

Photo Essay – Water and Rock Pipits

In a perverse sort of way, pipits have long been among my favourite passerines. Their quiet colouration, complex patterns, subtle songs and song flights and cryptic nesting habits have always made them challenging birds to get to know well and contribute to the problems novice birders sometimes experience in their identification.

Until fairly recently both Water and Rock Pipits were considered to belong to the same species, as subspecies. Today, Water Pipit has full species status and Rock Pipit occurs in the county as two subspecies. Of the two species it is the Water Pipit that is the most sought-after by birders and often provides identification challenges. This photo-essay includes a good series of photos mostly taken in the county recently, along with some others of an earlier vintage.

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*

The Water Pipits we see in Kent arrive in mid-autumn from their breeding grounds in the upland zone of central Europe, notably the Alps. They tend to favour lowland wetland habitats in Britain where they remain until springtime. In Kent, the Stour Valley is a key site, with the wetlands of Stodmarsh and Grove Ferry being prime localities. They are a bit variable, but are usually a dull earth-brown on the upperparts with rather pale white to cream underparts. Key features are a prominent pale supercilium, white wing bars on both greater and median coverts, whitish outer tail feathers and variable amounts of dark streaking on the underparts which tends to become fainter on the flanks. They can be told from Meadow Pipits *Anthus pratensis* by their dark legs, while Meadow pipits have rather different, more olive, upperparts colour and different call. Once spring arrives and the birds are getting ready to return to the alpine zone, they undergo a significant moult which converts their rather sombre plumage into something much more striking, with a blue-grey crown, nape and ear coverts and a wonderful peachy wash on largely unstreaked underparts, a treat to behold at Grove Ferry in March!



Water Pipit, Sandwich Bay by Steve Reynaert



Water Pipit, Sandwich Bay by Steve Reynaert



Summer plumage Water Pipit, Norfolk April 2018 by Steve Gantlett/www.cleybirds.com

Rock Pipit *Anthus petrosus*

Kent is blessed by the presence of two subspecies of Rock Pipit. The nominate race ***Anthus petrosus petrosus*** breeds in the county in two disjunct populations, one on the chalk cliffs of the

Thanet coast from Minnis Bay to the Western undercliff in Ramsgate; the second population occupies the cliffs from Kingsdown to Hythe. Within these areas is a total population of 50 – 60 breeding pairs. This makes the Rock Pipit rarer in Kent than many other more iconic species, such as Cetti's warbler or Nightingale. It is also significant that the next adjacent populations are either at Flamborough Head, Yorkshire to the north and Beachy Head, Sussex to the west. The breeding population in Britain is remarkably sedentary, indeed, the only ringing recoveries from UK ringing of more than 20 km are of birds dispersing from the Northern and Western Isles of Scotland. *Petrosus* is highly adapted to exploit the sub-littoral habitat and consequently the birds are able to remain on territory all year, useful given that rock pipits are highly territorial and inclined to dispute ownership vigorously against any intruders.



Rock Pipit petrosus, Kingsdown by Steve Reynaert



Rock Pipit petrosus, Kingsdown by Steve Reynaert



Rock Pipit petrosus, Kingsdown by Steve Reynaert

In winter 'Rock pipits' can frequently be found on shorelines of estuaries and coastal marshes well away from typical breeding habitats notably along the Thames and Medway shores. These birds appear to be practically identical to the nominate race, but are most likely to be of the Scandinavian race ***Anthus petrosus littoralis***. There has been much controversy surrounding whether this taxon can be effectively separated from *petrosus* in the field, but most informed opinion supports the view that, in winter at least, the inherent plumage variability of both subspecies added to ambient light conditions makes the identification of single birds in the field virtually impossible. To my eyes winter *littoralis* seem to often show a hint of a pale supercilium, but I can confirm that even with a row of study skins in a museum setting it is frustratingly difficult to do better than chance in picking a winner! As the name implies, the Scandinavian Rock Pipit breeds across the Nordic countries and Baltic states, migrating across the North Sea to winter in Britain and milder climes along the Channel Coasts.



Rock Pipit littoralis, North Kent by Barry Wright



Rock Pipit littoralis, North Kent by Barry Wright

Although they are virtually impossible to separate in winter, by the time the *littoralis* birds are getting ready to depart they have mostly moulted into the beginning of breeding plumage, when they are more easily separable from the nominate race. They show some similarities to breeding plumage Water pipits, and indeed it has been said that *littoralis* is intermediate between Water and Rock, being

most like a *petrosus* in winter, but more like a *spinoletta* in summer. Some show noticeably grey crown, ear-coverts and nape, and a pale supercilium, with a tendency to a greyish suffusion over olive green mantle and scapulars. Some can show some pink suffusion on the upper breast, but the few I have seen in this plumage in Northumberland seem to show a malar stripe and more breast streaking than *spinoletta* in spring.



Rock Pipit littoralis spring plumage, Sandwich Bay by Tony Morris



Rock Pipit littoralis spring plumage, Sandwich Bay by Tony Morris

My thanks to the photographers who provided the images, Steve Reynaert, Barry wright, Tony Morris and Steve Gantlett.

References

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