Field identification of Long-billed Pipit in the West Palearctic

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The Long-billed Pipit Anthus similis has an extensive, if somewhat discontinuous breeding distribution, through Africa, the Middle East, and from Iran to the Himalayas including India and Burma (Cramp 1988). Within this range, 17-20 subspecies have been described (e.g. Vaurie 1959). In the West Palearctic it is represented by the resident race captus, which breeds in Israel, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon; vagrants reported from Iraq and Kuwait possibly refer to the Iranian race decaptus, which is larger, a richer buff, and has a more streaked breast (S. C. Madge in litt.). This paper is restricted to the race captus as it occurs in Israel, and comparisons are between that population and the West Palearctic forms of Tawny Pipit A. campestris and Richard’s Pipit A. novaseelandiae. Walsh & Wassink (1980, with appended editorial comment) briefly summarised the field identification of Long-billed Pipit of the race captus, drawing attention to its grey appearance and comparatively indistinct plumage markings; the following adds considerably more detail to that summary.

In Israel, the Long-billed Pipit inhabits stony slopes or hillsides with rocky outcrops and grass vegetation thinly interspersed with bushes and low trees. It is clearly a large, heavy-bodied pipit strongly resembling Tawny, and often creating a deep-chested and a rather long, full-tailed impression. It is important to note that some Tawny Pipits occurring in Israel belong to larger and greyer populations than those typically encountered in Western Europe. Nevertheless, the plumage of Long-billed, especially the subdued head pattern, combined with voice and behaviour, facilitate its separation from both Tawny and Richard’s Pipits.

Basic plumage description
In fresh adult plumage following the post-breeding moult (usually completed by the end of September), Long-billed Pipit has a dark grey-brown forehead and crown with creamy or sandy feather edges, appearing neatly and narrowly streaked; nape and hindneck are very slightly paler, with less prominent
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dark feather centres. A long, narrow, cream-coloured supercilium fades onto the nape (where, on some individuals, pale flecking may be present). Fore part of supercilium may be more warmly washed buff when fresh. Upper 'cheeks' and ear-coverts are grey-buff or pale buff, streaked with dark brown. Dark brown loral line. Typically, the moustachial stripe is poorly defined or even absent (some individuals have a dull grey-brown lower border to the ear-coverts); the dull buff or dull cream submoustachial area is poorly marked; and the dull grey-brown malar stripe is typically diffuse and poorly defined (but can be more pronounced).

Upperparts, from mantle to uppertail-coverts, are brown-grey, with slate-brown shaft-streaks and with diffuse creamy or sandy fringes; the lower scapulars are dull brown-grey, usually with the shafts poorly marked. The tail is quite long and often appears dark, but with paler sides.

The flight feathers are dull black with pale sandy outer edges, and the tertials dark brown diffusely fringed brown-sand, dull buff or tawny-buff. The lesser coverts are dull buff or buff-brown with dark centres; the median coverts are fringed dull buff, grey-buff or tawny-buff, their dark brown centres merging with these pale fringes (especially on inner webs) but typically extending in a long thin 'tooth' virtually to the tip; and the dark brown greater coverts are diffusely fringed dull buff, sandy-buff or tawny-buff. The alula and primary coverts are dull black with pale sandy fringes.

The underparts appear uniformly dull. The upper breast and breast-sides are diffusely streaked, the prominence of the streaking being variable (can appear very weak). The underwing-coverts are washed buff.

Seasonal and age-related differences

Breeding plumage is very similar to that of adult winter. With increasing wear, however, the upperparts become duller grey-brown and the underparts washed-out, and the breast streaking becomes slightly sharper (on many individuals often creating light brown 'tick-marks'). In spring, the greater coverts and often the tertials look moderately worn, and by late summer (July/August) adults are heavily worn, with most fringes lost and the underparts greyish-buff or brown-buff.

Juveniles are similar to fresh-plumaged adults, but with more contrasted plumage. They often have a strong buff wash on breast and flanks, with the belly off-white, and the streaking is heavier, darker and more clearly defined than on adults.

First-winter individuals resemble adults, but many retain some juvenile feathers above and (rarely) below. Some juvenile greater coverts may be retained (showing greater contrast between their centres and fringes), and in autumn many individuals have some retained juvenile tertials (fresh adult feathers have broader, more diffuse, buff or tawny-buff edges).

First-summer plumage is much as that of adult, but becomes duller and more heavily worn, and greater and median coverts and tertials become heavily abraded.

Field separation from Tawny Pipit

Long-billed Pipit appears much bulkier than Tawny, with stouter chest and
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belly, slightly shorter legs, relatively smaller head with slightly longer and stouter bill, and a fuller, broader tail; it lacks the slim appearance of Tawny, which resembles a wagtail Motacilla. The main distinctions between the two species are summarised in table 1. Compared with Tawny Pipit, the general plumage pattern of Long-billed is rather uniform, subdued and lacking contrast. Its head pattern is poorly marked and rather bland, with a more open-faced or gentle expression in which the dark eye is fairly obvious; the dark, heavier bill can be prominent. The curving supercilium is narrow and usually quite long. The moustachial stripe is typically poorly defined or even absent (although some individuals have a dark lower border to ear-coverts), the sub-moustachial area is inconspicuous and lacks contrast, and the malar stripe is normally reduced, poorly defined and diffuse. By contrast, Tawny has a much better-marked and distinct head pattern, especially at close range: a thick, square supercilium bordered above by dark crown-sides; blackish lores and a dark eye-stripe; a thin but distinct moustachial stripe extending from base of bill to below eye (or sometimes running along lower border of ear-coverts), with a contrasting clean sandy or off-white submoustachial stripe; and usually a well-marked malar stripe (often prominent on juveniles).

Long-billed’s upperparts are a flat grey-brown, lacking Tawny’s sandy or buffy tones (especially on rump). On juveniles, the upperparts show more contrast, being dark grey-brown with paler cream or greyish-sandy fringes, though not approaching the scaly pattern on head and upperparts typical of juvenile Tawny. It is important to remember that some Tawny Pipits migrating through Israel are from greyer populations than those in Western Europe, griseus from west-central Asia being distinctly olive-grey above.

The underparts of Long-billed Pipit are more uniform and less clean than on Tawny. When fresh, they have a buff, grey-buff or tawny-buff ground colour (including on undertail-coverts), duller, deeper buff and less sandy than on Tawny; when worn, they become dull grey or buff-grey, with the breast a darker brown-grey. The ground colour of Tawny’s underparts is a cleaner sandy or buff-sandy, with off-white belly and undertail-coverts (rarely, washed buff-sandy). On Long-billed, the chest and breast-side streaking is diffuse and dull grey-brown (recalling Thrush Nightingale Luscinia luscinia), the streaks sometimes becoming slightly longer and better defined as the broad feather edges wear off to create thin, soft brown 'tick-marks'; the streaking is variable, and can be quite indistinct. Adult Tawny Pipit normally lacks streaking on its sandy breast, although it is not uncommon for individuals (especially females) to have sharp blackish spots or streaks which, when present, are bolder, darker and larger than on Long-billed and (importantly) are crisply defined; the sides of the upper breast may also show some, less distinct, streaking. Juvenile and many first-year Tawny Pipits are heavily marked below.

The wing-covert pattern of Long-billed is characteristically duller than that of Tawny. The median coverts look dark with Buffy fringes, but exceptionally close views reveal a distinctive coloration and pattern: the dark brown centres are drawn into a long ‘tooth’ which virtually meets the feather tip, but they are not well demarcated, especially on the inner webs (where they gradually fade to the edges); and the fringes are buffish, grey-buff or brown-buff (when fresh, some washed warm orange-buff or tawny-buff, especially at sides), but
### Table 1. Distinguishing features between Long-billed *Anthus similis* and Tawny Pipits

*See also figs. 1 & 2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Long-billed</th>
<th>Tawny</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Shape</strong></td>
<td>Heavy, with full breast and belly. Head relatively small for body size. Tail long and broad, appears rather 'full' when flushed. Wings distinctly broad in flight. Bill long and stout; legs relatively short for a large pipit</td>
<td>Sleek and often wagtail <em>Motacilla</em>-like, with long, narrow tail (held tightly closed when flushed). Wings not markedly broad. Bill slim and insignificant; legs long</td>
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<td><strong>Behaviour</strong></td>
<td>Usually solitary or in pairs. Rises heavily when flushed, and often (not always) hovers briefly before alighting. Walks with horizontal carriage, although more upright when perched on boulders. Less energetic than Tawny, occasionally flicks and partially opens tail rather than typical wagging action of Tawny. Inhabits rocky and grassy hill and mountain slopes in well-vegetated country</td>
<td>Often solitary, but migrants often in small flocks of up to about 20. Rises suddenly and flies with strong undulations, dropping on to ground directly. Runs and walks energetically, wagging tail freely and nervously. Frequents dry, open country</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Song</strong></td>
<td>Given from ground or boulder, or in flight when rises quite high and flies on slow-flapping wings to another perch, generally without undulations. Perched song typically two far-carrying phrases interrupted by a pause, the first rising, the second falling: 'sweeii-sweeoo'; in full song flight may be expanded to 3-4 notes with varying pauses between notes, but two-note rising and falling song most typical</td>
<td>Monotonously repeated, ringing 'cherlee' given in undulating, direct or semicircular song flight, ending with short parachute glide</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Head pattern</strong></td>
<td>Rather plain, with weak supercilium diffusing onto nape. Loral line dark, but less obvious than on Tawny. Moustachial stripe weak or absent; malar stripe usually weak or absent, but sometimes clear</td>
<td>Quite well marked, with distinct supercilium; notably dark loral line, malar and moustachial stripes</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Upperparts</strong></td>
<td>Grey-brown; darker on juveniles, which show weak pale scaling</td>
<td>Sandy or buffish grey-brown, on race <em>griseus</em> often almost olive-grey; juveniles with bold blackish feather centres</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Underparts</strong></td>
<td>Contrast little with upperparts, with buff ground colour extending to undertail-coverts, becoming distinctly greyish below when abraded. Breast streaking diffuse, becoming slightly mottled when worn</td>
<td>Contrast quite strongly with darker upperparts. Typically washed sandy below, becoming whiter on lower belly and undertail-coverts. Breast streaking, if present, clear and spotted, not diffuse. Juveniles heavily streaked below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tail</strong></td>
<td>Broad and full; very dark on underside when seen from below</td>
<td>Slim and narrow; not obviously dark on underside when seen from below</td>
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</table>
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Fig. 1. Wing shapes of Long-billed *Anthus similis* (left) and Tawny Pipit *A. campestris*. Note more rounded wing shape of Long-billed (wing point formed by 6th, 7th and 8th primaries) compared with Tawny (wing point formed by 8th and 9th primaries). In the hand, emargination difference apparent (5th emarginated on Long-billed, in addition to 6th-8th).

can become quite bleached when worn. On Tawny Pipit, the median coverts have clean-cut blackish centres with contrasting creamy or sandy (sometimes quite buffish) fringes; rarely, the centres can be slightly drawn out towards the tip, but again are more crisply defined; juvenile median coverts have the centres extending down into a blunt point towards the tip, while adults possess broader rounded fringes. The greater coverts on Long-billed are pale buff, grey-buff or brown-buff with dark brown centres, duller than on Tawny and creating less of a light covert panel. Fresh-plumaged adult Long-billed has tertials with diffuse brown-buff or grey-buff edges; the juvenile tertials are extensively dark brown with thin buff or pale olive-cream fringes, lacking the pattern of juvenile Tawny (which recalls that of juvenile Yellow Wagtail *M. flava*).

Long-billed Pipit’s tail is quite long and full and can appear slightly darker (in flight, often strikingly so: S. C. Madge *in litt.*) and less contrasted than Tawny’s. At all ages, the central feathers, when fresh, are dark brown with narrow pale olive or grey-sandy edges (broader sandy fringes on Tawny, especially juvenile). The two outer pairs of rectrices have pale areas washed dull buff or brown-buff, often fading to off-white or cream-buff when worn (washed paler buff on Tawny, but colour can occasionally approach that of Long-billed). On perched individuals, tail pattern is normally, however, of little or no value in the field.

The bill of Long-billed Pipit is long, thick and typically extensively dark. It is longer than that of Tawny, with a drooped appearance created by the curved culmen. The bill creates the impression of thickness or heaviness distally, this being accentuated by the dark colour of the upper mandible extending almost to the basal cutting edges and by a blackish tip to the lower
mandible; the base of the lower mandible is flesh or orange-flesh, but on many dull flesh, grey-flesh or sometimes light grey. Tawny Pipit's bill is less prominent, generally appearing shorter, less heavy and not so dark.

Voice and behaviour

The song of Long-billed Pipit is rather simple, but distinctive. In its simplest form it consists of two notes (three syllables) suggesting a wolf-whistle. It is variously transcribed, but generally a 'sweeii-sweeo' or 'tir-ee...tiu'. The first note consists of two rising syllables suggesting the call of Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus*, but louder, longer and slightly more disyllabic, and in tone not

1-3. Long-billed Pipits *Anthus similis*, Jerusalem, February 1986 (Adi Gencz). Above left, and left, classic individual, showing typical head pattern, long, deep bill, face pattern, degree of breast streaking; above right, adult with very plain face, no marked moustachial or malar stripes, relatively pale lores, long supercilium fading into nape, also note fresh tail feathers.
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dissimilar to some of the gentle calls of Crested Lark Galerida cristata; the second note starts off high, but drops in pitch to create a descending whistle (second half of wolf-whistle). Some individuals insert a further note in between which is similar to the second note (or occasionally to the first), but often more clearly disyllabic. There is some variation in the song and in the pauses between the notes.

Tawny Pipit’s song consists of a repetition of two or three notes, with the last syllable stressed and rising in pitch: ‘cherlee’, ‘chee-ree’, ‘chi-vee’ or ‘tse-rue-flie’.

During the breeding season, Long-billed Pipit will monotonously deliver its song from dominant songposts or in flight. In song flight it shows a slightly unusual silhouette, created by the broadly rounded wings, the deep body, and the long, full tail, the latter almost blackish from below and contrasting with the otherwise pale plumage; the broad wing shape can suggest Bar-tailed Desert Lark Ammomanes cincturus, but the long full tail (and also the habitat) makes such confusion highly unlikely.

Outside the breeding season, Long-billed gives a reasonably soft, flat and plaintive ‘djeep’, ‘djup’ or ‘tyup’ call. This call is remarkably constant: it is used as the flight call, and also on the ground when anxious or alarmed. The flight call of Tawny Pipit is the well-known disyllabic ‘tsilip’, ‘tcheleep’, ‘chivlee’ or ‘teeuk’; sometimes it utters a ‘tcheep’ like a House Sparrow Passer domesticus (and almost recalling that of Richard’s Pipit), and occasionally, when flushed or in large parties (10-20 individuals), it can give a very hard chirpy ‘tchilp’.

Long-billed Pipit can sometimes be elusive outside the breeding season as it feeds quietly, walking with horizontal carriage, alone or in loose pairs. It is less energetic than Tawny, sometimes flicking and partially opening its tail rather than using the typical wagging action of Tawny. When alarmed, it does not perform the excited runs and nervous freezing behaviour associated with Tawny Pipit. When anxious, Long-billed assumes a slightly more horizontal stance than the upright posture of Tawny Pipit. See also table 1.

Field separation from Richard’s Pipit

Richard’s Pipit is a more elegant bird, with more erect carriage, longer legs, and a narrower and less blackish tail. It can be distinguished from Long-billed at all ages by its plumage pattern, loud explosive call and behaviour. Richard’s shows pale lores (occasionally lightly marked with grey), pale ear-coverts, a broad pale area around the eye, a well-marked moustachial stripe, a clear submoustachial stripe, and a strong well-defined malar stripe. It also displays bold, heavy and well-defined streaks on chest and breast-sides, and its brownish cap and upperparts are streaked dark. The outer tail feathers are extensively white.

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4 & 5. Long-billed Pipits *Anthus similis*: above, Jerusalem, November 1986 (Adi Gencz); below, Golan Heights, September 1988 (Noah Satat). Note characteristic pose; long, narrow, curving supercilium; diffuse moustachial stripe and malar stripe; buffish underparts; deep-chested appearance; long tail; long, stout bill; short legs compared with other large pipits
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Summary
The Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis* breeds in the West Palearctic, in Israel, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, as the race *captus*. This race is similar to Tawny Pipit *A. campestris*, but can be distinguished by its duller, more uniform plumage with less marked head pattern, its voice, and differences in habitat choice and behaviour; its distinctive wing-covert pattern is also visible in very close views. Separation from Richard’s Pipit *A. novaeseelandiae* is straightforward.

References

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