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This is a short paper produced by Mike Hodgson.

# Water & Rock Pipits In Northumberland

## WATER & ROCK PIPITS IN NORTHUMBERLAND

by Mike S. Hodgson

Water Pipits *Anthus spinoletta* are rare (less than ten records per annum) spring and autumn passage migrants in Northumberland which seem to occasionally winter in the county in very small numbers. The first documented occurrence was a single bird at St. Mary's Island between 30th March and 4th April 1956 (Galloway & Meek, 1983). Another was there in March 1962 and two at Holywell Pond in February 1964 (*Trans. Natural History Society of Northumberland, Durham and Newcastle upon Tyne*). Since then, there have been records of a further 68 birds accepted to the end of 2008. Figure 1 shows the annual totals between 1970-2008 and Figure 2 the occurrence by month (source *Birds in Northumbria 1970-2008*). There is an obvious spring peak in March presumably as birds move back to their central and southern European breeding grounds but it is interesting to note there are almost as many records in the winter months between November-February inclusive.

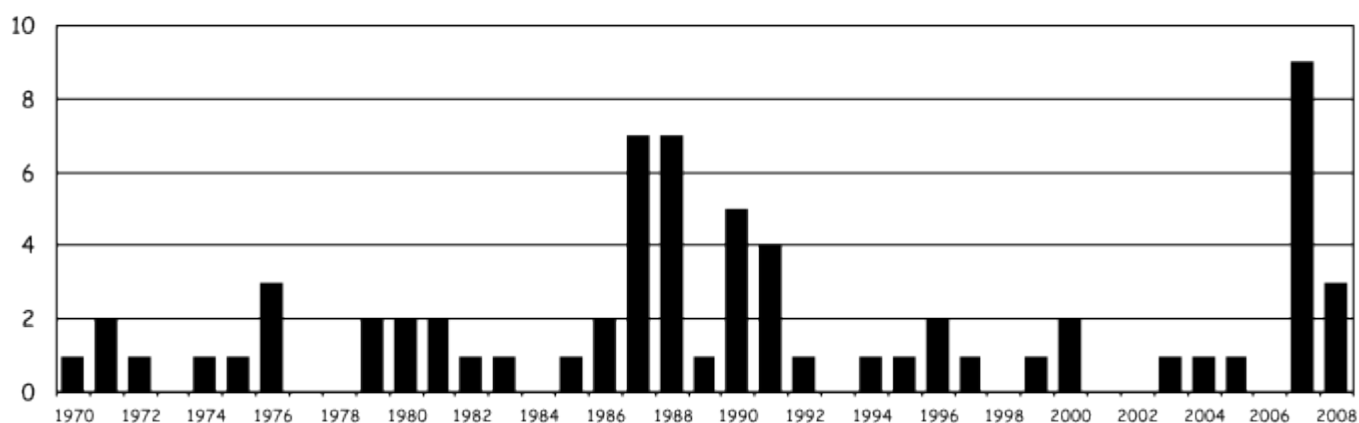


Fig 1 Numbers of Water Pipits recorded in Northumberland by year

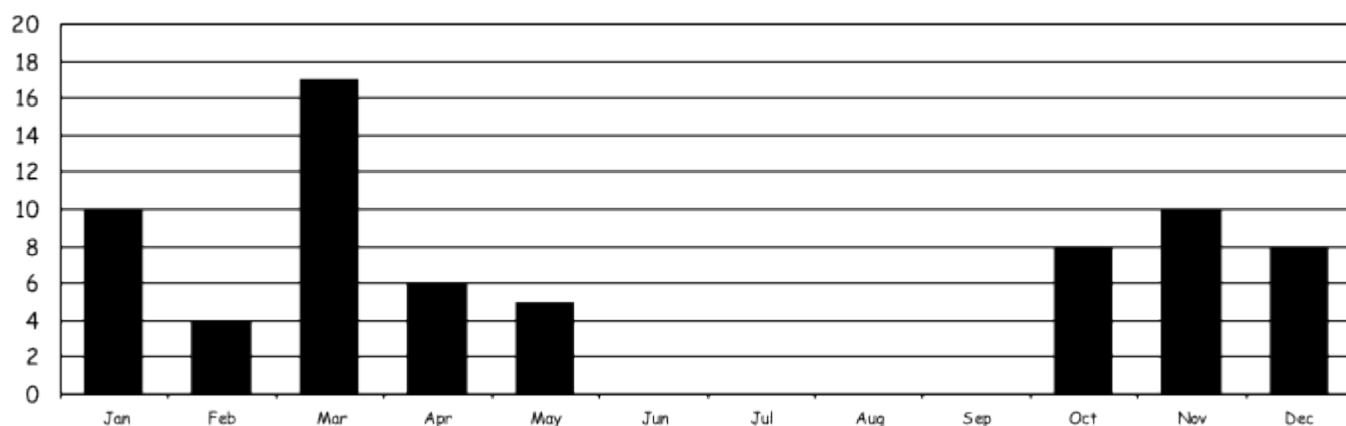


Fig 2 Numbers of Water Pipits in Northumberland by month (i.e. first found) 1970-2008

Birds have generally not lingered long and, coupled with their well-documented habit of being relatively shy and wary, at least in Britain, probably few local birders have really been able to achieve prolonged observations of them. However, during the winter months of 2007/2008 & 2008/2009 there were at least three apparently wintering birds which gave the opportunity to catch up and get reasonable views of the species in non-breeding plumage. These involved single birds at West Allotment Pond and at St. Mary's Island in the first winter period and again at St. Mary's Island in the second. Since early November 2009 a single bird has been seen almost daily at the north end of Whitley Bay beach, again allowing prolonged views with patience.

There are many useful and accurate descriptions of Water Pipit in non-breeding plumage available (e.g. Alström *et al*, 2003) and it is not the intention to repeat here all of the field characteristics needed to identify the species. Rather, since the successful use of digital photography has resulted in a good number of images of 'local' birds becoming available these will be used to try and assist observers. This, of course, is also offered with particular reference to possible confusion with the Scandinavian race of Rock Pipit *Anthus petrosus littoralis* which occurs regularly in the county on spring passage (when it is sometimes relatively easy to identify in summer plumage) and may well winter, although currently in unknown numbers, or even our 'own' Rock Pipits *Anthus petrosus petrosus* which can show very variable plumage patterns.



Water Pipit - Whitley Bay Beach 9th November 2009

(photo Tom Tams)

This shows most of the main features, in winter plumage, in this clear portrait. Note the well-defined white wing bars formed by tips to the median and greater coverts, white fringes to the tertials, pure white outer web to the majority of the outermost tail feather, white belly and lower underparts, conspicuous white supercilium and indistinct streaks on the mantle. This photo also shows a hint of contrast between crown/nape colour and the browner back. Leg colour appears to be variable but this bird is showing quite pale legs. As has been said elsewhere, the overall impression can be like a small 'thrush'.



Water Pipit - Whitley Bay Beach 9th November 2009

*(photo Tom Tams)*

The same bird. This shows the fine and slightly 'blurred' brownish streaks across the sides of the upper breast meeting, but less dense, across the front and becoming very thin and indistinct down the sides and upper flanks. The bill is distinctly two-toned with an obvious orange-tinged base of a third to a half of the lower mandible.



Rock Pipit

(photo Tom Tams)



Water Pipit (lower) with Rock Pipit (photo Colin Bradshaw)

The all-important pattern and colour of the outer tail feathers helps to clinch an identification of tricky birds. In the Rock Pipit (above left) the outer web (along almost the full length) is diffuse smoky whitish which extends on to the tip of the inner web and upwards in a narrowing triangle or wedge. The very tip of the second outermost tail feather barely shows any lightness.

In the Water Pipit (above right) the outermost tail feather is clearly pure white along the outer web and also the tip of the inner web together with an obvious white tip (and wedge) on the second outermost tail feather. It is important to see the pattern of white on both outermost tail feathers.



Rock Pipit Feb 2008

(photo Ian Fisher)



Water Pipit Dec 2007

(photo Mike S. Hodgson)

The Rock Pipit (above left) shows somewhat sullied whitish along virtually the whole of the outer web of the outermost tail feather but definitely not pure white. The Water Pipit (above right) shows how the white in the outer tail can also appear as a prominent tip, an effect probably enhanced by the very white wedge on the second outermost tail feather. Note also the contrast in colour between the two central tail feathers and the dark portions of the outers. Care should be taken however, with assessing the outer tail feathers as some Rock Pipits can show a prominent whitish tip or very white-looking webs due to wear, bleaching or bright sunlight.



Rock Pipit Nov 2009



Water Pipit Nov 2009 (photos Mike S. Hodgson)

Rock Pipits on the Northumberland coast during autumn and winter seem to show a wide and occasionally confusing variation in plumage types (and some may belong to the race *P.c. littoralis* - see below). The very light-breasted bird above approaches the underpart pattern of Water Pipit but note the faint yellowish cast to the underparts, more whitish on the Water Pipit (right above), the thicker or more smudgy flank streaks, much thinner and 'cleaner' on Water Pipit, and the less well-marked face pattern of Rock particularly the supercilium (the pale eye-ring tends to stand out more because of a lack of distinct supercilium on Rock).



Water Pipit Dec 2007 (photo Colin Bradshaw)



Water Pipit Jan 2009 (photo Alan Curry)

The two photos above (of presumed different birds) hopefully illustrates how varying light and viewing conditions can alter appearances and plumage colours. Consideration should also be given to the vagaries of colour rendition in digital photography!

Below are a few images attempting to show the variability of Rock Pipit plumage during winter months.



Rock Pipit Nov 2009

(photo Tom Tams)



Rock Pipit Dec 2007

(photo Colin Bradshaw)



Rock Pipit Dec 2007

(photo Colin Bradshaw)



Rock Pipit Nov 2009

(photo Mike S. Hodgson)

In typical spring plumage, provided all of the key features are seen, Water Pipits are usually distinctive birds but there is always the risk of confusion with well-marked and bright Rock Pipits of the *littoralis* subspecies. The long range photos below of a spring Water Pipit were taken in April 2009. Note the pink-washed almost un-marked underparts, broad white supercilium, white wing bars and the contrast between greyish crown and brownish mantle.



Water Pipit April 2009



(photos Ian Fisher)

## Voice

Alström *et al* (2003) indicate that the call of Water Pipit is similar to Meadow Pipit *A. pratensis* but generally indistinguishable from Rock Pipit. Other references seem to bear out this comment. However, several observers have noted that some Water Pipits (locally) do give a slightly different call-note to Rock which can be useful. Certainly the West Allotment bird when first found in 2007 gave a distinctly different call-note but then seemed to revert to a call, which to my ears at least, was indistinguishable from Rock. Colin Bradshaw commented (*in litt*) on the St. Mary's Island bird in December 2007 "It's call was persistently different to all the Rock Pipits. They had a sibilant or sseeeping quality to their calls. This one was shorter and slightly harsher - zzic.... I had direct comparison .... with Rock (Pipit) and it was obviously different. Whether I could have picked the call in isolation, as in the West Allotment bird, I don't know". The bird at Whitley Bay Beach during November/December 2009 consistently gave a single call or a short series of the call which is clearly different to nearby Rock Pipits.

A recording of this Water Pipit made in December 2009 can be heard here : [Click to Play](#)

For comparison a recording of Rock Pipit made in November 2009 can be heard here : [Click to Play](#)

## Behaviour of wintering coastal Water Pipits

Because a Water Pipit or Pipits have been present in the St. Mary's Island area during the last three winters it is probably worthwhile describing some of the behaviour. The bird present during 2007/2008 was found in the north bay near the island causeway and for the most part was quite wary of humans and any approach too close was likely to cause the bird to fly considerable distances, unlike the nearby Rock Pipits which were far more tolerant. A bird was found on 29th October 2008 along the north edge of Whitley Bay Beach but soon moved to the same area as the previous winter's bird for much of its stay. Although wary, this individual would allow a slightly closer approach (but not much!). On 5th November 2009 a bird was again found on the north end of Whitley Bay Beach but remained there until at least the end of January 2010. These birds have all vigorously defended areas against Rock Pipits often flying long distances to chase intruders from areas where they had previously been feeding. These chases were often punctuated with single flight calls or short series of calls as described above. Curiously, Meadow Pipits *A. pratensis* seem to be tolerated. As well as feeding along upper 'dry' seaweed strand lines, they have also fed in amongst very 'wet' seaweed areas far down the beach, often flying back to chase off intruders in the higher areas. During a very cold spell in December 2009 the bird was feeding almost on the tide-line in amongst a flock of Sanderling! Each winter, the boulder clay cliffs have been actively used as feeding areas with birds utilising the full height from beach-level to under any overhanging grass at the cliff top. Both discrete wintering areas have obvious outflows of fresh water across the sandy beaches and through seaweed strewn tide-lines.

There are precedents shown by ringing for Water Pipits returning to the same areas in subsequent winter periods (Taylor & Marchant in Wernham *et al*, 2002) so it may be worthwhile searching previously visited localities (and with similar habitat as above) in the county each winter.

Some references have indicated that Water and Rock Pipits can be separated ecologically with the former inland and the latter typically coastal. However, it should be noted that in Northumberland there have been a number of 'inland' records of Rock Pipit. Unusually, one wintered at Whittle Dene Reservoirs between November 1990 and March 1991 and there have been several others recorded (principally during October) ranging from that site to other localities just a few kilometres inland. All of these records appear to have been birds of un-determined race but during March 2008 single *littoralis* were identified at Haughton Strother and Caistron.



### 'Scandinavian' Rock Pipits *Anthus petrosus littoralis*

Rock Pipits of this race are (at least) scarce winter and passage visitors in the county and are almost certainly under-recorded. This subspecies has long been known to occur as Bolam (1932) said 'A passage migrant, to which are now assigned Hancock's specimens, one at least of which he told me long ago had been sent to him from North Sunderland in 1887'.

Nationally, there are few ringing recoveries of known *littoralis* but a growing volume of observational data in autumn and winter (see Taylor in Wernham *et al*, 2002).

Figure 3 shows the annual totals between 1970-2008 and Figure 4 the occurrence by month (source *Birds in Northumbria 1970-2008*). The spring passage peak is obvious and coincides with probably the easiest time to correctly separate the subspecies.

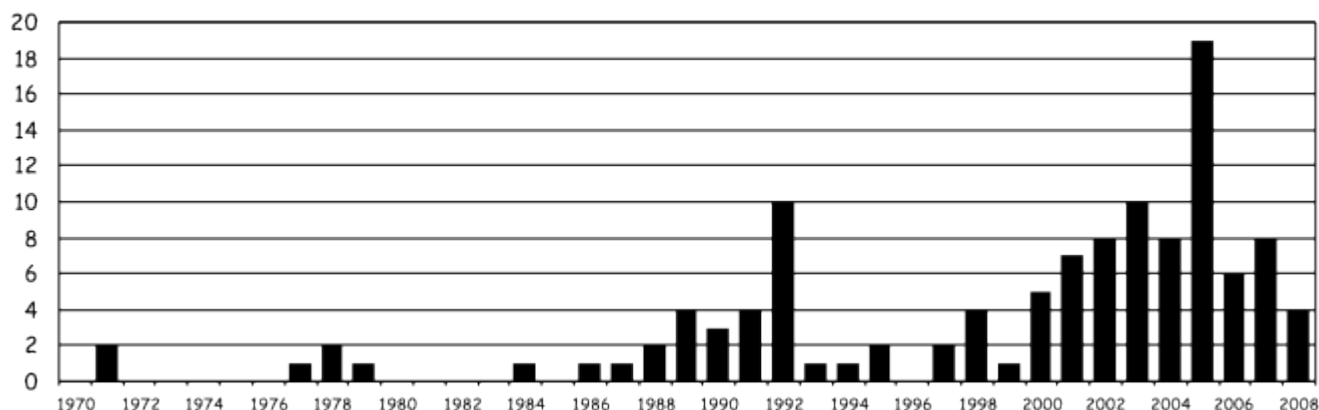


Fig 3 Maximum numbers of 'Scandinavian' Rock Pipits recorded in Northumberland by year

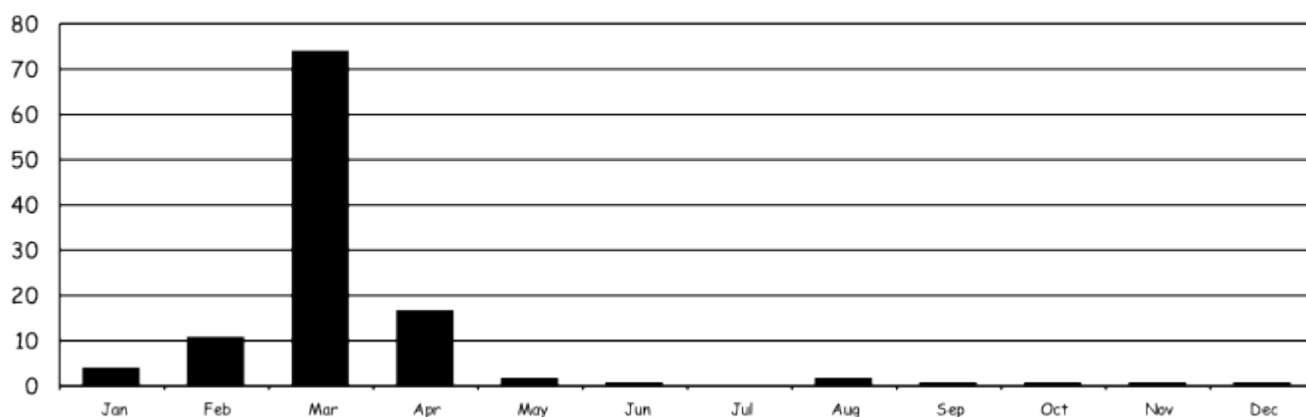


Fig 4 Numbers of 'Scandinavian' Rock Pipits in Northumberland by month 1970-2008

Svensson (1992) considered that *littoralis* is 'very similar to nominate (race), and apparently inseparable in autumn'. Alström *et al* (2003) noted that in summer *littoralis* is 'often indistinguishable from typical *petrosus*'. In winter they give a number of plumage pointers to possible separation of the two races but also state that 'single specimens of *petrosus* and *littoralis* cannot be reliably separated in winter plumage'.



'Scandinavian' Rock Pipit March 2008

*(photo Gary Woodburn)*

The bird shown above is perhaps what could be considered as 'typical' 'Scandinavian' Rock Pipit in early spring plumage with a well-defined supercilium, an extensive pinkish flush to the underparts and greyish upperparts.



'Scandinavian' Rock Pipit March 2007



*(photos Ian Fisher)*

The bird illustrated in the two photos above is probably not quite so advanced or bright in its spring plumage although there is a distinct pink flush to the un-marked chin and upper throat and a good supercilium.



This late autumn bird (left) was judged to be almost certainly *A. p. littoralis* because of the very uniform grey mantle and rump and a faint but distinct trace of pinkish on the underparts presumably remnants of a brighter summer plumage. The outer tail feather was dusky greyish or at least not pure white on the outer web.

Left : 'Scandinavian' Rock Pipit Nov 2005  
(photo Mike S Hodgson)



Above & left : 'Scandinavian' Rock Pipits May 1996

Two different birds on Bardsey Island, Gwynedd. Note the very conspicuous supercilia, warm pinkish flush to the sparsely streaked underparts and greyish tones to the upperparts. The dusky white pattern on the outermost tail feather can be seen well despite the heavy abrasion and feather damage on the right-hand bird.



(photos Ian Fisher)

### 'Problem' Pipits

Because some of these Water and Rock pipits can be difficult to separate there (unsurprisingly) have been a number of birds seen in the county which have caused confusion as to the correct identity. A bird present at Snab Point, near Cresswell between 30th January-3rd April 1994 was identified by different observers as both Water Pipit and 'Scandinavian' Rock Pipit. The County Records Committee left the record as 'undetermined'.

A bird present at St. Mary's Island Wetland on 7th June 2003 was initially thought to be a summer-plumaged Water Pipit. This bird was scrutinised closely by a number of observers and descriptions obtained. Eventually, the bird was accepted as a 'Scandinavian' Rock Pipit by the CRC and a full account has been published in *Birds in Northumbria* 2003. Despite showing various plumage characteristics that could have been pro Water or pro 'Scandinavian' Rock, the clinching feature was the olive-toned rump. A long-range photo below of this individual shows how 'Water Pipit'-like this bird was (note the broad dark malar patch on the neck-side).



'Scandinavian' Rock Pipit June 2003

(photo Mike S. Hodgson)

Another bird, on first glance remarkably Water Pipit like, was present at Hauxley NR on 11th June 2009. Fortunately, a series of photographs was obtained but even they may not be sufficient to enable a definite identification to be made. Two images are given below but, judging by comments made by a number of local birders with wide experience, it may turn out to be another 'undetermined'!



Pipit sp. *Anthus sp.* June 2009



(photos Ian Rae)

Because of their scarcity, the Northumberland County Records Committee still requires a full description of any claimed Water Pipit (at any time of the year) before acceptance can be made into the historical record. Records of 'Scandinavian' Rock Pipits should be supported by at least some description of key features (enough to separate it from Water and nominate Rock Pipits) and photographs of both are always welcomed.

### **Acknowledgements**

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