

April's mystery species presents a real identification challenge. It is impossible to detect the bird's coloration or to see any pattern that may exist on the bird's underparts. Careful scrutiny of the characteristics that are visible reveals that the bird has a very thin and pointed bill, a faint suggestion of an eye ring, extensively white outer tail feathers (note especially the left rectrix), extensive pale margins on the folded tertial feathers, and a faintly streaked back.

Using the slender bill as an starting point for analysis, it is possible to dismiss immediately most seed-eating species, such as sparrows and finches, as candidates. Likewise, the presence of white outer tail feathers and the fineness of the bill eliminate will species of eastern thrushes. Thus, the options are quickly limited to only a few other bird families. Foremost of these would seem to be a warbler of some type. Fortunately, because the bird's outer left rectrix is visibly white along its entire outer edge, it is possible to eliminate all of the eastern wood-warblers. Many warblers possess white in the tail in one configuration or another, but none have entirely white outer tail feather edges. Nor do North American warblers exhibit the wide, pale tertial edges shown by the mystery bird. This characteristic is actually more typical of certain small flycatchers—a group that can be discounted by the bird's posture, small head, and thin bill. These same pale feather edges, along with the streaks on the back, also remove the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher as a possibility despite the pictured bird's white-bordered dark tail and thin eye ring.

Having eliminated these species as identification candidates, the only remaining viable possibility is that the bird in the photograph is a pipit of some type. Until December 1988 when a Sprague's Pipit appeared in Provincetown for a first state record, the Water Pipit was the only pipit species to be expected in Massachusetts. Indeed, the mystery bird's white outer tail feathers, pale-margined tertials, faintly streaked back, and thin bill all serve to identify the bird as a Water Pipit, *Anthus spinoletta*. A corresponding view of Sprague's Pipit would reveal a scaly back, a pale face and larger eye, and a finely striped crown.

This photo of an immature Water Pipit was taken in August in Colorado.



Photo by Wayne R. Petersen

## AT A GLANCE

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Photo by Alan Bennett



Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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