

Rec 10/4/98 wpl

## COLORADO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS - SIGHT RECORD FORM

NEW STATE RECORD

UNUSUAL RECORD 

ACCEPT 6-1

Species: Sprague's Pipit (*Anthus spragueii*)

Date: 18 October 1998

Number seen: one

Sex: unknown

Plumage: Basic

Locality: West side of Rd. 59, south of Rd. 30, south of Julesburg

Elevation: ?

Nearest town: Julesburg

County: Sedgwick

Time observed: about 10:00 MDT

Duration of observation: about 20 seconds in two views

**Description:** John Vanderpoel and I decided to look for a reported Sprague's Pipit (SPPI) south of Julesburg. We tromped around in two fields in the area. In the second field (a pasture left in native shortgrass with good, dense grass cover with *Opuntia*), after tromping around for about 20 minutes, we decided to give up. We started walking back to the vehicle when we kicked up an *Ammodramus* sparrow. We chased that bird around for some time, then finally lost track of it. As soon as we started heading back to the vehicle again, we kicked up a pipit. We both immediately yelled out, "Sprague's Pipit!" It had started flying directly away from us, but soon turned and flew back past us. We got good looks at the bird as it flew by us to land about 100 meters away. We chased after it, kicked it up once more and lost it for good. Though we really only saw the bird well in flight, we were able to note all relevant features.

The bird flushed virtually from our feet - it was pipit-shaped -- small, slender, thin-billed, but was obviously not an American Pipit -- it was pale brown with whitish underparts. The head was pale and plain -- the dark eye stood out on a virtually unpatterned face (auriculars the same pale color as the rest of the face). The pale brown back was scaled with a paler color -- individual feathers were fringed. The outer rectrices were white, contrasting with darker inner rectrices. The whitish underparts had thin, brown streaking on the chest; the belly was unmarked. The bill was somewhat pale; I did not note leg color.

When the bird flushed initially, it called and flew away from us for a short distance (approx. 5 meters) then made a sweeping 180° turn, all the while climbing. It was probably about 5-8 meters high when it passed back past us at a distance of only about 10 meters. The bird eventually reached about 20 meters in height before diving back to the ground about 100 meters away.

**Similar species eliminated by description:** Numerous species need to be considered: Horned Lark (HOLA) is eliminated by head and underparts patterns, size (it was much smaller than HOLA we had been seeing, though none in the immediate vicinity), and shape -- the bird did not show the bulky-chested and long, attenuated rear end look of HOLA. Even juvenile HOLA is ruled out by the above. Additionally, the behavior was unlike that of HOLA, as that species tends to flush at much greater distance. American Pipit (AMPI) is ruled out by overall coloration and head, upperparts, and underparts patterns. AMPI also tends to flush at much greater distances than did this bird. All sparrows are eliminated by the thin, pipit-like bill. Additionally, Vesper Sparrow is ruled out by the bird's small size and lack of strong face pattern. Savannah Sparrow (SAVS) is eliminated by tail pattern and shape (the bird did not have the short, notched tail of SAVS); though SAVS can show pale outer webs to the outer rect., this bird had very white outer rect. Pechora, Olive-backed, and Red-throated pipits are ruled out by back and underparts

patterns and the latter two are also eliminated by face pattern. Additionally, the escape behavior of SPPI is distinctive.

**Describe the bird's song and call, if given, including method of delivery (i.e. from perch, in flight, etc. duration):** The call the bird gave was the alternate call that I and others of my crew have heard from SPPIs in Mexico on the winter grounds. It is a somewhat two-noted call, brusque and unmelodious, unlike the "pip-pit" of AMPI. Most birds in Mexico give the typical "squeee-ee" call, but I have heard this alternate call five or six times there; I also heard it from a SPPI I flushed in southern OK in November 1998. Though John did not know the call, he still knew that the bird was a SPPI.

**What is your prior experience with this and similarly-appearing species?** I have seen in excess of 60 SPPI, with most of these being on the winter grounds in Texas and Mexico. Additionally, I have seen 1000s of AMPI, bazillions of HOLA, VESP, and SAVS, and no other species of pipit. I have spent 2-4 weeks during three winters running a grassland-bird survey project in northern Mexico for Colorado Bird Observatory. We spend most of our time tromping around in grasslands surveying for sparrows and SPPI. I am very familiar with the plumages and habits of SPPI due to running this project.

**Light conditions:** sun variably behind me and to my left

**Optical equipment used:** Zeiss 7x42

**Distance, and how estimated:** estimated closest distance at 1 meter

**Other observers who saw the bird with you:** John Vanderpoel

**Other observers who saw the bird independently:** I believe that a SPPI was reported in the vicinity by Richard Stevens, though I cannot say whether or not this is the bird he reported.

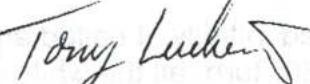
**If photographed, type of equipment and film:**

**List books, illustrations, recordings, other birders, etc. consulted and how this influenced your identification:**

**a) at time of observation:** none

**b) after observation:** none

**Reporting observer:** Tony Leukering

**Signature:** 

**Address:** Colorado Bird Observatory, 13401 Picadilly Road, Brighton, CO 80601

**Date report was written:** This report was written on 20 October 1998 (description) and 4 and 6 October 1999 (other information) from field notes written approximately eight hours post-sighting with no reference to field guides or other ID material.