

Further notes on pipit identification

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IT IS WITH SOME surprise I read Kenneth C. Parkes' contribution on pipit identification in *American Birds* (1982). May a European ornithologist, fairly familiar with the European species, give his reaction?

Parkes discusses the difficulty of separating Meadow Pipit, *Anthus pratensis*, and (Brown) Tree Pipit, *A. trivialis*, expanding what King (1981) wrote in his very useful paper. Drawing from his experience from two visits in October to St. Agnes, Isles of Scilly, England, Parkes warns—even stronger than King did—that first fall Meadow Pipits look very similar to Tree Pipits, so similar that they are easily confused.

According to Parkes, first winter Meadow Pipits differ clearly from adults as to plumage color, and color of legs.

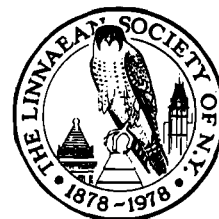
I do not agree. I have examined numerous specimens in various collections and live birds in the hand with the object of detecting any such difference which would be helpful to banders and which could have been included in my "Identification Guide to European Passerines" (1970, 1975), I have found *no reliable aging criterion* whatsoever (apart from the degree of skull ossification) in this species, and this is equally true for *A. trivialis* and the others. In the excellent "Handbook of British Birds" (Witherby *et al.* 1939-41) you read:

"First winter.—Like adult.", and in the very useful monograph by B.P. Hall (1961), nothing is said about differing first fall plumages.

In most species of the genus *Anthus*, juveniles differ *very slightly* from first winter birds and adults by being *on average* a little browner above and sometimes more yellowish below, and by having a *tendency* to be more boldly streaked. The juvenile plumage is replaced by the first winter plumage through a molt in late July to early September. After this molt, the age classes, being extremely similar before it, become inseparable in the field.

Nine times out of ten, European or-

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nithologists have no problems at all in separating Meadow and Tree Pipits thanks to the call notes. These birds call frequently, and their calls are very characteristic. Parkes dismisses the value or usefulness of calls in a fashion which I find difficult to understand. He says: "The alleged distinctiveness of calls would be useful only after one was sure one had heard both, preferably by having them pointed out by somebody who knew the calls, since the written descriptions are not much help." Which descriptions? All existing ones, or the method of rendering bird voices with letters as such?

I strongly recommend that American ornithologists who encounter any of these two European pipits concentrate on the calls initially and then make supplementary notes on plumage, leg color, behavior, etc. I will try to give written descriptions which, hopefully, Parkes will find more useful than those he has consulted before. (But in principle, King has already given adequate information.)

Meadow Pipit. When flushed utters a "nervous," often quickly repeated, clear, shrill *eest* (rendered *tsiip* in With-

erby *et al.*, loc. cit.); thus often *eest-eest-eest* when rising in hopping flight. There is no strident, hoarse quality in this call. (Only risk of confusion is with Rock/Water Pipit, *A. spinoletta*, which has a very similar call, although generally discernibly more sharp, intense and penetrating; when in doubt, check leg color: *pratensis* pinkish, *spinoletta* dark.) When more at ease, often perched, but also from flocks on migration, a lower, more quiet *pip*, again often in series, are heard, and softer variations of *eest*. Alarm is a bisyllabic *tissip* (cf. King), but this is probably only heard from breeding birds.

(Brown) Tree Pipit. When flushed or, more often, when flying over on migration, calls a somewhat drawn-out, hoarse, very characteristic *tzeeze* (or *speez*). It is never repeated quickly in series, but several calls may be heard from a bird before it has disappeared. When flocks are encountered, the calls from several birds may create the impression that the call is repeated quickly. According to various sources, and to some colleagues with personal experience, the *tzeeze* call can only be confused with Olive-backed Pipit

("Olive Tree Pipit") *A. hodgsoni*, but the call of the latter is said to be generally finer and more drawn out, approaching Red-throated Pipit, *A. cervinus*, in quality though not quite as fine and high. Alarm on breeding grounds is a monosyllabic, distinct *sip*, slowly but persistently repeated. Occasionally this call can be heard from migrating birds too.

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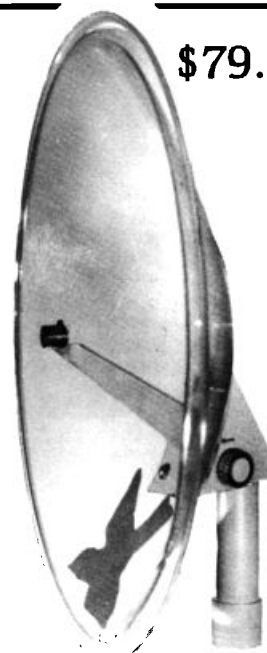
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