

To A Pipit

The crowning achievement of *The Sibley Guide* is a paradox.

The achievement?—This greatest of American field guides houses a gallery of some 3,100 paintings of birds in flight. Gray-cheeked Thrush and Blackpoll Warbler? They're shown here in flight. Eared Quetzal and Green Jay? They're depicted as creatures capable of flight. House Wren and Field Sparrow? They can fly, too.

The paradox?—The major “breakthrough” of this guide is that it reveals the single most obvious and distinctive of avian behaviors. Just as fish swim, snakes slither, and plants grow (and are credited with such actions in most of the ichthyological, herpetological, and botanical manuals on my bookshelves), so birds fly. And now, at last, we have a revolutionary new guide to birds in flight.

The Sibley Guide was a long time in coming. In hindsight, it is easy to say that champion long-distance migrants like Gray-cheeked Thrush and Blackpoll Warbler are more notable for their powers of flight than for their proneness to perching. It is the thrill of spotting an Eared Quetzal, streaking through the pines, that beckons birders to Southeast Arizona; it is the emerald flash of a startled Green Jay that enlivens the dry woodlands of South Texas. And even though House Wrens and Field Sparrows do not leap to mind as paragons of aerodynamism, they are nonetheless capable of flight—indeed sometimes of sustained flight over long swaths of inhospitable habitat.

It's not just that we have taken for granted the fact that birds can fly. No, the problem runs deeper: We are, in many instances, actually incapable of observing and identifying common birds in flight. That is what I conclude from my own experiences with one of the most widespread and characteristic species of the North American continent.



Largo – Montana. For longer than I would care to admit, the American Pipit was my “nemesis bird”. From the farm fields of Pennsylvania to the lake shores of Alabama, from the marshlands of New Jersey to the mudflats of Texas, the species had eluded me. My life list already had entries for Henslow's and Bachman's Sparrows, for Ruff and Pyrrhuloxia—easy “ticks” all, compared to my first pipit. To get that pipit, I had to fly to Missoula, drive for miles on Forest Service roads, hike past a dozen switchbacks, transit a waterfall, pick my way through a scree field, wedge myself between a pair of abutting rock faces, and slide down a snow bank. Finally, here, in the company of Golden Eagles and Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches—in the land of lichens, in this realm of rock and snow—I had found an American Pipit.

It was standing on the ground.

Allegretto – Pennsylvania. A month later, in the Quaker State hill country, I observed another American Pipit, streak-breasted and slender-tailed, strong and strident, on passage to points south. In the weeks that followed, there were other pipits—hurtling past the hawk watches, swirling about the mudflats, bounding across sun-kissed meadows. And in the years ahead, there were thousands more—streaming south on October cold fronts, striking north again through April showers. One year, I even found a pipit in January, during a special survey of mid-winter bird populations. The identification was a cinch, the documentation was straightforward, and the record was unquestioningly accepted. I never saw the bird land.

I had learned to identify pipits.

Intermezzo – North Dakota. It wasn't too long ago that I visited Bismarck, for a reason that should come as a surprise to few birders: to see the Sprague's Pipit. The bird wasn't going to be easy. I was too late for the mating season, and it was forecast to rain the whole time I was there. My strat-

egy was to walk across miles of muddy prairie and pastureland—home to skulking Clay-colored Sparrows, haven for sulky Sharp-tailed Grouse. In this week of stormy, unsettled weather, the neighborhood harriers were disinclined to fly, and the resident longspurs declined to display. In anticipation of my appointment with the pipit, then, I was rehearsing for a terrestrial encounter. What I got instead was a bird in flight, circling around me in the drizzle, several times, surprisingly close. I made a quick mental tally of its field marks: *streaky overall; short tail with lotsa white; blank face and staring black eye; squeaky flight call*. The bird approached even closer, as though it were going to land on me; and then it flew directly away.

It was one of my most satisfying lifers.

Cabaletta – Colorado. One of the “duties” of living in Boulder is to help out-of-state birders find White-tailed Ptarmigan. And not long after having moved into the area, I was called upon to “perform the service”. My guests and I drove to Rocky Mountain National Park, walked out along the Alpine Ridge Trail (staying on the path, of course; ABA Code of Ethics, § 1.d), and spotted the brown bantam of the tundra. Mission accomplished. *Tick*. On the return to the car, we made note of the remainder of the sparse avifauna of this harshest of habitats: hardy White-crowned Sparrows, a restive flock of Mountain Bluebirds, a disputatious Rock Wren. And an American Pipit—in profuse strains of unpremeditated art performing its aerial courtship display. Amid the roiling clouds and howling winds, this blithe spirit of the tundra proclaimed a jangling descant of chirps and trills and twitters. Higher still and higher the pipit ascended—until unseen, an un-bodied joy—showering a rain of melody on the talus slopes below.

I have never heard praise of love or wine that panted forth a flood of rapture so divine.

Coda – Alaska. The passerine fauna of Adak Island is depauperate: just six species of breeders, a handful of rare-but-regular transients, and a smattering of casuals and accidentals. Pipits migrate over Adak in small numbers each year, and I observed several during a recent visit to the island. Most of them were easily assignable to that taxon



American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens alticola*) in flight display.
Clear Creek County, Colorado; 13 July 2003. © Bill Schmoker.

which is designated by the ABA Checklist as “American Pipit”. The call note alone was sufficient for identification, and the flight silhouette was the clincher. But two subspecies of American Pipit presumably migrate past Adak: nominate *rubescens* and *Asian japonicus*. Which race (or races) did I have? The birds in the field guide are easy: The Asian race is more boldly streaked below, with brighter wing bars, and pink legs. I would have killed for a specimen—or just a bird standing on the ground. No such luck. Even though I would observe several fly-over American Pipits during my week on Adak, all of them were too high up for me to make out details of the plumage or bare parts. And I haven’t yet determined whether *rubescens* and *japonicus* differ in their call notes.

I am still learning about pipits.

— TED FLOYD