

**Pipits and Wagtails**, by Per Alström and Krister Mild. 2003. Princeton University Press. 496 pages, 30 color plates by Per Alström and Bill Zetterström, numerous maps and sonograms, 240 color photos. Hardback \$49.50. ISBN 0-691-08834-9.

This addition to the growing series of identification guides to bird families treats only the 18 species of pipits and 9 of wagtails recognized by the authors as occurring in the Holarctic biogeographic region (ostensibly Eurasia and North America). The title is thus misleading, in that the book does not treat about half of the world's species of the Motacillidae. This approach, however, has advantages over the commoner one of including all of the world's species in a given family, despite an author's lack of familiarity with many species. And the authors of *Pipits and Wagtails* have spent many years studying this group of birds, rather than deciding one day that they'd simply like to write a book. As a consequence, *Pipits and Wagtails* stands virtually alone in this recent series: it is authoritative, well written, and full of literature citations. It should be a model for any future works in this genre.

The introduction includes a discussion of materials and methods, color maps of geographic regions and habitats, and helpful discussions of voice transcriptions and sonograms, age criteria, and taxonomy. Molt terminology is confusing, however, and includes "first adult"—a seemingly redundant term for a first-year plumage indistinguishable from adult plumage. Following the detailed and sometimes thought-provoking introduction come the 30 color plates (18 of pipits, 12 of wagtails); facing-page captions summarize identifying criteria. The meat of the book is the species accounts, which follow the color plates. Species accounts include sections addressing identification, description, geographical variation, measurements, wing formula, systematics, molt, ageing, sexing, voice, behavior, distribution, and habitat. Color maps show breeding and nonbreeding ranges, and numerous sonograms illustrate variation in songs and calls. The book concludes with a section of (almost too small) color photos (annotated with location and date), an appendix listing details of publication date and type locality for all taxa covered, a bibliography, and separate indexes for English and scientific names.

In North America we deal mainly with two species, the American Pipit (called Buff-bellied Pipit in this book) and Sprague's Pipit, but four other pipits and five wagtails have been recorded in North America. *Pipits and Wagtails* provides detailed identification and taxonomic information on all of these species and helps place them in context. For example, Sprague's Pipit is more closely related to the South American pipits than to the holarctic pipits, and the eastern and western groups of the Yellow Wagtail complex appear not to be closely related, despite similarities in their appearance. The authors have combined critical field studies with laboratory and museum work and adopt a "monophyletic species concept," which they explain in the introduction. This approach accommodates a somewhat flexible taxonomic philosophy: e.g., the White Wagtail complex can be viewed as comprising from two to nine species. This said, the authors' own taxonomic interpretations are on the conservative side: they lump the Black-backed Wagtail (*Motacilla lugens* of AOU 1998) with the White Wagtail (*M. alba*), they merge the subspecies *pacificus* of American Pipit into nominate *rubescens*, and they merge subspecies *simillima* of the Yellow Wagtail into *tschutschensis*. The taxonomy discussion ends (p. 38) with a refreshingly honest "contrary to general belief, DNA does not always reveal the truth." And, throughout the species accounts, reference is made to the need for more data to help with many taxonomic questions.

The color plates are clearly and attractively laid out and illustrate most plumages of all species, with a strong emphasis on intraspecific and individual variation. Front and back views of many plumages are shown as well as the more conventional field-guide profiles. Some plates group similar species in comparable plumages, one plate is devoted to 17 heads of males of Yellow Wagtail taxa, and one plate covers 12

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plumages of the White (*M. alba ocularis*) and Black-backed Wagtails (but remember to read the text and not look simply at the pictures!). Color reproduction in the plates is generally good, although the Sprague's Pipits are too cold and gray in my copy. An omission from the plates is a female Yellow Wagtail of the Alaskan subspecies *tshutschensis*. Full captions to age, sex, and plumage are given on the plates themselves (a great improvement over simply a bunch of letters, employed by most guides of this genre); letters are also given for quick cross-reference to the facing-page captions. Brief summaries of the geographic range of all species (not just those presumed less familiar to European readers) would be a helpful addition to the facing-page text (these could be lifted from the introductory paragraphs to the species accounts).

Preceding the species accounts are excellent syntheses of pipit (pp. 101–104) and wagtail (pp. 262–266) characteristics and systematics. The species accounts themselves are extremely detailed but clearly organized and well written, although the going gets a little heavy in the accounts of the Yellow Wagtail (46 pages!) and White Wagtail (49 pages!). Each account starts with a brief introductory paragraph that summarizes geographic range, age and sex variation, and number of recognized subspecies. Then follow identification criteria, broken into geographic regions when relevant. This much, in conjunction with the plates, will suffice for most field identifications. The lengthy plumage descriptions that follow, plus information on molt, wing formulae, and 142 tables of measurements and 298 sonograms of songs and calls, epitomize the European penchant for detail. The sonograms often include phonetic “translations” along the top, a helpful touch. There are no sonograms of Alaska Yellow Wagtail songs or calls, and no complete song phrases for the American Pipit—hints at weakness in the treatment of New World taxa. For example, the distribution accounts often simply cite AOU (1998) for summaries of distribution, and much information apparently comes from “Jon Dunn *in litt.*,” when it would not have been too difficult to consult, or cite, primary published references. The only recent summary of New World pipit and wagtail taxonomy was not consulted (Phillips 1991); no seasonal pattern is noted for vagrant Red-throated Pipits in California (fall) and Mexico (wintering); the Olive-backed Pipit record for California is overlooked (published in *Western Birds* simultaneously with the included Mexican record); the winter range of Sprague's Pipit shows unexplained allusions of wintering south to Guatemala; the text (p. 183) notes that American Pipits breed in the eastern Aleutians (which is correct; D. Gibson pers. comm.), whereas the map wrongly shows breeding throughout all of the Aleutians. Editing and syntax are generally good (far better than in many books by authors whose first language is English), but slips do occur: note “testicles” (not testes) on p. 15; under the moult section on p. 17, the first use of “pre-breeding” molt should say “post-breeding” molt; figure h on Plate 12 should be labeled juvenile (not adult), as done correctly on the facing-page caption.

The book's stated objectives (p. 14) are to deal with all aspects of identification for all holarctic taxa, and to be a taxonomic review for these same taxa. Notwithstanding some weaknesses in the New World, *Pipits and Wagtails* succeeds admirably in its aims.

### LITERATURE CITED

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