

Blyth's Pipit identification



Colin Bradshaw, on behalf of the Rarities Committee

There can be few species on the British list quite so enigmatic as Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii*. Despite a number of detailed articles on identification of the species (Hall 1961; Alström & Mild 1987; Cramp 1988; Alström 1988; Holt 1991; Lewington *et al.* 1991), it is still largely unknown to most British birders. This may be due to the fact that the identification features are fairly subtle, but, equally, the lack of good photographs of the species may contribute to the feeling that 'We haven't got this one sorted out yet.' More important, perhaps, is the fact that very few British birders have thorough field experience with either the smaller races of Richard's Pipit *A. novaeseelandiae* or Blyth's Pipit.

Its place on the British List is no less enigmatic. It owes its current position to the sharp eyes of Kenneth Williamson, who, while examining specimens of Tawny Pipit *A. campestris* in the British Museum in 1963, discovered a specimen of Blyth's Pipit obtained at Brighton, Sussex, in October 1882 (Williamson 1977). It was not accepted in 1963 because of the perceived unlikelihood of such a bird turning up in Britain as a vagrant. It was only when a further bird was found in Finland in 1975 that the record was re-evaluated and accepted. There have been no further accepted records in Britain up to the time of writing, but this seems likely to change, with several claims currently being reviewed (e.g. see Evans 1993). Some of these recent reports of unusual, large pipits have, however, given rise to varying degrees of controversy, none more so than the 'Portland Pipit' (Alström 1989; Grant 1989; Millington 1989; Moorhouse 1989; Richards 1989): a bird at Portland Bill, Dorset, from 16th March to 3rd May 1989. Usually, such instances lead to a clarification of the identification features of the species concerned, but this has not been the case for Blyth's Pipit, although Chris Heard's comprehensive coverage of a bird at Skewjack, Cornwall, from 24th October to 1st November 1990 (Heard 1990) has shed light for many British birders.

In the text to accompany the photographs, I have unashamedly drawn from published information by Per Alström, Chris Heard and Paul Holt, unpublished data in

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the Rarities Committee files, from Graham Catley, Alan Dean and Jimmy Steele, and my own notes from China. The result is not meant to be a definitive identification article, but is more of a conglomeration of important features, most of which are well illustrated by my photographs of an individual grounded in a fall at Beidaihe, Hebei province, China, in May 1993 (plates 39-41).

Similar species

Blyth's Pipit can really be confused only with juvenile Tawny Pipit or Richard's Pipit of all ages. The separation from juvenile Tawny Pipit is fairly straightforward. Whilst both species can be heavily streaked on the upperparts and the breast, the streaks on the upperparts of juvenile Tawny Pipit tend to be made up of a series of dark crescentic scales arranged in lines whilst those of Blyth's Pipit are just ordinary streaks. In addition, Tawny Pipit shows a dark loreal stripe, whereas Blyth's Pipit is bare-faced. To my eyes, they are structurally different, with Tawny Pipit more like a Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*, but Blyth's Pipit more like a large Tree Pipit *A. trivialis* (but others disagree on this point, P. Alström *in litt.*). The separation from Richard's Pipit, especially of the smaller eastern race *dauricus*, is more complex, and the rest of the text will be devoted to this.

Jizz and structure

Blyth's Pipit is smaller than the usual race of Richard's, *richardi*, that occurs in Britain. It has a shorter tail and legs, and usually has a shorter, more conical bill, lacking the thrush-like curve on the distal half of the upper mandible characteristic of Richard's. I feel that this bill shape, in combination with some plumage features described later, gives the head of Blyth's Pipit some similarity to that of Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*. Blyth's often perches on bushes and, in long vegetation, creeps around furtively like a Tree Pipit rather than with the strutting gait of a Richard's. Some of these features, especially the short tail, are also apparent in flight, when it may recall one of the smaller pipits rather than Richard's. When seen in the same grassy habitat, however, the two species could not be separated by Blyth's Pipit's much-quoted lack of hovering prior to landing (some do, some do not, of each species). Blyth's Pipit has a shorter hind-claw than does Richard's Pipit: it is still a long hind-claw compared with that of most other passerines, but lacks the ridiculous length of that of Richard's. Care should be exercised with all these points, however, as Richard's Pipits of the race *dauricus* are, in general, smaller, slightly shorter-tailed and thinner-tailed and have a shorter hind-claw than do *richardi* Richard's Pipits. Although they are a trap for the unwary, they still look like Richard's Pipits, however, and display none of the 'small pipit' jizz of Blyth's Pipit.

Plumage

Head

Blyth's Pipit generally has a more bland face than does Richard's, although both have relatively open facial expressions due to the lack of a loreal stripe. On average, Blyth's Pipit has a reduced supercilium, especially in front of the eye, compared with Richard's. On occasions, the supercilium can look a bit

'Groucho Marx-like', with a curved supercilium from just above to behind the eye, as in plates 39-41. This appearance can, however, be mimicked by Richard's Pipit. The crown of Blyth's is more heavily and uniformly streaked with sharp, fine, blackish streaks, which, when seen from a distance, may coalesce to give a capped effect, whereas Richard's tends to have a fairly solid stripe of black streaks over the supercilium, almost a lateral crown-stripe, with a paler crown centre streaked with more-diffuse blackish streaks. The ear-coverts are often a warmer colour on Blyth's than on Richard's and so contrast with the greyish colour of the rest of the head. I was not able to pick this out in the field on those that I saw in China, although it seems to be present in the photographs, so I am unsure how useful a feature it would be in Europe.

Upperparts

The mantle of Blyth's tends to be more heavily marked with broader blackish streaks than is that of Richard's, creating a more contrasting pattern which also contrasts with the relatively plain nape. This pattern can be seen in plates 39-41. In general, the upperparts of Blyth's Pipit tend to be greyer than those of Richard's, which do, however, show considerable variation in both the colour and the degree of upperpart streaking, with *dauricus* being one of the more streaked races and being little different from Blyth's Pipit.

The cardinal plumage feature of Blyth's Pipit seems to be the shape and coloration of the median and greater coverts. This feature, however, holds true only for 'adult-type' coverts. The patterns of juvenile wing-coverts of Blyth's and Richard's are identical, but many first-winters show at least some 'adult-type' coverts, Richard's more often than Blyth's. Juvenile Blyth's and Richard's Pipits both have pointed, clear-cut, dark centres and buffish sides and clean white tips to the median and greater coverts. There is no difference in these feathers between the two species, but the juvenile median and greater coverts are clearly different from the adult-type coverts of both species. Adult and some first-winter Blyth's Pipits show median coverts with less-triangular and more square black centres, less diffuse on the sides, and with generally paler, broader and less rufous-tipped tips than those of Richard's (see fig. 1).

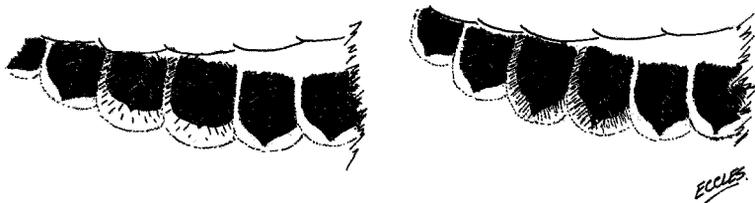


Fig. 1. Median coverts of Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii* (left) and Richard's Pipit *A. novaeseelandiae* (right), each showing two adult-type feathers (*M. Eccles*)

The combination of paler tips and more clear-cut square centres produces a prominent, pale, median-covert wing-bar (although these fresh feather tips are buff, they rapidly wear to a whitish colour). There is, however, considerable individual variation in the colour of the pale tips, which is due to variation in moult. Similar, though less obvious, differences in the pattern of adult-type

feathers occur on the greater coverts, producing a bar which is generally paler and better defined than that on Richard's. There is a suggestion, however, that the variation in the colour of both median and greater covert tips across the racial spectrum of Richard's Pipit has not been fully elucidated (A. Dean *in litt.*). On adult, spring Blyth's Pipits, I found the broad white median-covert bar a more obvious feature than the shape of the dark feather centres, yet it seemed equally reliable for separating the two species when they were seen together.

This is unlikely to be the case, however, when dealing with a first-winter vagrant in Britain, which is likely to have most or all median coverts juvenile and, consequently, a less noticeable bar. If not all the feathers of a first-winter bird are 'Blyth's shape', how many will do? It may be that one correctly shaped, adult-type central median covert feather is 'as acceptable as a full set' (P. Alström *in litt.*). Both the innermost and the outermost median (and greater) coverts may be atypical on both Blyth's and Richard's Pipits, so observers should concentrate on the central feather (Alström 1989; Alström *et al.* 1992). This has been borne out by examination of skins by the Rarities Committee, which showed that only the central median coverts have a consistent shape. It is worth pointing out, however, that if two inner and two outer median coverts may be atypical that means that 50% may be atypical.

The problem is compounded by the difficulty of perceiving the shape of these critical feather centres on a moving bird. This is particularly so for birds with both adult and juvenile-type feathers in the median coverts (i.e. many first-winters) or adults in active moult, as there is then no consistent median-covert bar to use as a point of reference for assessing the shape. Adjoining coverts overlap and it is easy for a 'tapered edge' to be interpreted as a 'flat front'. How this can arise is best seen by studying photographs of various pipits. A video taken by Alan Shaw in India also illustrates just how difficult it can be to 'fix' the covert pattern on a moving bird. While the validity of the shape of the centres of the central median coverts may not be in doubt, the field perception of these feathers may be a different matter. This feature is best judged, perhaps, on good-quality photographs, when there can be little doubt about the shape of the relevant feathers.

Another feature discussed at the meeting on Texel in 1991 was the possible absence of a pale web on the proximal half of the longest tertial. The photographs (plates 39-41) seem to show a continuous pale web for all of the outer tertial and so suggest that this is not a feature of Blyth's Pipit. Another feature mentioned by both Peter Lansdown and John Miller (*in litt.*) is the ratio of exposed tertials to exposed tail. There seems to be a constant difference with little overlap: birds with a tertial-to-tail ratio of 1 to 1.1 or less would seem to be Blyth's Pipits, whilst those with a ratio of 1 to 1.3 or greater are Richard's. There are three points to make about this: first, it has been checked on only a small number of photographs and skins, so it may be unreliable (especially with skins, as tail projection is partly dependent on how the skin was prepared); secondly, this ratio may vary for some of the races of Richard's (e.g. *dauricus*) and needs to be checked against these; thirdly, despite good optics and a reasonable eye, I am pretty sure that I could not differentiate these ratios in the field. It may, however, prove to be useful with photographs.

Underparts

There are some slight differences between the two species, but it is important to see the bird head-on to judge these correctly. The underparts of Blyth's Pipits are usually more uniformly coloured than those of Richard's, being a pale buff with a richer wash down the flanks. The colour is shown well on the photographs, and my rather poetic field notes record the colour as 'pale apricot'. This feature should be used with caution, however, as I have seen small Richard's Pipits, presumably *dauricus*, in China showing very warmly coloured underparts, and similar birds have been noted at Donna Nook, Lincolnshire, and Snettisham, Norfolk, in 1988 (this latter bird also gave some peculiar calls, so perhaps it was a Blyth's).

There is a tendency for Blyth's to show a wider gorget of streaks across the breast, but there is overlap between the two species. To my eyes, the breast streaking seems to be somewhat neater and less blurred than on Richard's Pipit, but others disagree (P. Alström *in litt.*). The malar stripe is said to be less obvious on Blyth's Pipit, but I did not find this a useful separating feature in the field, and others doubt its validity.

Tail

There is usually a difference between the tail patterns of Blyth's and Richard's Pipits in the amount of white on the two outer tail-feathers, especially the second. This was first described by Hall (1957). The outer tail-feather and the outer web of the second outer tail-feather of both species are essentially all-white. The inner web of the second outer tail-feather of Blyth's Pipit tends to have a triangular-shaped white patch, broadest at the tip and narrowing quickly, whilst Richard's Pipit tends to have a white stripe that runs parallel to the shaft. This feature can sometimes be observed, in the field, when a bird is preening in the open, especially when perched on a bush or rock. Once again, however, there is considerable overlap between the two species, so that this is, at best, only a supporting feature (van den Berg *et al.* 1993). Since, in the field, a tail is fanned rather than opened laterally (or the feathers examined individually), overlapping feathers can produce erroneous impressions even in the presence of appropriate patterns, and field impressions may not be enough.

Call

The single best feature for separation is the calls, but even these need some care and a lot of experience. There are two basic calls given by Blyth's which are relevant to Western Europe. The first is a sibilant, buzzing 'pssheoo' with a downward inflection at the end. To the experienced ear, this is different from the typical sparrow-like 'schreep' of Richard's Pipit, but, personally, I found the separation quite difficult as, unfortunately, many calls of Richard's Pipit are slightly atypical, being less harsh and thus similar to the call of Blyth's Pipit. When both species are calling together, however, it is quite easy to differentiate the calls. The timbre of the call of Blyth's is somewhat like the first half of the flight-call of Red-throated Pipit *A. cervinus*, but lacks the long-drawn-out sibilance of the second half of that call. The second call of Blyth's Pipit is an abrupt 'chup', quite similar to one of the calls of Tawny Pipit.



39 & 41. Above and below, Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii*, China, May 1993 (Colin Bradshaw)

40. Above, Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii*, China, May 1993 (Colin Bradshaw)

42. Below, Richard's Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae dauricus*, China, May 1990 (Colin Bradshaw)



Flocks of Richard's Pipits occasionally seem to 'chip' to each other, but I have never heard a lone bird make that call. 'Paddyfield Pipit', commonly regarded as a race of Richard's *A. (n.) rufulus* from India, does give a 'chep' or 'chup' call, so it is clear that there is variation in calls across the species group. Fortunately, Blyth's Pipit will often combine the two calls in a fairly unmistakable 'pssheoo chup chup'. Any bird calling like this would have to be a Blyth's Pipit. Flocks of Blyth's Pipits emit a rather strange sound, produced by a combination of calls, which is reminiscent of a flock of Twites *Carduelis flavirostris*, but this is unlikely to be useful in Europe.

Other features

Other supposed Blyth's Pipit features, such as primary projection and leg colour, are of no value in identification of this species.

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Summary

The identification of Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii* is not easy, although the combination of subtle structural and plumage features gives it a distinctive nature. Any large pipit which is short-tailed, with the jizz of a Tree Pipit *A. trivialis*, a short broad-based bill and shorter hind-claw, capped appearance and otherwise plain face, distinct wing-bars and squared-off median coverts, with a uniform buffy breast, belly and flanks, and with the distinctive calls, may stand a chance of getting accepted. It would need, however, to be photographed or to be seen and well described by a large number of good observers.

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