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SPRAGUE'S PIPIT OVERWINTERS AT APALACHICOLA, FRANKLIN COUNTY, AND AN ASSESSMENT OF ITS WINTER STATUS IN FLORIDA AND NEARBY STATES

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Sprague's Pipit (*Anthus spragueii*) has been observed about 40 times in Florida, most frequently in November, and most frequently along the Florida Panhandle coast (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992; Stevenson and Anderson 1994; H. M. Stevenson, unpubl., TTRS archives). The most frequently reported locality is the St. George Causeway, Franklin County, in the eastern Florida Panhandle as well as inland at Lake Jackson in Leon County (Stevenson and Anderson 1994; see also Stevenson and Ogden 1965). However, the precise winter (October-April) status of Sprague's Pipit in northwest Florida is unknown. Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) state the species is a "Rare, probably regular winter visitor . . ." i.e., one to five in a day, not more than five per season, and probably reported every winter, while Stevenson and Anderson (1994) state the Sprague's Pipit is a ". . . very rare and irregular winter resident . . ." i.e., not more than one per day and one per season and less than once per year, but at least once in five years.

This paper documents observations of Sprague's Pipit at the Apalachicola Airfield (AAF), Franklin County, Florida, during each of the past four winters (1994-98), and assesses the winter status of Sprague's Pipit in Florida and nearby states, focusing on anthropogenic and natural habitats occupied by this species. The discussion includes information on sex ratios obtained from specimen data.

The AAF, formerly an Army Air Corps Airfield, was constructed in 1941 and used as a training base. The AAF is now used only for civilian purposes. Currently, about half the approximately 80-ha airfield is runway and half is dry grassland. Management for the sparse, short (8 to 13 cm) grassland is minimal: the grass is not fertilized and is only mowed between early April and late October. The grassland consisted of a mixture of grasses, forbs, and scattered prostrate cacti (*Opuntia* spp.); an appreciable amount of bare ground is exposed.

I observed three Sprague's Pipits on the AAF grassland in each of the first, third, and fourth winters, and two birds in the second winter (1995-1996). Hundreds of individuals (B. Riuc, pers. comm.) observed the Sprague's Pipit at the AAF during the last two winters (1996-1998). Extreme dates of observations are 13 November and 14 March, although greater coverage would probably yield observations beyond these dates. I also sighted two Sprague's Pipits at an outlying airfield (OLF Silverhill) of the Pensacola Naval Air Station (NAS), Baldwin County, Alabama, on 30 January 1997.

The birds usually concentrate their activities in the central portion of the AAF. Sprague's Pipits call frequently when flushed and it is usually easy to locate at least one bird.

Bird species richness and abundance on the AAF grassland during winter (November through mid-March) is low. Excluding swallows and other species flying over, I have observed only 14 bird species here during the winters of the past four years. Both mean and median numbers of species detected per trip (trip duration: 1-2.5 h; $n = 10$) is six (range: 4-10). The mean number of total individuals per trip is 49 (median: 43; range: 23-102). The most numerous species was usually the Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*); the most frequently detected species (every trip) was the Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*). Only one other Emberizid, the Vesper Sparrow (*Poocetes gramineus*), was detected during these winter trips.

In Florida and nearby states, Sprague's Pipits mostly have been detected in anthropogenic habitat such as dry, short grassland at airfields and farmland (Denton 1953, Imhof 1976, Haney et al. 1986, Post and Gauthreaux 1989, Robinson 1990, McNair and Post 1993, Stevenson and Anderson 1994). In Florida, the most frequently cited location is the St. George Causeway, Franklin County, but even at this location overwintering was confirmed during no more than three or four winters (Stevenson and Anderson 1994; H. M. Stevenson, unpubl. data, Tall Timbers Research Station archives). Few published reports exist documenting observations of Sprague's Pipits in this or other localities in northwest Florida after early winter.

The habitat, depauperate avian assemblage, and relative abundance of species at the AAF are generally similar to these features at military airfields I examined the winter of 1997-1998 in northwest Florida and in adjacent Baldwin County, Alabama (also Augusta, Georgia, at Daniel Field Airport, where the Sprague's Pipit was verified in the 1950s; see Denton 1953). The Sprague's Pipit is unlikely to be overlooked or confused with other species at airfields in the southeastern United States should an observer focus on this type of habitat.

In the 1950s, Sprague's Pipit temporarily overwintered at inland anthropogenic sites in three other southeastern states: Daniel Field Airport in Augusta, Richmond County, Georgia, from 1952 to 1957 (three winters; Denton 1953; Burleigh 1958; Haney et al. 1986; Audubon Field Notes 10:243, 1956; Audubon Field Notes 12:270, 1958; in an old field at the Savannah River Plant, Aiken County, South Carolina, 1956 to 1958 (two consecutive winters; Norris 1957, 1963); and in farmland adjacent to a prison in Shelby County, Tennessee, from 1953 to 1959 (five winters; Robinson 1990). Otherwise, the species is very rare and irregular in these states, with most observations in the coastal plain (Haney et al. 1986, Post and Gauthreaux 1989, Robinson 1990, McNair and Post 1993).

Sprague's Pipit also has temporarily overwintered in natural habitat (beach dunes) during one winter each at Cumberland Island, Georgia (1902-1903; see Denton 1953), and at St. George Island, Franklin County, Florida (1952-1953; Stevenson and Anderson 1994; H. M. Stevenson, unpubl. data, Tall Timbers Research Station archives). However, overwintering on beach dunes in northwest Florida has not been proven since 1952-1953; not a single bird has been reported in extreme northwest Florida since the 1950s, despite special search for this species since the mid-1970s in suitable habitat (Weston 1965; R. A. Duncan, *in litt.*). In Baldwin County, Alabama, two Sprague's Pipits were present in beach dunes in January 1981 (G. Jackson, *in litt.*).

A limited number of separate occurrences of Sprague's Pipit from January through March in various years (Hallman 1958; Imhof 1976; Haney et al. 1986; Stevenson and Anderson 1994; H. M. Stevenson, unpubl. data, Tall Timbers Research Station archives; G. D. Jackson, *in litt.*), may indicate temporary overwintering, in either anthropogenic or natural habitats in Florida and nearby states, occurs more frequently than confirmed cases documented or cited herein. Imhof (1976) intriguingly reports eight birds in northern Alabama from 18-26 February 1956.

Sprague's Pipits very rarely have temporarily overwintered in northwest Florida and nearby states. At least one incursion occurred simultaneously (winter 1952-1953) at inland (Shelby County, Tennessee; Augusta, Georgia) and coastal (St. George Island, Florida) localities in both natural and anthropogenic habitats. The longest documented incursions (successive winters) lasted four years in anthropogenic habitat at inland (Shelby County, Tennessee) and coastal (Apalachicola) localities. Consequently, it has not been established beyond doubt that Sprague's Pipits regularly overwinter at the Apalachicola Airfield, at what is probably the current southeast extremity of their winter range, unless further surveys establish this in the future. Temporary overwintering in northwest Florida at anthropogenic habitats may be a response to availability of suitable habitat at current or former military airfields. In contrast, temporary overwintering in natural habitats, i.e., beach dunes, has not been established beyond doubt for over 40

years, though this may have occurred in Baldwin County, Alabama, in winter 1980-81. The number of unconfirmed cases of overwintering Sprague's Pipits in either anthropogenic or natural habitats in Florida and nearby states is probably rather limited though the species has undoubtedly been overlooked, even at airfields.

The sex ratio of specimens of Sprague's Pipits is highly biased toward females (18/19, 95%) (Florida: 5 females, excluding one specimen of suspect provenance, H. M. Stevenson, unpubl. data, Tall Timbers Research Station archives; the sexed specimens are deposited at Tall Timbers Research Station, Carnegie Museum, and the Museum of Rhodesia; Georgia: 11 females, see Denton 1953; South Carolina: 2 females, 1 male, see Denton 1953, Norris 1957).

Data on differential distribution of the sexes (almost all birds are females) are consistent with occurrence data that suggests the Sprague's Pipit occurs very rarely and irregularly ("not more than one per day and one per season and less than once per year, but at least once in five years"), with occasional incursions, at the limit of its winter range in Florida and nearby states. Regular overwintering ("reported every winter") of the Sprague's Pipit has not been documented to occur in the southeastern states. The available data indicate regular overwintering, should this ever occur, is probably most likely at anthropogenic habitats (e.g., airfields) in northwest Florida and adjacent Baldwin County, Alabama.

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