

Blyth's Pipit Stiffkey Saltmarsh, Norfolk 2nd Oct 2015

James R McCallum

Late September 2015 offered reasonable weather conditions for migrant birds to arrive on the Norfolk coast but an obvious arrival never materialised. By the end of the month I'd bumped into a Red-breasted Flycatcher and a handful of Yellow-browed Warblers but surprisingly little else. The same weather conditions continued into early October and still nothing seemed to be happening but I kept plugging away as autumn is simply a great season to be out and about in the countryside. More frustrating for me from a work perspective was that, without warning, my annual exhibition venue was suddenly no longer available and I had a large show planned for mid November.

On the 2nd October I had arranged a couple of meetings at Wells-next-the-Sea to discuss possible alternative venues. I made an early morning visit to Garden Drove, Warham Greens to see what was about (very little) before going to the meetings then afterwards I revisited the site to see if further birds had arrived. No newly-arrived birds were apparent; instead two groups of birders were standing around moaning about how quiet it was. I had too much going on in my mind so was not really in the mood for talking to people – especially negative ones. So I decided to move on and try my luck elsewhere.

The marsh edge seemed like a good alternative and the solitude would provide a good opportunity to gather my thoughts as to what to do about a November exhibition. My expectations of seeing any migrants were pretty low and the long walk over the saltmarshes and across muddy creeks proved a good tonic for the venue worries. Arriving at the northern edge of the marsh I headed westwards along a higher ridge towards a line of dead gorse and pines – both sadly killed off by the 2013 tidal surge. On reaching the first gorse bushes a Skylark flew up calling from the path that meandered through the long grass. I spent the next hour or so wandering around the general area looking for birds and enjoying the landscape.

On my return what I initially assumed to be the same Skylark rose from the exact same spot so I followed it with my eyes as it headed low towards the saltings - suddenly I thought 'Hey, that looks like a large pipit!' Lifting my bins I managed to

get onto it before it dropped into the marsh. It was indeed a large pipit but it instantly struck me as looking a little 'odd' – the tail looked a little short for a Richard's and, interestingly, it was kept fanned rather than closed tight like Richard's frequently do. As it landed I could just hear a half-hearted 'shreep' call, it was poorly heard but I thought it sounded a little higher than Richard's with a strange whispering Red-throated Pipit quality about it. I placed little value on the call as essentially it was only a 'half-call' uttered on landing; I was, however, more intrigued by the odd short-tailed look...

I decided to make a large loop around to the south of where it landed then if it flushed there was a chance that it may return to the path from where it was first found. Thankfully it did just that and again it showed the same intriguing long-winged and short-tailed silhouette as before which put me in mind of a Tree Pipit as much as it did a Richard's. I was feeling a little edgy as I sensed that there was a chance that it might be something other than a Richard's so I approached the area with caution. Soon I caught my first glimpse of it on the ground – a fast run around one corner of the path that snaked through the long grass. I only had my 8x bins and so had to slowly follow its progress along the winding path and anticipate the moment when the bird would run around each corner. The views were therefore a series of quick snap-shots. Once the bird had come to one end of the grassy stretch it would fly the 100m back to the beginning of the path which meant that I'd have to make a wide loop around the area so as to not disturb it before repeating the process. Occasionally it would linger at the eastern end where the path opened into a small area of open short turf. Only on one occasion did it very briefly hover before landing.

Over the next hour I was able to piece together a picture of the bird. It looked very interesting - the bill was clearly short and pointed - the plumage was very contrasting above – the entire underparts were evenly washed with apricot buff - the breast neatly streaked but the malar area was not a very dominant feature of the plumage. However, when the bird was alert and upright it appeared quite big and, worryingly, there was an impression of it having a darker 'brow' above its supercilium (a pro-Richard's feature). On a plus side these concerns were countered each time it flew back past me – the short fanned tail combined with

the other pro-Blyth's features were interesting and worthy of a second look. I realised that I was unlikely to gain much additional detail using binoculars and as I didn't want to keep flushing the bird I decided to make the 3 mile round trip to the car to get my telescope.

Thankfully on my return the bird was still present and with much better views the notion that it might well be a Blyth's Pipit was firming up but I have to admit that I wasn't finding the ID easy and the process was causing me much self-doubt. The bill shape, structure and many plumage features looked very good but I was still puzzled by the apparent dark brow above the supercilium that I'd seen earlier in the afternoon and the notion that the bird didn't look particularly small, but to be fair there were no other species present to compare it with. Half the problem was that the bird wouldn't keep still and was very difficult to view as it constantly ran away from me and dashed around each corner of the winding path.

I was keen to get a second opinion so I phoned a few people whose judgement I value and thought might be able to nip out and give me a second opinion – Andy Bloomfield and Ash McElwee where the first I managed to reach but neither was able to join me. Ash very helpfully phoned me back with a list of features to check through. The bird didn't appear to have moulted any of its medium coverts so some of the key information didn't apply. While Ash was describing the pattern of T5 (something I was unlikely to see clearly in the field!) I suddenly noticed that the bird was sitting motionless facing me at the base of a *Suaeda* bush. The crown was now straightforward to observe in detail and, to my surprise, it was evenly streaked and the impression of a dark brow over the supercilium had vanished - the streaks were of an even width from the supercilium right across the crown.

Just at that eureka moment a Meadow Pipit flew off the marsh and buzzed the larger pipit and the two birds rose together, the large pipit giving a series of 4-5 loud 'chep' calls in quick succession! Two great moments rolled into one and I now strongly suspected that the bird was indeed a Blyth's Pipit.

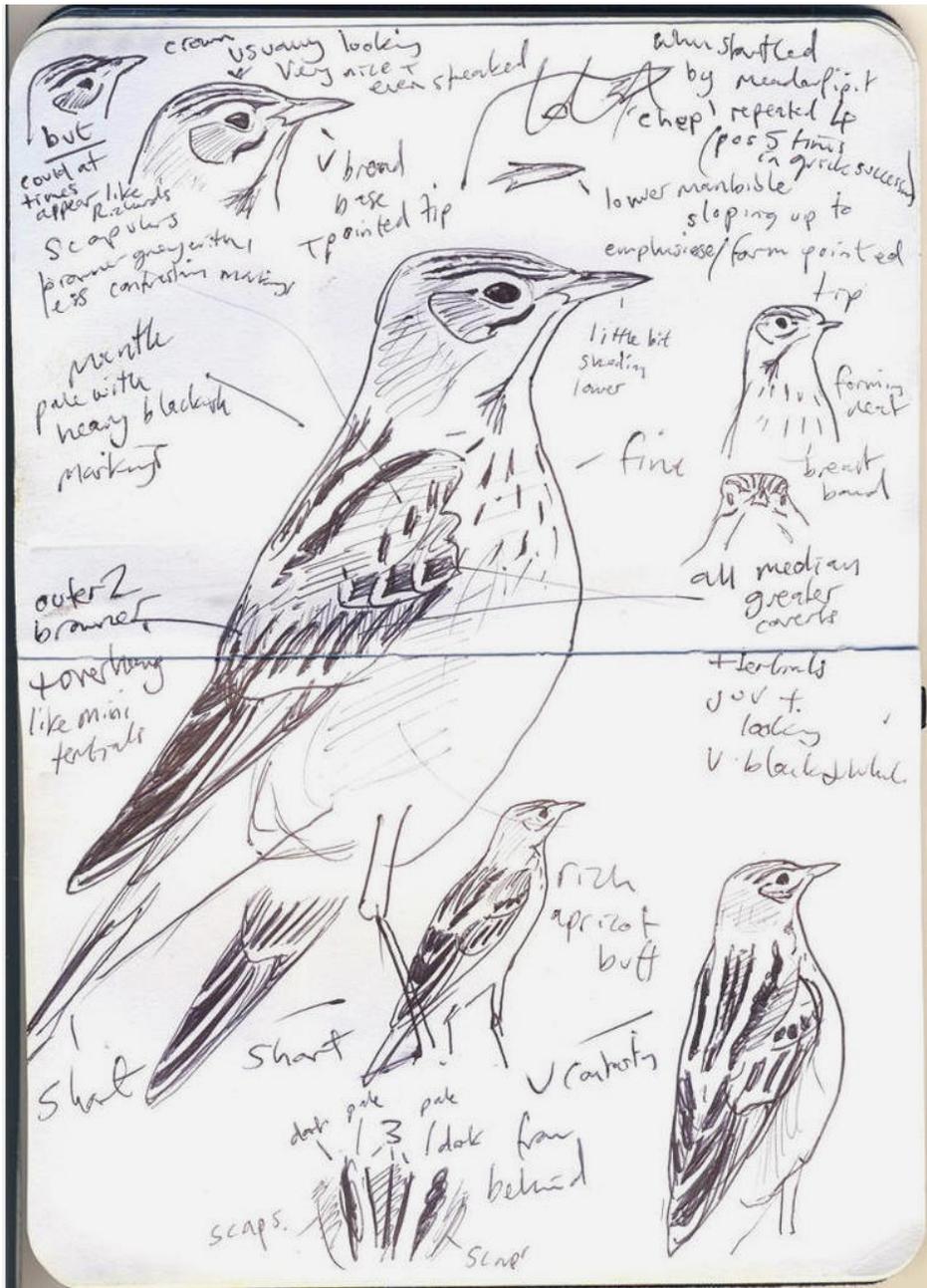
I thanked Ash for his help then managed to get hold of Mark Golley who planned to come over by coasthopper bus. Marcus Nash, at last, returned my missed calls

and was also on his way. I phoned RBA with the news of a 'possible Blyth's Pipit' as I was still panicking a bit and want to shake those horrible feelings of self-doubt before fully committing to the tricky identification. I was hugely relieved when first Mark, then Marcus arrived and on initial views both felt it looked very good for Blyth's Pipit. After critically checking the bird's plumage they agreed with all the features that I'd noted and Mark added that he also really liked the fact that the mantle was so boldly-marked with dark feathers – a pro Blyth's feature that I was not aware of at the time.

Having more people present it was much easier to manoeuvre the bird into areas which afforded longer, better views. It was then possible to view the bird at a greater range through telescopes and it became much more relaxed. Its initial upright alert posture was quickly abandoned and the bird now spent most of the time wandering around in a more horizontal posture – more reminiscent of the 'smaller pipits' than a Richard's Pipit. This horizontal relaxed posture also served to emphasise the relative shortness of the bird's tail and legs. (Even when upright and alert the bird never had that amazing leggy - almost knock-kneed - characteristic of Richard's Pipit).

I guess that much of the reason why the bird remained so upright and alert early in the observation was because I had to get close to the bird as I only had my 8x bins at this stage – the sketches were largely made during the early stages of observation, the bird is therefore depicted in this upright alert posture, whereas the photos, taken later, show the feeding bird in a more relaxed posture. I was slightly puzzled, not to mention pleased, that as soon as the bird became more relaxed the crown no longer gave them impression of having a dark brow above the supercilium and continually looked evenly streaked – perhaps this impression was caused when the bird was alert and the crown feathers pulled in tightly.

Now that Mark & Marcus had given it the 'thumbs-up' RBA was updated and a handful of people made it out there by dusk. The bird was seen the following morning at first light when Andy Stoddart and three others flushed it from the same path – it called 'chep' then landed in the saltmarsh to the north but was never seen again – presumably being a diurnal migrant it left soon afterwards.



Blyth's Pipit Stiffkey, 2nd Oct 2015

field notes (above), worked up sketches (opposite)

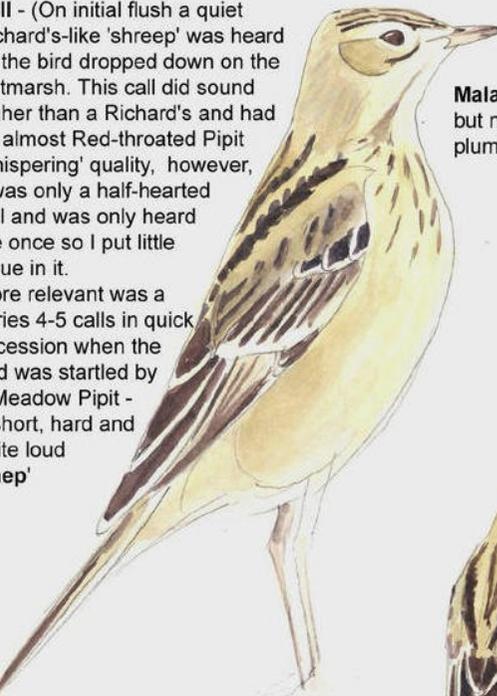
Blyth's Pipit, Stiffkey Saltmarsh, 2nd October 2015

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Crown - evenly streaked with fine black markings that merged to form series of black lines, evenly spaced over crown * however see bottom of page.

Call - (On initial flush a quiet Richard's-like 'shreep' was heard as the bird dropped down on the saltmarsh. This call did sound higher than a Richard's and had an almost Red-throated Pipit 'whispering' quality, however, it was only a half-hearted call and was only heard the once so I put little value in it.

More relevant was a series 4-5 calls in quick succession when the bird was startled by a Meadow Pipit - a short, hard and quite loud 'chep'



Tail distinctly shorter than in typical Richard's.

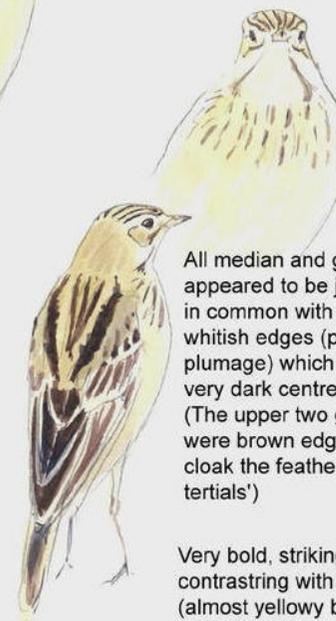
Legs subtly shorter than RP too - lacking that the big strong gangly-legged look so often seen in RP.

Bill - compared to Richard's - fairly short, broad-based and rapidly tapering to form a sharply-pointed tip.

Darker shading over upper mandible and small area of shading on lower towards tip

Malar stripe obvious but not a dominant plumage feature.

Fine, crisp blackish streaking across breast forming breast-band. Breast and belly having an even apricot buff wash - slightly darker on rear flanks.

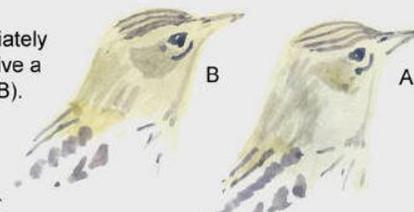


All median and greater coverts appeared to be juv. These feathers in common with tertials had crisp whitish edges (palest part of plumage) which contrasted with very dark centres to feathers. (The upper two greater coverts were brown edged and seemed to cloak the feather track like 'mini tertials')

Very bold, striking mantle streaks contrasting with a medium brown (almost yellowy brown) background colour.

The scapulars were more greyer brown with more diffused streaks.

* crown streaking even across head (A), however at times the two lines of streaking immediately above supercilium could occasionally merge to give a confusingly Richard's-like pattern esp. when alert (B). This caused me much ID problems at the time of discovery but later it was clear that the effect was caused by the bird's posture/attitude and it could be seen that the crown was in fact evenly streaked.



Cross btwn Richard's
and Tree Pipit in flight

cross btwn
Richard's
&
Tree Pipit



Short tail always spread in flight which seemed
very different from Richard's

short tail always
spread in flight
which seemed
very diff
from
Richard's
indent
(in centre of
spread tail)



Very long
wings & short
spread tail

Very long wings &
short spread tail.

Field notes - Blyth's Pipit Stiffkey, 2nd Oct 2015

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From the very first flush there were two noteworthy characteristics of the bird that grabbed my attention - the tail was seemingly always held spread or loosely spread during flight and the tail looked obviously shorter than that of a Richard's Pipit. It was obviously a 'large pipit' but the long-winged & short-tailed flight silhouette reminded me of a Tree Pipit.

I only saw it hover once briefly before landing.

Aside from a single brief half-hearted 'shreep'-type call it only called on one other occasion - a Meadow Pipit flew low over the perched bird which, seemingly startled, took flight uttering a short, hard 'chep' note 4-5 times in quick succession.



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(photo Eddie Myers)