

Olive-backed Pipits on Fair Isle: a species new to Britain and Ireland

By Roy H. Dennis

(Plate 20)

AT MIDDAY ON 17th October 1964 my wife and I heard a pipit calling from the cliffs of the Landberg, a headland beside the Bird Observatory on Fair Isle, Shetland. We were unable to find it or identify it from the call. A few hours later, however, Miss P. Adams saw a strange pipit near the Double Dyke trap about half a mile from the Observatory. E. J. Wiseman and I then searched this area and heard the same unfamiliar call when we flushed a small pipit from the cliff top at the mouth of the Gully. This call was a loud *tsee* or *tseet*, rather like that of a Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus*, but louder and more strident, resembling to some extent the *reep* of a Richard's Pipit *A. novaeseelandiae*. The bird landed at the top of a 200-foot cliff, where it searched for food in the short grass. On the ground it was silent and rather wagtail-like, striding along and wagging its tail more often than our common pipits. We were able to approach within thirty yards and compile a field description (see below).

The pipit was very partial to these high cliffs and only with difficulty did we next persuade it to go towards the traps. We missed catching it in the Gully by inches, but a few minutes later caught it in the Single Dyke trap as it followed the line of a stone wall. We showed it to G. J. Barnes, who had by then arrived on the scene, and afterwards carried it back to the Observatory where we ringed, weighed and measured it and took a full description. The bird was also seen in the hand by Miss P. Adams, Bernard Hardy and my wife. It was released early next morning at the Observatory and flew off to the cliffs. On 19th October it was frequenting a rocky area on Bunes, a few hundred yards from the Observatory.

Nearly a year later, on the afternoon of 29th September 1965, A. Heath and L. Tucker found a very greenish-looking pipit haunting the banks of the small gully leading to the Vaadal trap on Fair Isle. They walked it into the trap and then brought it back to the Observatory where I examined it. It was identical with the one trapped the previous year. A description was recorded and the bird was ringed, weighed, measured and photographed (plate 20). It was seen in the hand by G. J. Barnes, Miss W. Dickson, M. Kristersson, D. Putman, R. Rhodes, E. Salholm, E. J. Wiseman and my wife. It was kept in a roosting box overnight and released early the following morning.

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FIELD DESCRIPTION

Only the 1964 bird was observed well in the field and the following notes were made on that occasion. It was a small pipit, about the size of a Tree Pipit *A. trivialis* or Meadow Pipit *A. pratensis* and with a similar stance. The first impression was of a strikingly contrasted pipit, the upper-parts being greenish-olive lightly streaked with blackish and the under-parts very white for a pipit and boldly spotted with black on the breast. The spotting on the breast seemed nearly as bold, in fact, as that on a Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*. The spots and streaks coalesced on each side of the neck to form a noticeable black mark. The short supercilium was broad and obvious, being white behind the eye and orange-buff in front of the eye. There was some white on the outer tail-feathers and the bill appeared heavy.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

The recorded descriptions of the two birds in the hand were so similar that the following is a combination of both, the minor differences indicated by the ring numbers (N32349 in 1964, and AS88363 in 1965):

Upper-parts: crown, nape, mantle and back greenish-olive, rather lightly streaked blackish; finer blackish mesial streaks on crown more pronounced at sides of crown to form a blackish stripe above the supercilium (N32349 less heavily streaked on crown); rump and upper tail-coverts uniform greenish-olive with no noticeable streaking; supercilium broad and distinct, short and white behind eye and orange-buff in front; blackish mark through eye; ear-coverts olive-brown with dark rear edge. *Under-parts:* chin and throat yellowish-white with blackish moustachial streaks (N32349 more orange-buff on throat); upper breast buffish-white tinged yellowish and with large black mesial spots; lower breast white and with similar streaks, these coalescing at each side of neck to form blackish mark; belly pure white; under tail-coverts white with slight buff tinge; flanks white with buffish tinge and some blackish shaft streaks; axillaries yellowish-buff (N32349 greyish with yellowish-olive tinge). *Tail:* tail-feathers blackish fringed and tipped green on outer webs, centre pair browner; outer pair with whitish on outer webs for two-thirds of length from tip and large white wedges on inner webs at distal end; penultimate pair with small white wedges on inner webs and small white marks on outer webs (N32349 with slightly more white on outer webs and small white tips to next pair of feathers). *Wings:* flight-feathers dark brown with greenish edges to outer webs of primaries (except 2nd on both, and possibly 3rd on AS88363, which were more yellowish-green); greater and median coverts blackish, tipped and broadly fringed on outer webs yellowish-green (N32349 tipped creamy-olive); lesser coverts blackish with greenish fringes; primary coverts and bastard wing with slight green fringes on outer webs. *Soft parts:* upper mandible and tip of lower dark horn, rest of lower flesh; iris dark brown; legs and feet pinkish (N32349) or flesh (AS88363), rather yellowish from behind.

MEASUREMENTS AND STRUCTURE

The measurements (in millimetres) and weights (in grams) of the two birds were as follows (time GMT):

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	Wing	Bill	Tarsus	Tail	Hind toe	Hind claw	Weight	Time
N ₃₂₃₄₉	82	15	21.5	60	10	7	20.7	15.00
AS88363	86	15	21	68	8	7.25	20.9	15.00

Their wing-formulae were very similar (length of each primary expressed as number of millimetres less than longest):

	2nd	3rd and 4th	5th	6th	7th	8th
N ₃₂₃₄₉	-2	Longest	-2.5	-11	-16	-19
AS88363	-1.5	Longest	-2	-11	-15.5	-19

In both, the 3rd to 5th primaries were emarginated on the outer webs; and the 1st primary was minute. The longest tertial was 6.5 mm. shorter (N₃₂₃₄₉) or 5 mm. shorter (AS88363) than the longest primary; the secondaries were equal to the 7th primary (N₃₂₃₄₉) or fell between the 6th and 7th (AS88363). The tail was slightly forked; and the distance between wing-tip and tail-tip was 38 mm. The bill was larger and wider than that of a Tree Pipit, being 5 mm. wide at the feathers in each case.

IDENTIFICATION

On 17th October 1964 G.J.B., E.J.W. and I were certain that the bird we had caught was not a Tree Pipit of the typical race *A. t. trivialis* because of the greenish coloration, the heavily spotted under-parts, the unusual supercilium, the call and the fact that the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th primaries were rather similar in length. We handle Meadow and Tree Pipits regularly. In the Observatory collection we had skins of Red-throated Pipit and Pechora Pipit *A. gustavi* and it was clearly neither of those species. We decided that it either belonged to an unfamiliar race of the Tree Pipit or else was an Olive-backed Pipit. *A. hodgsoni**. Hodgson's Pipit, *A. roseatus* is also greenish, but this was ruled out by the measurements and lack of lemon-yellow axillaries.

We could find little information in the Fair Isle library. Peterson,

*The name 'Indian Tree Pipit' has often been used for this species, but we regard that as rather confusing. In the first place, it sounds misleadingly like a geographical race of the Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*. Secondly, *Anthus hodgsoni* is actually no more than a winter visitor to most of India, whereas its breeding range covers a large part of central and eastern Asia north to about 64°N and also extends westwards into north-eastern European Russia. In consultation with the Records Committee of the British Ornithologists' Union, we have therefore considered the various other vernacular names which have been used for the species. Most of these combine a geographical term, such as 'Oriental' or 'Siberian', with the words 'Tree Pipit' and so still seem like a race of *Anthus trivialis*. We are thus adopting the only established name which is based on the bird's colour.—EDS.

Mountfort and Hollom (1954) described the Olive-backed Pipit as smaller than a Tree Pipit, more olivaceous above with softer streaking, and more heavily streaked on the breast. We were fortunate to have Hall (1961), but this work is designed for use in the museum rather than for the identification of a single pipit in the wild. The wing formula of our bird suited both *A. hodgsoni* and eastern race(s) of *A. trivialis*. As, however, we could find no mention of any field characters and we did not have a criterion to judge the greenness of the upper-parts, we decided to regard it as some eastern race of *A. trivialis* until it was proved otherwise.

In early 1965, through the generosity of the Royal Scottish Museum and Ian H. J. Lyster of the bird room there, we were able to examine some skins of *A. hodgsoni*, *A. trivialis* (various races) and *A. roseatus*. All three of us immediately identified our bird as an Olive-backed Pipit on account of the greenish upper-parts, the distinctive breast markings, the unusual supercilium, the large bill and the wing-formula.

The first Olive-backed Pipit to be recorded in Europe outside Russia was shot at Utsira, Norway, on 8th October 1937. The record was published by Schaanning (1939) and, through the good offices of George Waterston, we received a photocopy of his paper from the library of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Girvan MacKay, the missionary on Fair Isle, very kindly translated this paper and I was then able to compare it with our notes; I was surprised how similar the two descriptions were. Another Olive-backed Pipit was found on Heligoland, Germany, on 8th May 1961 (Gräfe, Requate and Vauk 1962).

Our capture of a second individual on 29th September 1965 finally confirmed our belief that the bird we had trapped the previous year was the first Olive-backed Pipit for Fair Isle and Britain. The fact that we were so certain that the one in 1965 was almost identical with the one in 1964 indicates that this species is easier to identify in the field than might be expected. I suggest that the combination of the rather lightly streaked greenish-olive upper-parts, the clean but heavily spotted breast, the neck smudge, the pure white under-parts and the unusual supercilium are diagnostic in the field. The call also appears sufficiently different to distinguish the bird from other European pipits. The habitat preference for gullies and cliffs may be distinctive; Tree and Meadow Pipits at Fair Isle tend to frequent longer grass and marshy areas. The Norwegian one lived in the only coniferous plantation on Utsira and foraged by itself in the surrounding fields; the Fair Isle birds were also solitary.

DISCUSSION OF WING-FORMULA

In the hand, the relative length of the 5th primary is important. For *A. trivialis* Hall (1961) gave the 2nd, 3rd and 4th primaries as equal and

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longest, and the 5th about 5 mm. shorter in western birds and 1-2 mm. shorter in eastern ones. *The Handbook* put the 2nd to 4th about equal (greatest difference 1 mm.) and the 5th 2.5-5 mm. shorter. For *A. hodgsoni* N32349 had the 3rd and 4th longest and equal, the 5th 2.5 mm. shorter and the 2nd 2 mm. shorter; AS88363 had the 3rd and 4th longest and equal, the 5th 2 mm. shorter and the 2nd 1.5 mm. shorter. The fact that the 2nd primaries were 1.5 mm. and 2 mm. shorter than the longest primaries suggests that this may also be a distinctive feature of the Olive-backed Pipit.

The 5th primaries at 2 mm. and 2.5 mm. shorter are outside the range of nominate *trivialis*, but within the range of the eastern race *haringtoni*. According to Hall, this race of the Tree Pipit (which breeds in Turkestan and the north-western Himalayas) has heavier markings on the head, mantle and breast and, in any case, does not undertake vast migrations.

In *A. trivialis* the 3rd and 4th primaries are distinctly emarginated on the outer webs and the 5th is less well marked. Both our birds had distinct emargination on all three of the primaries; the Norwegian one was similar in this respect.

RANGE AND SUBSPECIES

Hall (1961) gave the range of the Olive-backed Pipit as breeding from the Pechora in north-eastern Russia, eastwards across Asia to the Kurile Islands and Japan, and southwards to the Himalayas and Szechwan; and wintering in India, Burma, Siam, Indo-China, Japan and the Philippine Islands.

The races show a certain amount of variation and Ripley (1948) has demonstrated that the birds of the most northern breeding population *yunnanensis* (those most likely to occur on Fair Isle) are the least heavily streaked. Hall also found that in *yunnanensis* the 5th primary is usually 1-3 mm. shorter than the longest, whereas in nominate *hodgsoni* the difference is usually less than 1 mm. These plumage and structural characters agree with the Fair Isle birds and suggest they are both referable to *yunnanensis*.

WEATHER AND ASSOCIATED MIGRANTS

In 1964 a southerly wind at Fair Isle backed to south-east on 15th October and continued from this general direction until the 18th. The 17th was a fine sunny day, after a hazy start, and the wind was light and south to south-east. The second Steppe Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor pallidirostris* to be recorded for Fair Isle and Britain arrived on the 17th, but was not trapped and identified until the 18th. Other newly arrived migrants included a Richard's Pipit, a Yellow-browed Warbler *Phylloscopus inornatus* and 175 Bramblings *Fringilla montifringilla*. It is also

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interesting that an Eye-browed Thrush *Turdus obscurus* was recorded on North Rona, in the Outer Hebrides, on the 16th (Picozzi 1965). The arrival of the Steppe Grey Shrike, Eye-browed Thrush and Olive-backed Pipit in northern Scotland was probably due to a large anticyclone over northern Europe, which was producing strong and sustained easterly winds across Europe from the ranges of these birds in Asia.

In 1965 the wind at Fair Isle was south-easterly from 24th September, reaching gale force on 25th and 26th. On the 28th it backed to north-east and in these conditions the second Olive-backed Pipit was found on the 29th. We recorded a Yellow-browed Warbler on the 25th, an Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana* on the 26th, and a Great Snipe *Gallinago media* and many thrushes on the 27th. Newly arrived on the 29th with the Olive-backed Pipit were a Yellow-browed Warbler and a Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris*. In this connection, it is interesting that on the same day as Schaanning shot the Olive-backed Pipit on Utsira on 8th October 1937, he also shot a Marsh Warbler, the first for that island.

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PLATE 20. Olive-backed Pipit *Anthus bodgsoni*, Fair Isle, September 1965. These photos show the lightly-streaked greenish upper-parts, the short supercilium edged above and below with blackish, the pale-tipped wing-coverts, the white outer-tail and the white breast with bold black spots (pages 161-166) (photos: Roy H. Dennis)

