

American Pipit *Anthus rubescens*

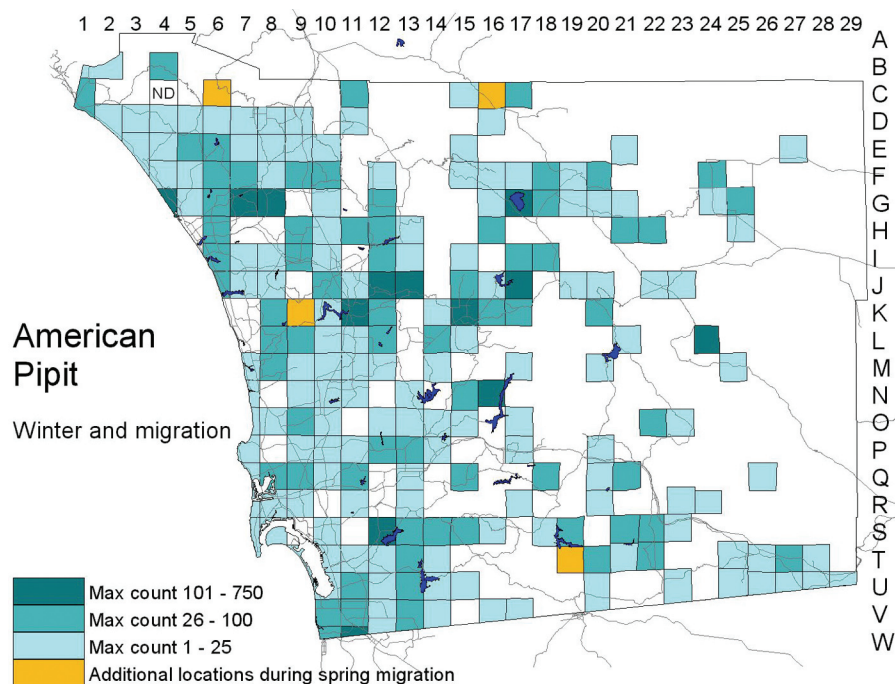
Breeding above timberline, the American Pipit reaches San Diego County as a winter visitor only. It is a bird of open country, visiting pastures, lawns, lakeshores, beaches, and expanses of bare dirt. In winter it is gregarious, flocks occasionally numbering in the hundreds. The pipit takes advantage of many of man's alterations of the environment: agriculture, reservoirs, city parks, ball fields, and golf courses. It is an opportunist, moving in to exploit habitats that are suitable only intermittently, like dry desert playas coaxed to life by rare winter rains.

Winter: The American Pipit is widespread on the coastal slope wherever there are large areas of its habitats. The largest numbers frequent lakeshores, with up to 750 at Sweetwater Reservoir (S12) 16 December 2000 (P. Famolaro) and 400 at Lake Henshaw (G17) 18 December



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

2000 (J. Coker). Pipits can be abundant in agricultural areas, too, with up to 200 near the Santa Margarita River mouth (G4) 28 February 1998 (P. A. Ginsburg), 300 at San Pasqual (J13) 15 January 2000 (D. and D. Bylin), and 200 in



the Tijuana River valley (W11) 16 January 2000 (P. Unitt). In the higher mountains, we noted them fairly regularly at 5400–5500 feet elevation in Laguna Meadow (O22/O23; up to 50 on 14 January 1998, P. Unitt) and once at 4900 feet near San Ignacio on the east slope of Hot Springs Mountain (E21; two on 11 December 1999, when one to three inches of snow lay on the ground, K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrdt).

In the Anza–Borrego Desert, the pipit occurs mainly on lawns and at sewage ponds (up to 50 in north Borrego Springs, F24, 21 December 1997, R. Thériault). It visits other habitats there—dry lake beds and plowed fields—only rarely. In the wet winter of 1997–1998, however, large numbers occurred in Little Blair Valley (L24), up to 196 on 20 February (R. Thériault).

Migration: American Pipits arrive in San Diego County occasionally as early as mid September, in numbers in early October. They depart largely in April. During the five-year atlas period, the dates on which the species was last reported ranged from 16 to 30 April

(1999, Sweetwater Reservoir, P. Famolaro). There are few records for May, the latest of one at Point Loma (S7) 21 May 1984 (R. E. Webster, AB 38:961, 1984). The nearest sites where the American Pipit summers are the summit of San Geronio Peak in the San Bernardino Mountains (Miller and Green 1987) and the high plateau of the Sierra San Pedro Mártir, Baja California (Howell and Webb 1992).

Conservation: In its winter range in southern California, the American Pipit benefits from many human activities, especially water storage, irrigation, and the clearing of scrub. Conversion of agricultural land to cities, however, is negative. San Diego County Christmas bird count results suggest no

trend, just irregularity, probably due to the randomness of birders encountering flocks. The American Pipit's recent spread as a breeding bird to California's highest mountains (Miller and Green 1987) suggests an increase, though these colonizers are not the same subspecies as the pipits wintering in California.

Taxonomy: The only subspecies of American Pipit collected in San Diego County is *A. r. pacificus* Todd, 1935, which breeds in northwestern North America. In fall 1991, sightings of the more heavily streaked east Asian *A. r. japonicus* Temminck and Schlegel, 1847, were reported, from the Tijuana River valley 26 October–11 November (at least two individuals) and from Mission Bay 23 November (G. McCaskie, R. E. Webster, AB 46:151, 1991). Confirmation with a specimen is appropriate before this subspecies is added to the list of California birds. Though the lightly streaked *A. r. alticola* Todd, 1935, breeds in California's high mountains, on migration it apparently skips over southern California's lower elevations.