

Species: SPRAGUE'S PIPIT

Anthus spragueii

(Vernacular Name)

(Scientific Name-use binomial)

Date(s): 23 Aug 1976 Time Bird Seen: 1233 to 1235

Locality: Table Mountain, a restricted entry U.S. Govt. test site

Nearest Town: Boulder (site is 6 mi. north of town) County: Boulder

Other observers who independently identified this bird:

NAME

ADDRESS

TELEPHONE

None

Optical Equipment: 7 x 35 binoculars

If photographed, type of equipment used: None

Light Conditions: Noon, 3/10 cumulus, wind W at 8 kt, visual range 100 mi.

Distance from bird (how measured): 6 m to 20 m, or 20 ft to 70 ft (estimated)

Number of Birds Seen: One Sex: - Plumage: -

Describe the bird's overall behavior and demeanor:

First observed running between tumble weed clumps, over-growing N-S road. (I was driving a govt pickup, going to an abandoned test site). When approached within 6m, it flew down the road away from me, at a height of less than 1m, then settled into the weeds again. After about 20 sec, it walked into view again, in the right tire track of the road. I got the glasses on it, and slowly inched up on it. We repeated the flight down the road sequence three times, before it flew off at right angles, low.

Describe in great detail the bird's size, overall shape, plumage and color-pattern. Include details on shape of bill, wings and tail. Give particular emphasis to the marks you used to identify the bird. Reference to its resemblance in field guide descriptions is not enough. Describe what you actually saw in the field:

Bird was somewhat longer and more slender than the Lark Sparrows I was watching immediately before. White outer feathers seen on medium length brown tail, seen on first flight. Eye was dark - no yellow as in Sage Thrasher. Two dark throat streaks or whiskers setting off white throat. Pointed, slender bill, has slight downward curve hint. Darkish streaks on light breast, back heavily striped - like a Tree Sparrow. Tan or flesh colored legs - definitely not dark as in the Water Pipit. Faint eye line behind eye, ends in a chestnut collar. Before each short run, the bird leaned forward, and twitched in a side-to-side manner. Just a hint of two wing bars. Belly was very light, nearly white - no rufous wash as Water Pipit.

Here is an exact copy of my field notes, made on a 3x5 card as I was watching the bird:

Sprague Pipit? Brown tail w/white edge, dark eye - two throat streaks  
thin slightly curved bill, streaked breast - sparrow  
like back colors - flesh brown legs Chestnut streak  
down rear of cheek, runs



Describe the bird's song or call, if heard, including method of delivery, i.e., from perch, in flight, etc:

Not heard

Describe the habitat in which you observed this bird:

Two square miles of virgin, sod prairie - grama, buffalo, wheat, rye, and cheat grasses, Yucca, cactus, some rocks and boulders - tumble weed on over grown roads. Table Mountain stands about 30m above the surrounding terrain, very flat and level - not grazed since owned by Dept of Commerce for past 20 years - a few scattered buildings - few personnel present.

How were similarly appearing species eliminated?

Water Pipits had been seen twice in the three previous weeks on the tundra (Mt Audubon & Heart Lake), and the gray back, and buffy breast and belly were clearly not present. The legs were also light colored, blending with sandy road background. The tail was fully developed, and not short as in the immature Water Pipit. It was the back colors - bold black stripes separated by light brown that was most striking. Dark eye eliminates Thrashers, as did striped back. Running habit was also diagnostic, I learned later. Other common birds on Table Mt are Meadowlarks, Lark Sparrows, Vesper Sparrows, Mourning Doves, and in winter, Tree Sparrows. I have seen these all countless times. The bill was much more slender than a sparrow's, and seemed to curve down slightly. This may have been a trick of the bright day lighting. No thrushes have white edges to tail.

Prior experience with this and similarly appearing species:

This was the first Sprague's Pipit for me, but I have seen numerous Water Pipits. I have six thrashers and five thrushes on my life list, and four streaked breast sparrows. (I've also seen the New Zealand Pipit and the Sky Lark, also in New Zealand, and if you took away the Sky Lark's crest, you would nearly have my Table Mt bird)

Books, illustrations and advice consulted and how did these influence this documentation?

Robbins, Bruun, Zim, & Singer, Birds of North America; Peterson, Field Guide to Western Birds; Bailey and Niedrach, Pictorial Checklist of Colorado Birds. These confirmed my field notes and guess on what I'd seen. I was surprised by the few Colorado records in the latter reference. This report was written from notes made during x after        observation; from memory       

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