

Photo Quiz

by
Bob Curry



It's clear from the pointed, finely proportioned bill that our small to moderate-sized bird is not a sparrow. It could be a warbler, but the entire bird seems rather long and slender with a rather too long tail; and also the wings are long, extending rather farther down the tail than in the Parulinae. The habitat, apparently a man-made breakwater or

berm of boulders, seems wrong for most warblers although a few which are similar to this bird such as Palm could be in such a situation. A clue is to closely examine the feet. The hind toe and claw, especially on the right foot in the photo bird, can be seen to be extremely long. Only the pipits among our birds combine the fine bill, slender

proportions and long hindclaw. Of course, in life, the family could easily be established by the bird's habit of pumping its tail and walking. Without such cues, we are compelled to a closer examination.

Two species of pipits are on the Ontario checklist and a third has occurred in Canada and is not a complete impossibility in our province so, being the careful birders that we are, we must carefully eliminate two species. Once again we are handicapped, as vocalizations can be diagnostic distinguishers.

All the pipits have varying amounts of streaking above and below, and varying amounts of white in the tail feathers. Certainly this bird has white on the outer web of the leftmost rectrix but, unless the bird flies (in this case the bird will outwait us!), we cannot determine whether this is the extent of white or whether it extends to one or two full feathers on each side of the tail. Moreover, species identification is better determined by other features.

Could it be a Sprague's Pipit belying its normal furtive behaviour of skulking in the grass? Sprague's is an overall light sandy bird with an especially light-toned back. Admittedly the photo bird is lit from the left and the back is in shadow, but it nevertheless seems a uniformly dark shade but with several broad dark streaks. Sprague's has the crown and nape heavily and boldly streaked, but on the aforementioned light sandy ground colour. The brown-centred back feathers are edged in light buff, reminiscent of the appearance of two other grassland birds, Baird's and Buff-breasted Sandpipers, and quite unlike American Pipit. Sprague's has a rather plain face with less well defined auricular patch and

eyestripe and no blackish malar mark, contrary in all these respects to this bird. The plainer, lighter appearance is reinforced by an absence of flank streaking which this bird possesses. Finally, Sprague's Pipit has light yellowish-pink legs and feet. Don't rush to the phone just yet.

The Red-throated Pipit is annual in small numbers on the west coast of North America and it has been recorded in British Columbia. It breeds across Eurasia and into Alaska and should be kept in mind during the autumn here. In first basic plumage, probably the most likely to occur as a distant vagrant, there is no reddish or rust in the throat but the entire breast ground colour is a rich buff, boldly streaked with black. The upperparts are black streaked, more finely on the crown and rump. The back has alternate broad buffy and black streaks. Our bird is plain-crowned and, streaks notwithstanding, too uniformly dark on the back, and the breast streaks, while quite distinct, are just not bold or black enough. Finally, Red-throated Pipit has light pinkish legs.

So why didn't I cut to the chase and say the other two species have light legs and American Pipit has dark legs? Because, first basic birds often have pale legs. I can't personally recall seeing light legs on an American Pipit, probably because the vast majority are seen and identified in flight, but it is a reason for examining them more closely in future. It would appear that the photo bird is in winter plumage as the tertials are broadly edged in off-white and there is a black patch at the side of the neck.

Until quite recently, ornithologists considered the circumpolar Water Pipit (*Anthus spinoletta*) to be one species, consisting of several distinct allopatric

(geographically separate) subspecies. Now, however, three species are recognized. Both the Rock Pipit (*A. petrosus*) and the Water Pipit (*A. spinoletta*) are western Eurasian short-distance migrants, and as such are unlikely to reach Ontario. The so-called American Pipit (*A. rubescens*) has two subspecies, one of which (*japonicus*) breeds right across Siberia. Thus, the

appellation Buff-bellied Pipit now used in some guides and birding circles may eventually be officially accepted for this bird.

Two good references for pipit identification are:

- King, B.* 1981. The field identification of North American pipits. *American Birds* 35: 778-788.
Jonsson, L. 1992. *Birds of Europe*. Christopher Helm Ltd., London.

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Editors' Note:

This **American Pipit** was photographed at Bronte, Ontario in January 1983 by Bill Crins.

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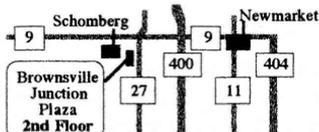
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