

Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus*: a new species for South America

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Received 12 April 2009; final revision accepted 25 July 2009

first published online 16 March 2010

Cotinga 32 (2010): 98–100

Un Bisbita Gorgirrojo *Anthus cervinus* fue observado y fotografiado el 28 de marzo del 2008 en la playa de Río Verde, provincia de Esmeraldas, Ecuador. Basados en nuestras fotos podemos identificar esta ave y excluir todas las otras especies de bisbita. Una combinación de múltiples características solo se ajusta a esta especie. El Bisbita Gorgirrojo es un migrante de largas distancias y se reproduce en la tundra ártica. La especie es un nómada raro en otoño en la costa del Pacífico con observaciones recientes en California cada año. Nuestra observación representa el registro más austral en América para esta especie. En este artículo reportamos el primer registro de Bisbita Gorgirrojo para Ecuador y el continente de Sur América.

On 28 March 2008 we visited the coast north of the village of Río Verde, prov. Esmeraldas, Ecuador (01°04'34"N 79°24'48"W) to search for roosting Lesser Nighthawks *Chordeiles acutipennis*. Having flushed two at c.10h00, our attention was drawn to a small terrestrial passerine that we immediately recognised as a pipit *Anthus* sp., which was foraging at the high-water mark between the flotsam. The bird was alert and proved very shy when we tried to approach. It flushed several times, giving a loud *psssssii* call. After a short flight the bird usually landed again c.50 m away and started foraging again. Twice it landed atop a small bush and perched for a few minutes. Eventually, we were able to take some digital photographs from c.10 m (Figs. 1–2; cf. *Dutch Birding* 30: 267).

We were unable to identify the species in the field. Ridgely & Greenfield¹² describes one species of *Anthus* in Ecuador: Páramo Pipit *A. bogotensis*, which is typically found in the highlands, usually above 3,000 m. Therefore, we assumed that we had found a North American vagrant. Photographs were posted at www.surfbirds.com and with the help of American and European ornithologists

we identified the bird as a Red-throated Pipit *A. cervinus*. Here we present full documentation of this record, including photographs, and discuss the species' distribution and patterns of vagrancy.

Description

The following is based on field notes and photographs taken by DB.

Size, shape and structure.—Small (c.14 cm), approximately the same size as Rufous-collared Sparrow *Zonotrichia capensis*, but more slender and elongated compared to the latter. On the ground, it was more upright with an elegant, long-legged appearance. It resembled one of the smaller *Anthus* species from the Old World. *Head.*—Crown olive-brown with fine dark longitudinal streaking, extending to the nape and hindneck. Conspicuous buffish-white supercilium starting at base of bill and reaching far beyond eye towards nape. Eyestripe and lores with dark wash in front view, otherwise appeared unmarked. Ear-coverts and neck-sides uniform olive-brown and unmarked. Dark moustachial stripe and prominent dark malar stripe. Submoustachial stripe, chin and throat



Figures 1–2. First-winter Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus*, Río Verde, prov. Esmeraldas, Ecuador, 28 March 2008 (Dušan M. Brinkhuizen)

uniform buffish-white. Poorly differentiated eye-ring. *Upperparts*.—Heavily streaked mantle with four prominent black and two white stripes. Streaked rump and uppertail-coverts. *Underparts*.—Pale buffish-white. Breast and flanks heavily streaked with solid black longitudinal stripes. Belly and undertail-coverts unstreaked. *Wings*.—Median and greater coverts dark with pale fringes, forming two fine wingbars. Dark tertials equidistantly spaced, with buffish-white fringes on inner and outer webs. Tertial length overlapped with primaries, i.e. no visible primary projection. *Tail*.—Dark except for outer-tail feathers: t6 mainly white, t5 with white tip. *Bare parts*.—Slender, pointed bill, mainly black with yellow base to lower mandible; tarsi pale pink; dark irides. *Vocalisations*.—Called repeatedly in flight 1–3 times: a sharp and long drawn-out *pssssssii*.

Identification

The identification of pipits can be difficult, especially outside the breeding season or extraliminally. Our photographic documentation confirms the bird's identification as a Red-throated Pipit, safely excluding other species.

Seven species of pipit occur in mainland South America with Páramo Pipit being the only species previously recorded in Ecuador^{1,12,13,16}. Of these, Correndera Pipit *A. correndera* is most superficially similar to Red-throated Pipit. Both species have well-streaked upperparts with distinct black and white stripes forming 'braces' on the mantle¹⁶. Correndera Pipit can be separated from Red-throated Pipit by (1) its less contrasting head pattern—the supercilium and submoustachial stripe are less prominent; (2) the presence of streaked ear-coverts and neck-sides, which are unmarked in Red-throated Pipit; (3) a smaller and less distinct dark malar stripe; and, most diagnostically, (4) the tertial spacing. As in 'large' pipits of the Old World, the shortest and central tertials are relatively longer in Correndera Pipit¹. As a result, distances between the tertial tips are unequal, whilst in Red-throated Pipit these are evenly spaced (Fig. 3). Furthermore, Correndera Pipit has a stouter bill, which is pinkish, not yellowish, at the base.

The chief confusion species for Red-throated Pipit is the Eastern Palearctic Pechora Pipit *A. gustavi*, which is the only other similar-sized pipit with such prominent streaking on the mantle, rump and uppertail-coverts^{1,9,12,15}. As in Red-throated Pipit it has prominent 'braces' on a contrastingly patterned mantle. Differences between the two can be subtle as they can be very similar in plumage. A strong identification mark of Pechora Pipit is the short but distinct primary projection beyond the tertials (Fig. 3c)^{1,9,12,15}. In contrast, the long tertials of Red-throated Pipit reach the tips of the primaries and cover the remiges on the folded wing.

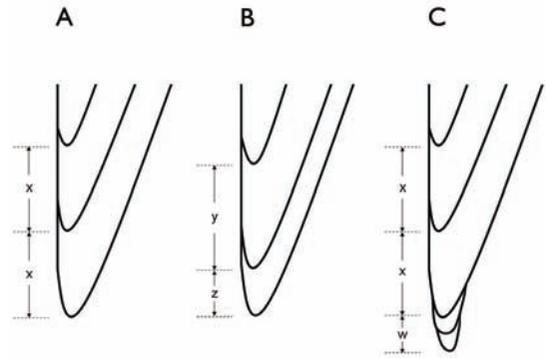


Figure 3. Schematic representation of right-wing tertial feathers of (a) Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus* showing equal distances between tertial tips, (b) Correndera Pipit *A. correndera* with shortest and central tertials being relatively longer resulting in unequal distances between tertial tips, and (c) Pechora Pipit *A. gustavi* showing equal distances between tertial tips and prominent primary projection.

The buffish breast of Pechora Pipit often contrasts with a whitish belly, whilst Red-throated Pipit has more uniformly buff-coloured underparts. Pechora Pipit lacks distinct pale tips to the inner webs of the tertials, as in first-winter Red-throated Pipit. Furthermore, it also has a noticeably larger bill with a pinkish, rather than yellowish, base^{1,9,12,15}.

Other species that might be confused with first-winter Red-throated Pipit are first-winter Rosy Pipit *A. roseatus* and Meadow Pipit *A. pratensis*. However, Rosy Pipit has a diagnostic pale drop at the rear of the supercilium, dark lores and a dark base to the lower mandible¹. Meadow Pipit is overall less contrastingly patterned with much less streaking on the mantle, rump and uppertail-coverts^{1,3,9,12}.

The combination of characters, such as prominent streaking on back, rump and uppertail-coverts, mantle 'braces', white edges to the inner tertials and yellow base to the lower mandible, together with equidistantly spaced tertials and absence of primary projection only match Red-throated Pipit^{1,3,9,12,15,16}. The drawn-out *pssssssii* call supports the identification. In the field, the call reminded us of a Tree Pipit *A. trivialis*. Red-throated Pipit can sound confusingly similar to Tree Pipit, but is usually longer and less harsh^{1,12}. In general, adult Red-throated Pipits show rufous on the supercilium, throat and breast, although a small number of adult females may lack any trace of rufous, and thus appear similar to first-winters^{1,15}. The fresh plumage, lack of any rufous on the head and the distinct malar stripe indicate that the Ecuador bird was probably a first-winter.

Distribution and occurrence

Red-throated Pipit breeds on tundra across a narrow band of the Arctic ranging from northern Scandinavia to western Alaska^{1,3,4,16}. Although eastern and western populations have been distinguished^{1,3}, plumage variation appears clinal and the species is best considered monotypic^{1,16}. It is a long-distant migrant, arriving on the Siberian tundra in late May and departing in late August^{1,3,4,16}. Western populations winter principally in Africa whilst eastern birds winter mainly in South-East Asia^{1,3,16}. Vagrants have occurred in Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Borneo and even Australia^{1,2}. Red-throated Pipits (presumably from eastern breeding populations) also occur regularly during autumn migration well south of their breeding grounds, along the Pacific coast of North America. Annual numbers vary dramatically but most records are in late September through October and come from coastal central California south through northern Baja California^{5,7}. Recently, small numbers have been found during winter in southernmost Baja California, Mexico, and there are two records further south in Mexico: a bird in Colima in March 1992 and one in Michoacán in April 1988⁸. Spring records from North America outside of Alaska are exceedingly few⁷. Autumn 2007, during which the Río Verde bird would presumably have reached South America, was considered a year of moderate numbers in California^{6,11}.

Our observation, the southernmost record in the Americas, is the first published record of Red-throated Pipit for Ecuador and South America. The increasing number of observations along the Pacific coast of the USA and Mexico may indicate that the species occurs more regularly than previously thought. This record supports the idea that some of these birds wander even further south to winter in the Neotropics.

Acknowledgements

We thank Per Alström, Bert de Bruin, Willem-Jan Fontijn, Alvaro Jaramillo, Marnix Jonker, Cin-Ty Lee, Rudy Offerens and Rik Winters for their assistance in identifying this pipit. Per Alström and Alvaro Jaramillo also shared additional information regarding identification of other species. María Lorena Córdova helped prepare the Spanish summary and Guy Kirwan, Alex Lees and Steven Mlodinow commented on the submitted version of this manuscript.

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