natural History Club of Berks County and the Muhlenberg Botanic Society of Lancaster. He is also a member of the Baird Ornithological Club. Reach him at paplantings@gmail.com.

Are you positive of your identification ? (Why or why not)	yes, the tail pattern and all the other details fit perfectly with the books descriptions and pictures. This was the third Northern Wheatear I have seen. The first was at Cape May on September 27, 1981 and the 2nd was last year at Lickdale in Lebanon County.
During	Internet,
After	Sibley Guide, National Geographic Field guide to birds.
Supporting evidence (check all that apply)	Photograph