

## American Pipit *Anthus rubescens*



**Folk Name:** Water Pipit, Titlark, Skylark, Brownlark

**Status:** Migrant, Winter Visitor

**Abundance:** Uncommon to Common

**Habitat:** Bare-ground, short-grass fields, pastures, lawns, mudflats

The American Pipit was once called the Water Pipit and the Titlark. For a time, it was called the Skylark, similar to the Eurasian Skylark—a famous soaring songbird. However, the two are not closely related.

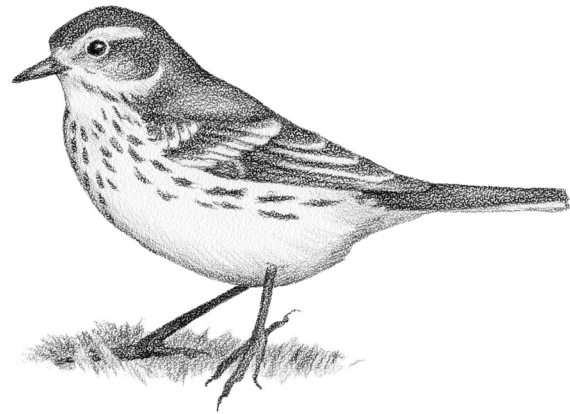
“What of the word ‘lark,’ as meaning a frolic? The Anglo-Saxon word ‘lark,’ meaning play. So a sky lark is the bird that frolics, or plays, or rejoices, or ‘larks,’ in the air or sky.” —*The People’s Press*, Winston-Salem, March 6, 1857

The American Pipit is a fairly nondescript winter visitor usually encountered in small loose flocks foraging on the ground in large open areas of very short grass, mudflats, pasture, or dirt fields. It has a distinctive flight call that sounds very much like *pip pit*. At 6 ½ inches, the pipit is slightly smaller than our common bluebird. It is gray brown above, and its underparts are buff white and streaked. Look closely for a light line above the eye and white outer tail feathers.

While on the ground, this bird walks rather than hops, which distinguishes it from the sparrows, and it often wags its tail. Pipits eat a wide variety of invertebrates and seeds. Pipits have a distinctive flight pattern. In April 1936, T.G. Pearson shared this description with readers of *National Geographic Magazine*: “In flight they undulate through the air, but at times have a drifting uncertain butterfly manner of movement different from that of other birds.”



American Pipit. (Jeff Lemons)



In the late 1870s, Leverett Loomis considered the “Brownlark” as an “abundant” winter resident in Chester County, SC. In North Carolina in 1939, C.S. Brimley noted that “[r]ecords of Pipits... seem to be totally lacking from the Piedmont region” and requested additional pipit records be submitted for use in the second edition of *Birds of North Carolina*. William McIlwaine responded to Brimley’s request with a list of American Pipit flocks he had observed while living in Charlotte: a flock of 200 on December 30, 1929; 40 on February 10, 1930; 60 on March 10, 1930; 50 on November 16, 1930; 2 on January 30, 1931; and an estimated 200 on March 26, 1931. McIlwaine found the 1929 flock at Selwyn Farms: “On another field just at sundown I ran into another flock of what I first thought to be larks. ...The give-away came as they ran around on the ground...they ‘teetered’ and in flight showed a ‘pronounced white in their outer-tail feathers.’”

David Wray was surprised to find a flock of 50 American Pipits in Hickory in Catawba County on 6 September, 1945. He submitted the record to *The Chat* and noted that this was the earliest date the species had ever been recorded in North Carolina. This early arrival date was later incorrectly published as 2 September in the third edition of *Birds of North Carolina* in 1959. Wray observed a flock at that same location on 25 September the following year. He noted the pipits would allow him to approach within 15 feet before moving off as a group, just a few yards, and landing again.

Pipits are a regular find on Christmas Bird Counts conducted in the Central Carolinas. Most counts tally under 100 individuals, but over 400 were tallied on the York CBC in 2001. Pipits occasionally linger into spring, and they are occasionally recorded on Spring Bird Counts. Our latest departure date for this species is a pair seen

on 15 May in 2015. Ornithologist Chris Hill reported a sizable flock estimated between 800 to 2,000 American Pipits near New Salem in Union County, NC, on March 18, 2017. This appears to be the highest count recorded in the region.

American Pipits breed in the Arctic and also at high elevations in the Rockies and western Canada. Perhaps

the easiest way for a Carolina birder to observe American Pipits on their breeding grounds would be to visit Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado, drive up Trail Ridge Road, and stop at any of the roadside stops just below the Alpine Visitor Center. Pipits can be heard singing and observed within 50 yards of the road, but watch out for Big Horn Sheep.