



Plate 276. Water Pipit, Barns Ness, East Lothian, 1 April 2013. © Stuart Gillies

## Photo ID spot: Water Pipit

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The identification of Water Pipit is well covered in current field guides and family guides, but due to the increase in records and unprecedented photographic opportunities, I felt that a brief photo identification spot would be worthwhile to aid observers unfamiliar with this interesting species.

In a Scottish context, the first accepted sighting was at Aberlady in 1968, with further singles or a few birds recorded almost annually since the 1980s. Subsequently, the Water Pipit has become a scarce winter visitor in Scotland, mainly south of the Forth/Clyde estuaries. Lothian accounts for almost half of all Scottish records followed by Ayrshire with about a quarter.

At least some of the rise in records may be attributed to increased observer knowledge of identification criteria, field experience and, conjecturally, a rise in interest among birders following the split from Rock and Buff-bellied Pipits by the BOURC in 1983!

Of note, the birds wintering and seen on passage in Scotland tend to be found on the coast in association with Rock Pipits rather than the expected wintering habitat of inland marsh and cress beds. This behaviour has also been noted in Northumberland where the preferred wintering habitat is similar i.e. sandy beaches giving way to a rocky littoral with favoured feeding areas often flushed with fresh water.



Plate 277. Water Pipit, Barns Ness, East Lothian, 1 April 2013. © Stuart Gillies



Plate 278. 'Scandinavian Rock Pipit', Barns Ness, East Lothian, 13 March 2017. © Stuart Gillies



Plate 279. Rock Pipit, Barns Ness, East Lothian, 30 January 2017. © Stuart Gillies

The Water Pipit is also a rare example of south to north winter migration in the Northern Hemisphere as our birds are presumed to originate in the mountains of Southern Europe.

In this short article, I would like to use photographs to help those observers less familiar with the main identification features of Water Pipit to be able to pick them out with confidence from their close relative the Rock Pipit.

Water Pipits generally arrive in Scotland from October and leave by early to mid-April. Here, I will concentrate mainly on winter plumage, as the birds tend to moult extensively into the very different summer plumage (Plates 276–277) from around mid-March when there is a real possibility of confusion with some

Scandinavian (*littoralis*) Rock Pipits (Plate 278), which can look very similar.

It is interesting to note that the bird shown in Plates 276–277 was ringed in Lothian and returned to the same area the following winter.

General impression: in my experience, the first sign of a Water Pipit at distance is of a very pale bird. The underparts are generally white or slightly off-white and the streaking is mainly confined to the breast giving a much brighter and cleaner impression than Rock Pipit.

The upperparts are usually a warm brown colour unlike the grey to olive range found in Rock Pipit (Plate 279). Usually there is a prominent, pale supercilium (though not always, see Plate 282).



Plate 280. Water Pipit, Barns Ness, East Lothian, 25 January 2016. © Stuart Gillies



Plate 281. Water Pipit, Barns Ness, East Lothian, 25 January 2016. © Stuart Gillies



Plate 282. Water Pipit (bird 1), Skateraw, East Lothian, 30 January 2017. © Stuart Gillies



Plate 283. Water Pipit (bird 2), Skateraw, East Lothian, 2017. © Stuart Gillies



**Plate 284.** Water Pipit (bird 3), White Sands Bay, East Lothian, 25 February 2017. © Norman Milligan

Upon closer inspection, a good suite of features should make identification relatively straightforward. Most birds I have seen have a warm brown crown (some with greyish cast) with prominent supercilium as above. The crown is generally the same colour as the nape (although winter birds can show greyish nape) and mantle (the latter being largely unstreaked cf. Meadow Pipit). The colour of the rump and upper tail coverts are invariably a warm brown, which is, in my experience, diagnostic. The two covert wing bars are paler and more obvious than in Rock Pipit. The outer tail feathers are pure white and are usually obvious in flight (*littoralis* Rock Pipit can have white on the outer tail, but look at other details). Leg colour is variable, typically a dark reddish brown (almost identical to Rock Pipit in winter). The bill is relatively long and strong (as in Rock Pipit) with a yellowish base to lower mandible - although, again, this feature is variable (Plates 280–281).

In terms of general habits, Water Pipits tend to be more wary and cautious of human presence than Rock Pipits in my experience. They will loosely associate with feeding Rock but can be very aggressive (territorial) towards them at times.

To my ear, the call is very similar to that of Rock Pipit, but it is said to be distinguishable to the experienced ear.

With at least three individuals wintering along a short stretch of East Lothian coast in 2016/17, an excellent opportunity presented itself to illustrate some of the variation between individuals. Two of the individuals could be observed loosely associating at Skateraw and the mouth of the nearby Dry Burn. One of these birds was notable for its very weak supercilium, giving it a very plain-headed appearance but was otherwise typical in its remaining plumage features (Plate 282). The second bird was easily recognised in having a greyish cast to the crown and nape and prominent white tip to the tail and more extensive streaking on the belly (Plate 283). A third individual, which I would describe as 'typical' was observed at White Sands Bay (Plate 284).

At the time of writing (early March 2017), Water Pipits and *littoralis* Rock Pipits are starting their moult into breeding plumage. Compare Plates 278–279 to help with separating these forms at this time of year.

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