

Sprague's Pipit

22 Apr 1998

Union Hills A., Cerro Gordo Co., IA

*Carolyn Fischer, *Jan L. Walter

IBL 68:95

Record Number: 98-19

Classification: A-D

DOCUMENTATIONS

Carolyn Fischer, 48 Lake View Ct., Mason City [11/27/98]

Jan L. Walter, 934 13th SE, Mason City 50401 [11/27/98]

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 68:95

Records Committee: IBL 69:90

VOTE: 6 A-D, 1 NA

A-D, A remarkable opportunity to study this species. I was concerned about the behavior of sitting on a fence wire since this species is almost always seen in the air or on the ground. I did, however, find a reference in Bent of one sitting on a telephone pole, so I guess they use perches occasionally.

A-D, The flesh-colored legs, thin pointed bill, white outer tail feathers, and streaked crown, nape, and mantle eliminate American Pipit, Horned Lark, longspurs, and sparrows.

A-D, Very complete descriptions. The slender pointed dark bill should eliminate any sparrow. Other possibilities also carefully compared. Habitat is not quite right, but this should be a migrant.

A-D, Great description of a well-seen bird. Nice job of eliminating possible vagrants. Sprague's probably moves through the state annually but is difficult to find during migration.

A-D, Extensive details are given by two experienced Iowa observers, one of whom has seen Sprague's Pipit in Texas. The details of plumage and soft parts are all consistent with Sprague's Pipit, including thin bill, dark eye with indistinct eye ring, pale face, streaking from head to back, limited breast streaking, buffy flanks, white outer tail feathers, and white wing lining. The behaviors--sitting on a fence wire and flying into a plowed field--are not typical for Sprague's Pipit. The most likely small bird with white outer tail feathers at this location and date would be Vesper Sparrow. The observers excluded a sparrow by bill shape and direct comparison with Savannah Sparrow. Based on the details given, the observers would have noted malar stripe, shoulder patch, and flank streaks of a Vesper Sparrow if they had been present. I am convinced that this was not an American Pipit by the combination of flesh-colored legs, streaked back, pale face, lack of flank streaking, and lack of tail pumping. Features of Sprague's Pipit that were not recorded include overall buffy-brown coloration, pale lower mandible, scalloped wing coverts, and indistinct wing bars. Also, pipits usually make call notes (but some of us do not hear them well) and have a swooping flight pattern. The habitat strikes me as very unusual (fence wire, plowed field), especially when the tall

grassy areas of Union Hills Waterfowl Production Area were nearby. The fact that "the bird flew out of sight to the north, then returned" does fit Sprague's Pipit and would be unusual for Vesper Sparrow.

NA, Timing of sighting good for Sprague's Pipit, but also for juvenile Horned Lark. One observer mentioned Horned Lark, but only adults. One observer mentioned "short tail made bird seem chunky"--this fits Horned Lark better than Sprague's Pipit. Pale legs are indeed suggestive of Sprague's, but do not rule out juv. Horned Lark. Descriptions do not eliminate juv. Horned Lark.

RE-VOTE (by mail): 6 A-D, 1 NA

A-D, I encourage the NA voter to look at the photos of the respective species in the Audubon Master Guide to Birding. Volume 2, page 297 has an excellent photo of a juvenile Horned Lark, probably the age of the bird reported by Fischer/Walter had it been a Horned Lark. Even a non-birder would describe the bird pictured as spotted, not streaked. Then go to the Sprague's Pipit described in the doc. Regarding leg color, the Audubon guide photo does not show leg color of the Horned Lark well, but it appears gray. The streaking issue and leg color were the two key arguments for the NA vote, and the most definitive (streaking) is put to rest by these photos. This bird was correctly identified by two experienced, careful birders who have provided a detailed and complete description.

A-D, After considering the NA voter's comments, I agree that several of the features described could apply to juvenile Horned Lark as well as Sprague's Pipit. However, I believe the pattern of the undertail as described matches Sprague's Pipit but does not match Horned Lark. The underside to the tail on a Horned Lark is mostly black with very narrow white edges. On Sprague's Pipit the underside of the tail is mostly white with a narrow black central stripe, which was noted in both documentations. See Peterson's Eastern Birds for an illustration of the undertail of adults of both species. (I'm operating under the assumption that the undertails of adult and juvenile Horned Larks are identical, an assumption which is implied but not confirmed by my available references. If this is incorrect, someone please correct me.) I also think the description of the bird's face and streaked upperparts is more suggestive of Sprague's Pipit than juvenile Horned Lark.

A-D, This bird can sit on fence wires. The thin dark bill and streaked crown, nape and back and flesh colored legs all favor Sprague's Pipit over Horned Lark Juv. The white outer tail feathers in flight are good, because the Horned Lark tail appears dark to me, even though outer tail feathers are light.

A-D, NA points well taken and we probably all should get better educated on juvenile Horned Larks. However, a few points which sway me towards acceptance: 1) Horned Larks may be independent in southwest Iowa in late March but I have some reservations on how early nesting success may occur in northern Iowa. Bent cites a study where it required to [two?] successive 40 degree days to begin the nesting process. It could happen that

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babies would be running around in Cerro Gordo County by April 22nd but the odds are much lower. 2) Observers described the streaking on the head and mantle. The attention both paid to other details adds credence to this description which is consistent with Sprague's Pipit. 3) Although juvenile Horned Lark was not specifically addressed, size comparison to that species was. While there may not be much difference there, it does tell me that Horned Lark was being considered.

A-D, Using Paul Lehman's article in the Aug. 1997 issue of Birding, these are the points I think support an ID of Sprague's Pipit: 1. Leg color flesh, dark in Horned Lark. 2. Longer legs than sparrow, larks have short legs. 3. Streaked back (dark streaking). 4. Streaked crown, larks have a distinctly spotted "salt-and-pepper" look. 5. Sprague's more vertical posture could make the tail look relatively shorter than the horizontal lark. 6. I don't know what the flight style of a Sprague's Pipit is, but the flight pattern of the Horned Lark has always reminded me of a Robin's. This bird in flight apparently didn't make the observers think "Horned Lark." I don't think landing on a fence "strongly" favors Horned Lark, although landing on the bare dirt certainly does. Sprague's shouldn't be far from grass.

A-P, The responses to the internet query remove my doubt about this species sitting on fences. The description and flying-out-of-sight just don't fit juvenile Horned Lark, although such birds can be confusing.

NA, See submission. This is a difficult species to describe.

IOURC Comments- Ross Silcock

98-14 Black-necked Stilt

I wish to amend my comments to read as follows:

A-D, Description eliminates other possibilities.

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Vote: NA

My concern, as stated previously, was that the possibility of a juvenile Horned Lark was not addressed. Juv Horned Larks can be very similar to Sprague's Pipits; I actually documented a "Sprague's Pipit" in southwest Nebraska some years ago that was rejected by the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union Records Committee on this very basis. I agreed with the NOURC's determination (also, my sighting was in August!).

Juvenile Horned Larks can be fully grown and essentially independent as early as the end of March in Iowa (personal observations in Fremont County).

While adult Horned Larks have blackish legs, this is not necessarily true of juveniles.

Thomas S. Roberts (A Manual for the Identification of the Birds of Minnesota and Surrounding States. Museum of Natural History, University of Minnesota. 1955) states:

"Juvenal Plumage.-- ...bill, legs, and feet dusky flesh color." Juvenile Horned Larks also have plain faces, blackish tails with white outer rectrices, and indistinct wingbars.

All features noted in the observers' descriptions could apply equally as well to juvenile Horned Lark, except possibly the mention of "streaking" on the "crown, neck, also back";

it is not clear whether use of the word "streaking" implies a field character different from the appearance of the crown, neck, and mantle of a juvenile Horned Lark, which are

"dark brown or sooty black, speckled rather sparsely with white (the tiny white spots wedge-shaped on the tips of the feathers, broadening into terminal edgings on the

scapulars)" (Roberts). The descriptions do not mention the ground color of the back and describe the streaks as "dark", but if the descriptions had been written with juvenile

Horned Lark under consideration a more critical comparison of these characters might have been made. The behavior of perching on a fence strongly favors Horned Lark over

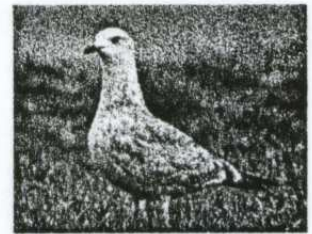
Sprague's Pipit, as does the statement "short tail made bird seem chunky".

The votes A-D by Committee members also do not address the possibility of juvenile Horned Lark.

I submit that the descriptions are suggestive but not conclusive for Sprague's Pipit, but may be judged more favorably if a pattern of occurrence of Sprague's Pipit in Iowa becomes clear in the coming years.

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Memo from aj..... August 8, 1998



To: Tom Kent
From: Ann Johnson
Subject: BNST Record

Jeez, I wrote THAT?!? Must have been a bad hair day! I know what I meant – Black-necked Stilt is a nearly annual occurrence anymore so the record was not unexpected (OK, the double-negative is bad), it's just that the most of them seem to be coming from eastern Iowa which kind of surprises me. I hadn't realized there were nesting records in Illinois. Guess I've always thought of these guys as more western birds and would think more records would appear from Riverton, Waubonsie WA, etc.

Let's just reword my comment to something like this:

Unmistakable bird that has become expected annually.

Saw your note on Bird Chat about Sprague's Pipit on fences. When Russ, Beth, Roy Godwin and I did our trip to Churchill a few years ago, we spent time in southern Manitoba looking for pipits and longspurs. Had great scope looks at a Sprague's because it spent so much time on the fence, so much so in fact that we finally had to walk away from it to go look for other birds. Russ may remember better than I just how much time was actually on the wire. I believe it may have more frequently sat on a fence post, but there was certainly some wire time in there, too.



If there's anything hot on the Birdline while Fuller is gone, can you send me a quick note so I can get it on the web update. It's amazing how many people are using it these days. Thanks.
Hologrambirds@worldnet.att.net

See you in September?

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Subj: FW: [BIRDCHAT] Sprague's Pipit behavior
Date: 98-08-06 14:40:09 EDT
From: james-fuller@uiowa.edu (Fuller, Jim)
To: thkent@aol.com ('thkent@aol.com')

> -----Original Message-----

> From: rednot@juno.com [SMTP:rednot@juno.com]
> Sent: Thursday, August 06, 1998 8:09 AM
> To: james-fuller@UIOWA.EDU
> Subject: Re: [BIRDCHAT] Sprague's Pipit behavior

> Jim,

> I never have seen this. I have seen American Pipits, in migration,
> sit
> on barbed wire fences and also up in small trees.

> I am guessing that your committee is running into the same problem
> that

> we sometimes have: judging the validity of a record that has some odd
> features. We have debated whether one can find Baird's Sparrows along
> roadsides and/or sitting on fence lines. While I feel that it is
> extremely unlikely, it perhaps doesn't totally rule out the sighting.

> My
> guess is that in Colorado, some observers mis-identify pale-lored
> subspecies of Savannah Sparrows, which are fairly common roadside and
> wire birds, as Baird's Sparrows, which are confined nearly exclusively
> to
> short grass prairie in migration.

> Our committee recently ruled against accepting a Sprague's Pipit
> record
> that used the old "Golden Guide" Birds of North America as a
> reference,
> citing that the observed bird looking "exactly like the picture in the
> book". This pretty much ruled out Sprague's Pipit for me as that
> picture
> is virtually unrecognizable as this species.

> Mark Janos
> Pueblo, Colorado
> Colorado Bird Records Committee, Chairman
> rednot@juno.com
> [visit the CFO website at:
> <http://www.frii.com/~hopko>]

> On Wed, 5 Aug 1998 11:03:48 -0500 "Fuller, Jim"
> <james-fuller@UIOWA.EDU>
> writes:

> >Chatters,
> >Has anybody out there experienced Sprague's Pipit sitting on fence
> >wires? Please respond to Tom Kent, Secy, Iowa Records Comm.at
> >thkent@aol.com
> >Thanks,
> >Jim Fuller

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Subj: Sprague's Pipit on wires
Date: 98-08-09 12:02:51 EDT
From: chaniot@pacific.pacific.net
To: thkent@aol.com (Tom Kent)

Date: Wed, 05 Aug 1998 11:03:48 -0500
From: "Fuller, Jim"
Subject: [BIRDCHAT] Sprague's Pipit behavior

Chatters,
Has anybody out there experienced Sprague's Pipit sitting on fence wires? Please respond to Tom Kent, Secy, Iowa Records Comm.at thkent@aol.com

Thanks,
Jim Fuller
james-fuller@uiowa.edu

Hello, Tom,
I'm responding to the above query on BIRDCHAT.

The first Sprague's Pipit I ever saw (26 July 1954, Nelson Co., ND) was sitting on a fence wire. This was, to me, unexpected behavior, and it caused me to scrutinize the bird very carefully before making the identification. All SPPIs I have seen subsequently have been on the ground.
George Chaniot

----- Headers -----

Return-Path: <chaniot@pacific.pacific.net>
Received: from relay20.mx.aol.com (relay20.mail.aol.com [172.31.106.66]) by air12.mail.aol.com (v47.2) with SMTP; Sun, 09 Aug 1998 12:02:50 -0400
Received: from pacific.net (pacific.pacific.net [199.4.80.1])
by relay20.mx.aol.com (8.8.8/8.8.5/AOL-4.0.0)
with ESMTP id MAA07423 for <thkent@aol.com>;
Sun, 9 Aug 1998 12:02:49 -0400 (EDT)
From: chaniot@pacific.pacific.net
Received: from [199.4.80.34] (ts1-34.pacific.net [199.4.80.34])
by pacific.net (8.8.7/8.8.7) with SMTP id JAA19824
for <thkent@aol.com>; Sun, 9 Aug 1998 09:02:44 -0700 (PDT)
Date: Sun, 9 Aug 1998 09:02:44 -0700 (PDT)
X-Sender: chaniot@pacific.net (Unverified)
Message-Id: <v01530500b1f3077a0187@[199.4.80.25]>
Mime-Version: 1.0
Content-Type: text/plain; charset="us-ascii"
To: Tom Kent <thkent@aol.com>
Subject: Sprague's Pipit on wires

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Subj: sprague's pipit
Date: 98-08-18 13:31:48 EDT
From: larry_igl@usgs.gov (larry igl)
To: thkent@aol.com

Dear Tom:

I noted Jim Fuller's message on Bird Chat concerning Sprague's Pipits. Although not common, during the breeding season, we occasionally see Sprague's Pipits singing from fence wires and from the ground.

Sincerely,

Larry Igl
Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center
US Geological Survey
Jamestown, ND 58401
larry_igl@usgs.gov

----- Headers -----

Return-Path: <larry_igl@usgs.gov>
Received: from rly-za05.mx.aol.com ([172.31.36.101]) by air-za02.mail.aol.com (v48.1) with SMTP; Tue, 18 Aug 1998 13:31:48 -0400
Received: from www.npwr.org (pickle.cr.usgs.gov [159.189.96.215])
by rly-za05.mx.aol.com (8.8.8/8.8.5/AOL-4.0.0)
with ESMTP id NAA07130 for <thkent@aol.com>;
Tue, 18 Aug 1998 13:31:43 -0400 (EDT)
Received: from pickle.cr.usgs.gov ([159.189.96.215]) by www.npwr.org
(Post.Office MTA v3.1 release PO205e ID# 0-0U10L2S100) with SMTP
id AAA54 for <thkent@aol.com>; Tue, 18 Aug 1998 12:31:57 -0500
Received: from 159.189.96.121 by pickle.cr.usgs.gov (Lyris SMTP service); 18 Aug 98 12:31:57 CDT5
from: <larry_igl@usgs.gov> to: <thkent@aol.com>
Message-ID: <35D9BA64.B86DB34B@usgs.gov>
Date: Tue, 18 Aug 1998 12:31:16 -0500
From: larry igl <larry_igl@usgs.gov>
X-Mailer: Mozilla 4.01 [en] (Win95; I)
MIME-Version: 1.0
To: thkent@aol.com
Subject: sprague's pipit
X-Priority: 3 (Normal)
X-Corel-MessageType: EMail
Content-Type: text/plain; charset=us-ascii
Content-Transfer-Encoding: 7bit

DOCUMENTATION FORM
For Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

98-19

What species? Sprague's Pipit How many? 1

Location? Union Hills Waterfowl Production Area So. of Ventura, Cerro No. Co

Type of Habitat? Rolling hills, open short grassy area, & cultivated field

When? date(s): April 22, 1998 time: 10:00 am to 10:25

Who? your name and address: Carolyn Fischer 48 Lakeview Ct. Mason City

Others with you: Jan Walter, Tim Phalen, Pat Hansen

Others before or after you: none

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, undertail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

Saw a bird on the barbed wire fence about 4 FT. off the ground. The bird was slightly larger than the Savannah Sparrow which was also on the fence about 6 FT. apart and closet to me. I could see a thin pointed dark bill, small dark eyes, light area around eyes, dark streaking from base of bill up over forehead & crown back to nape, mantle also streaked. Throat was light, breast was lightly streaked belly white, buffy area along flanks. Legs flesh-colored.

Similar species; how eliminated: (over)

Ruled out Sparrows & longspurs, this bird did not have a conical beak.

American Pipit, this bird did not have dark legs, no tail bobbing, not a heavy ear patch.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about the identification? no
If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), optical equipment.

Sunny, good light from behind us - Swarovski 8x30
30 FT. to fence (stepped it off) + estimated up to 100 ft out in field.

Previous experience with species and similar ones:

Saw Sprague's in Texas (winter) American Pipit 5 in the last 5 years in Cerro Norde Co.

References and persons consulted before writing description:

Birds in Iowa - Kent + Dinsmore, Birds of N. America, Western Birds - Peterson

How long before field notes made? 30 mins. this form completed? 7 hours

Send completed form to Field Reports or CBC editor (address on back cover of Iowa Bird Life).

upper wings dark, overall dark brown -

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Bird flew down to the ground, outer tailfeathers white, tail black, undertail white with narrow black band. Wing lining white,

Walked along the edge of cultivated field, did not bob tail. The birds shorter tail made the bird appear slightly chunky.

The bird flew out of our sight to the north, then returned to the same area on the fence a few minutes later -

Although this bird has not been accepted by the Records Committee it does breed in the northern Great Plains and migrates through Iowa

DOCUMENTATION FORM
For Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

98-19

What species? Sprague's Pipit How many? 1

Location? West edge of Union Hills Waterfowl Production Area s.w. Cerro Gordo Co.

Type of Habitat? Narrow, grassy fence row adjacent to plowed field

When? date(s): April 22, 1998 time: About 10AM to 20 to 25 min

Who? your name and address: Jan L. Walter 934-13th SE, Mason City Ia. 50401

Others with you: Carolyn Fischer, Patricia Hansen, Tim Phalen

Others before or after you: Others couldn't relocate it later in the day

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, undertail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

Size: Slightly larger than Savannah Sparrow sitting about 6' away on barbed wire fence. Bill: Longer and thinner than the sparrow's. Eye: dark. Head: indistinctly marked tan face. Dark streaking on crown neck, also back. Wing: brown with white linings Tail: white outer feathers, underside of tail; white outer feathers, black central feathers forming a narrow black band down center of tail. Underparts: whitish with some streaking across breast. Legs: flesh colored and longer than the sparrows. Voice: not heard Behavior: First seen sitting on the barbed wire fence. Flew out into plowed field, landed on top of a furrow and stopped about 100' out into the field. Took off and flew away, giving good views of upper parts and shape of flying bird. Circled around and flew back to the fence giving a good view of underparts as it flew. After a few minutes, it flew back out into the field, landed about the same place as before.

Similar species; how eliminated: Slender bill eliminated, sparrows, finches, and Long spurs. Horned Lark is larger and has black on face and breast, American Pipit has darker, dimly streaked back, dark legs, buff wing linings and bob its tail. Brown Tree-pipit has pink, not flesh colored legs and a yellowish wash on the breast, Olive tree-pipit has coarse breast spots, not faint streaks. Pechora Pipit has buffy, not white outer tail feathers. Meadow Pipit has brown legs. Red-throated Pipit has darker upperparts and heavy, not faint breast streaking.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about the identification? No

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), optical equipment.

Lighting: Bright sun, coming from behind

Distance: Closest 30 (est) Out in the field 100' and farther (guess)

Optical equipment: 8x32 Swift binoculars

Previous experience with species and similar ones: I have had a lot of previous experience with similar species except other Pipits. I have seen and studied a few American Pipits, but none of the others.

References and persons consulted, before writing description: National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America Golden Press Birds of North America, Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding, Peterson Field Guide to Western Birds

How long before field notes made? at the time this form completed? Next day

Send completed form to Field Reports or CBC editor (address on back cover of Iowa Bird Life).

There are records for Sprague's Pipit from all states bordering Iowa and many other eastern states BIRDS IN IOWA, Kent and Dinsmore 373

then walked, not hopped, down the top of a furrow and out of sight. It did not bob its tail

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