

NOTES

FIRST RECORD OF AN OLIVE-BACKED PIPIT IN CALIFORNIA

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The first Olive-backed Pipit (*Anthus hodgsoni*) recorded in California was banded on 26 September 1998 on Southeast Farallon Island, 42 km west of San Francisco. The bird arrived just prior to the largest wave of migrants on the Farallones in ten years as hundreds of western birds and several eastern vagrants descended on the island during the next five days. During this period, no Red-throated Pipits (*A. cervinus*) and only small numbers of American Pipits (*A. rubescens*) were observed. The Olive-backed Pipit was seen each day through 29 September.

The bird was first seen at 14:50 on the 26th by Burnett when it flushed from underneath a Monterey Cypress (*Cupressus macrocarpa*) and flew toward the east end of the island in undulating flight, twice giving a long, buzzy call ("zzrrring") unfamiliar to Burnett. An hour later, Capitolo flushed the bird from under a patch of bush mallow (*Lavatera* sp.). It called once upon take-off ("szeeeeep") and flew to the marine terrace, a flat area of low ground cover consisting primarily of Farallon Weed (*Lasthenia minor maritima*) and plantain (*Plantago* sp.). Capitolo quickly refound the bird and identified it as a pipit by its white and brownish olive plumage, slender bill, and tail-pumping behavior but was unable to identify it to species. Only Pyle had prior experience identifying Olive-backed Pipits, but he did not arrive on the island until the following day. At 16:45, Capitolo and Richardson refound the bird on the terrace and were joined by Burnett.

With the sun at our backs, we observed the bird at close range with binoculars and a spotting scope while it foraged on the terrace. The bird walked quickly between patches of plantain, often remaining out of view for several minutes before briefly reappearing at the edge of a patch, pumping its tail. It then slinked away to new cover, holding its tail nearly horizontal and bobbing its head like a pigeon. During this time, Richardson noted the greenish back and black brow to the supercilium through his spotting scope and tentatively identified it as an Olive-backed Pipit. We recorded field notes while following the bird and attempting to direct it back toward the mist net. At 18:00, the bird flew back into the bush mallow and was promptly caught in the net.

Using Svensson (1992) we confirmed the identification and telephoned Keith Hansen for assistance. We banded the bird, took measurements and photographs, pulled two ventral body feathers, and released it just before 19:00. Though secretive, the bird was sighted on the marine terrace each of the next three days, and Pyle was able to obtain photographs of the bird in the field. The feathers were deposited at the California Academy of Sciences (CAS) in San Francisco (accession number 87088), and this record was accepted by the California Bird Records Committee.

The bird (Figure 1) was in first basic plumage with a partially pneumatized skull and no indication of active molt. The upperparts were olive green and faintly streaked, with heavy black flecking on the crown. The broad supercilium was white behind the eye, orange-buff in front of the eye, and was bordered above by a thin black brow. The auriculars were olive brown with a whitish patch at the upper rear, just below and behind the end of the supercilium. A blackish spot was immediately below this patch. A buff-white submoustachial stripe and throat were set off by a thin but distinct black

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Figure 1. Olive-backed Pipit (*Anthus hodgsoni*), Southeast Farallon Island, California, 26 September 1998. Though not diagnostic, the pale and dark rear auricular spots and the dark brow to the supercilium are important field marks. The difference between primary 6 and the tip of the wing (primary 8; see text) suggests the subspecies *yunnanensis*, as this difference is usually <1 mm in *A. h. hodgsoni*.

Photo by Dan Murley

malar stripe. The breast was buff with bold black streaks that became thinner then ended abruptly at the white belly. The flanks were washed buff with streaks prominent but paler and more diffuse than those on the breast. The flight feathers were edged greenish, and the wingbars were buff, the upper more pronounced. The undertail coverts were white. The inner web of the outer rectrices and the tips of the adjacent pair were dusky white. Left rectrix 4 also had a small amount of white at its tip. The upper mandible was dark, the lower pinkish with a dark tip. The legs were pink.

We recorded the following measurements: bill length from nostril 8.7 mm; exposed culmen 11.0 mm; hind claw 8.3 mm; bill depth at posterior edge of nostrils 4.1 mm; bill depth at anterior edge of nostrils 3.5 mm; bill width at posterior edge of nostrils 4.5 mm; bill width at anterior edge of nostrils 3.1 mm; wing chord 82 mm; tail 62

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mm; weight (with band) 21.0 g. Primary 10 (numbered distally) was reduced. Primary 8 was longest and greater than primary 7 by more than 1 mm.

The Olive-backed Pipit is readily distinguished from all other pipits by the combination of the olive-green upperparts, a broad supercilium that is orange-buff in front of the eye and white behind the eye, and a hind claw that is shorter than the hind toe. The rear auricular spots are also important field marks, though the white spot is sometimes absent and the dark spot can be indistinct. The Olive-backed Pipit is most subject to confusion with the Tree Pipit (*A. trivialis*), particularly in badly worn plumage. The Tree Pipit can also show a white spot on the upper rear auriculars, has a similar posture and gait, a similar call, and is the only other pipit whose hind claw is shorter than the hind toe (Cramp 1988). Though it has only a faint olive tinge to the upperparts and its supercilium is narrower and uniformly buff, feather wear can cause the upperparts to appear more olive in tone and the supercilium paler. Badly worn Olive-backed Pipits may show no olive but rather browner and grayer upperparts, a faded facial pattern, and little contrast between the rear and front of the supercilium (King 1981). The Farallon bird was in fresh plumage with distinct facial markings. Wing formula can also be helpful in distinguishing these species, as primary 6 is usually not more than 3 mm shorter than the tip of the wing in the Olive-backed and is 2–6.5 mm shorter in the Tree (Svensson 1992). This measurement was near 2 mm on the Farallon bird, as primary 7 was measured more than 1 mm shorter than the tip of the wing and photographs show primary 6 to be a similar distance shorter than primary 7 (Figure 1). The Tree Pipit, furthermore, can be difficult to distinguish from the Meadow Pipit (*A. pratensis*), with identification determined by flight call or hind claw length. The Meadow Pipit, however, breeding in Greenland and Europe, is less likely to occur as a vagrant in western North America, while the Tree Pipit breeds farther east into southern central Siberia (King 1981), and an individual has reached Alaska (Kessel 1989).

The four other species of pipits occurring in western North America are easily distinguished from the Olive-backed Pipit. In fall the Red-throated Pipit differs by having dark brown upperparts with broad, conspicuous black and buff streaks and fairly uniformly buff underparts. Its flight call is similar, but the Olive-backed's is louder with a distinctive buzzy or reedy quality that the Red-throated's thin, high-pitched "seep" lacks (King 1981, Pyle pers. obs.). The Pechora Pipit (*A. gustavi*) is a casual migrant to the western Aleutian Islands (AOU 1998) and is therefore a potential vagrant to California. It resembles the fall Red-throated Pipit, but, as in the Olive-backed Pipit, its buffy breast contrasts with a whitish throat and belly. The Sprague's Pipit (*A. spragueii*) has sandy or buffy brown upperparts, a plain buffy face, and narrow streaks on the breast that do not extend down the flanks. The American Pipit has grayer upperparts, darker and more uniform supercilium and underparts, darker legs, and a different call (King 1981). However, the race *japonicus*, a probable vagrant from Asia, suspected on the Farallones four times from 1990 to 1999, can show bright pink legs (M. Heindel pers. comm.).

Two subspecies of the Olive-backed Pipit are recognized. *A. h. hodgsoni* has a much more distinctly streaked back and crown than *A. h. yunnanensis*. Nominate *hodgsoni* also has an unstreaked rump, and the streaking on its underparts extends farther down the belly than in *yunnanensis*. Primary 6 is usually less than 1 mm shorter than the tip of the wing in *hodgsoni*, 1–3 mm shorter in *yunnanensis* (Svensson 1992). This difference was approximately 2 mm on the Farallon bird (see above). The faintly streaked back and rump also suggest this bird was *yunnanensis* (Figure 2), though the faint streaking on the rump may be difficult to distinguish from the unstreaked rump of *hodgsoni*. The difference in back streaking, however, was obvious on specimens of both subspecies we viewed at CAS.

Nominate *hodgsoni* breeds in southern Asia, from the Himalayas to central and eastern China and Japan; *yunnanensis* breeds in northern Eurasia, east to Kamchatka

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Figure 2. Olive-backed Pipit (*Anthus hodgsoni*), Southeast Farallon Island, California, 26 September 1998. The faintly streaked upperparts also suggest *yunnanensis*.

Photo by Dan Murley

and south to Mongolia, Manchuria, Ussuriland, and northern Japan. Their wintering ranges overlap in southern Japan, the Philippines, and peninsular India, with *hodgsoni* also wintering in the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, and Indochina. Birds of unknown race winter in Borneo and southern Korea (Cramp 1988). The Olive-backed Pipit is regular in fall in Israel, and, though considered accidental across most of Europe, annual in Britain. In Britain and Ireland, over 90% of records are for fall, mostly late September and October (Snow and Perrins 1998). Svensson (1992) stated that all vagrants in Europe are probably *yunnanensis*.

The first North American record of the Olive-backed Pipit was on 1 June 1962 on St. Lawrence Island, Alaska (Sealy et al. 1971), and upon collection was determined to be *yunnanensis*. *A. h. yunnanensis* is an irregular spring and fall migrant to Alaska's western Aleutian Islands, typically occurring singly or in small numbers (D. Gibson pers. comm.) but with a remarkable count of 225 on Attu Island on 17 May 1998 (Tobish 1998). East of the western Aleutian Islands the species is accidental, and an adult *yunnanensis* banded 27 July 1998 at Mother Goose Lake, Alaska Peninsula, was the first documented record for Alaska's mainland (Tobish 1999, D. Gibson pers. comm.). Other fall records within the political boundaries of North America include 12–15 birds photographed on Kure Atoll, Hawaii, in late September and early October of 1983 (Pyle 1984) and an individual at Cataviña in Baja California, Mexico, 18–19 October 1996 (Hamilton et al. 2000). Finally, a specimen of *A. h. yunnanensis* collected 10 miles south of Reno, Nevada, in spring on 16 May 1967 (Burleigh 1968) suggests, as noted by Roberson (1980), that this species has successfully wintered within the New World before.

We thank the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Newark, California, and Point Reyes Bird Observatory for the opportunity to work on the Farallon Islands National Wildlife

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Refuge. We also thank Keith Hansen for his assistance in identification and for spreading the word on the mainland. Thanks also go to Robb Hamilton and Matt Heindel for reviewing earlier drafts of this paper. Dan Murley provided photographs of the bird, Doug Long permitted us to view specimens at CAS, and Daniel Gibson provided information on the Olive-backed Pipit's status in Alaska. The U.S. Geological Survey (Dixon Field Station) provided computer support. This is Point Reyes Bird Observatory contribution 747.

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Accepted 17 April 2000