

Identification pitfalls and assessment problems

This series, which started in January 1983 (*Brit. Birds* 76: 26-28), is not intended to cover all facets of the identification of the species concerned, but only the major sources of error likely to mislead the observer in the field or the person attempting to assess the written evidence. The species concerned are mostly those which were formerly judged by the Rarities Committee*, but which are now the responsibility of county and regional recorders and records committees.

9 Richard's Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae* and Tawny Pipit *A. campestris*

The field separation of these two large pipits has had its ups and downs during the Rarities Committee's lifetime. Prior to Kenneth Williamson's paper in 1963, they were regarded as almost inseparable in autumn, but by 1972, when P. J. Grant's paper was published, the problems had largely been resolved. Both papers were republished and updated in the now-out-of-print *Frontiers of Bird Identification* (1980). Since then, various pitfalls have once again clouded the horizon, most notably the almost annual expert controversies over specific individuals on Scilly during October. This is perhaps the most difficult assessment task passed to the counties following the review of the Committee's species list.

About 20% of Tawny records are straightforward spring adults (first-summers are inseparable from adults). The striking combination of pale sandy-brown upperparts, relieved by a line of blackish squares on the median coverts, and clean, almost unmarked underparts on a large wagtail-like pipit, with pale legs, is unique. The 'chirrup' or 'chiup' calls are distinctive, recalling a juvenile Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*, whilst the 'tsweep' call closely resembles that of a Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*.

173. Three Tawny Pipits *Anthus campestris*, Kent, September 1981 (Dorian Buffery)



*The Rarities Committee is sponsored by Zeiss West Germany.



174. Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris*, Kent, September 1981 (Dorian Buffery)

Spring Richard's Pipits are very rare, about 2% of all records, and need to be carefully assessed. A few claims have been rejected as suspected Skylarks *Alauda arvensis*, perhaps surprisingly, but for a perceptive review of this potential problem see chapter 4 of Oddie (1980). The rich buff flanks, lack of white trailing edge to secondaries and that superbly explosive 'tchreep' call all safely eliminate Skylark. It has been suggested that some immature Tawny Pipits retain juvenile plumage in spring (and thus may look Richard's-like, with heavily streaked breast and upperparts), but the only evidence for this lies with birds of unproven identity. The theory may, however, warrant further investigation. Some spring adults exhibit up to a dozen or so neat, fine streaks at each side of the upper breast (see *Brit. Birds* 56: plate 43).

In autumn, the first hurdle is to be certain that you are dealing with one of the larger pipits. Some juvenile Yellow Wagtails more or less lack yellow or olive pigment and superficially resemble adult Tawny Pipit. So, an autumn adult Tawny record is helped by upperpart details, the distinct 'chirrup' call and, the real clincher, the flesh or straw legs. These are black on Yellow Wagtails. Skylarks are a potential hazard, as in spring, and a few records of very streaky Richard's are thought to have been Tree Pipits *A. trivialis*. One was proven as such from photographic evidence, and the claim that a pipit was a 'large pipit' cannot necessarily be taken for granted. Once it is clear that you are dealing with a large pipit (and this stage may be reached after only a few seconds by competent observers familiar with both species), you either have an adult Tawny or a problem.

Tawny Pipits generally reach Britain from late August. Richard's Pipits arrive rather earlier than most Asiatic vagrants, but only a handful have

been accepted prior to the second week of September. Probability begins to favour Richard's by the end of September, and by late October Tawny is decidedly rare. A few Richard's have overwintered in Britain, but Tawny has yet to do so. Adult and immature Richard's are basically similar; but, whereas adult Tawny is as distinctive in autumn as in spring, juveniles may closely resemble Richard's. Most juvenile Tawny Pipits have moulted into adult-like first-winter plumage by late October. These timing considerations are important. Any claim of Richard's Pipit in August, or streaky juvenile Tawny in November, should be treated most cautiously.

In theory, if your bird calls clearly—preferably several times to allow precise interpretation—you are home and dry. This cosy understanding was however rudely shattered by a series of October birds on the Isles of Scilly that, according to some very experienced observers, uttered explosive sparrow-like 'schreep' notes, though others, of equal experience interpreted the very same calls as quiet sparrow-like 'chirrup' notes. Descriptions were suitably tailored to mesh with expectations raised by the calls, and some birds became perfectly acceptable as either species. Interestingly, where agreement was reached, it was always for Richard's, and it seems that this species' call may be misinterpreted as Tawny, but not vice versa. It is clear that 'call only' records of Tawny or Richard's Pipit are the prerogative of very experienced and totally reliable observers, and arguable that, if no plumage details at all are obtained, 'call only' Tawny Pipit records should not be accepted after August.

The main plumage distinctions between Richard's and juvenile Tawny are:

Feature	Richard's Pipit <i>Anthus novaeseelandiae</i>	Juvenile Tawny Pipit <i>A. campestris</i>
Jizz	Strutting, more upright: recalls thrush <i>Turdus</i>	Slimmer, less upright: recalls stout wagtail <i>Motacilla</i>
Mantle and scapulars	Pale to mid-brown, streaked dark grey-brown (streaks usually prominent)	Pale sandy brown, indistinctly streaked darker
Median coverts	Dark centred, but not greatly contrasting with upperparts	Dark-centred and prominent
Supercilium	Creamy or pale buff	Tends to be whiter
Lores	Pale, giving bare-faced look	Neat dark line
Ear-coverts	Pale-centred	More uniform
Malar stripe	More pronounced	Less pronounced
Tail	A shade longer; blackish with pure white outer feathers	A shade shorter; browner with less pure white outer feathers
Gorget of breast-streaks	More pronounced	Less pronounced
Flanks	Rich buff or orange-buff	Off-white or creamy
Bill	Heavy, recalls thrush	Finer and longer
Hind claw	Long (13½ to 19 mm, exceptionally 12 to 26 mm)	Short (7½ to 10½ mm, exceptionally 7-11 mm)
Tail-wagging	Less frequent	Frequent
Hovering before landing	Characteristic	Very rarely observed



175. Richard's Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae*,
Shetland, September 1979 (*Dorian Buffery*)

A very tiny proportion of accepted Richard's or Tawny Pipits may actually have been Blyth's Pipits *A. godlewskii*, now admitted to the British list on the strength of an October 1882 skin (*Ibis* 122: 565). The identification criteria are confused by conflicting opinions on the identification of some Asiatic populations, and it would seem wise, at this stage, to defer offering advice until the problem is critically analysed.

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