

## Field identification of long-distance migratory pipits in West Bengal state, India

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### Abstract

Received: 28 January 2020  
Accepted: 12 November 2020  
Published online: 31 March 2021

In this study we document the consistent presence of the long distant migrant pipits including, Blyth's Pipit, Tawny Pipit, Tree Pipit, Olive-backed Pipit, and Richard's Pipit in the district of West Midnapore (Paschim Medinipur) in West Bengal state, India. We confirm via photography the record of Blyth's and Tawny Pipits for the first time in this part of the world.

**Key words:** Identification, migration, new record, Pipits, species

India has 1313 species of birds, of which 78 species are endemic to the country (Praveen et al., 2020). The State of India's Birds report (<https://www.stateofindiabirds.in>), released on 17 February 2020, relied on more than 10 million observations from birdwatchers, recorded in eBird, the online repository of worldwide bird sightings (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S40240320>).

Hundreds of bird species in India are in decline, according to the country's first major report on the state of bird populations. Birds of prey and water birds seem to have been hit particularly hard owing to habitat destruction, hunting and the pet trade.

Eleven species of pipits are reported from India as well as in West Bengal State, including the Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris* (Linnaeus), Red-throated Pipit *A. cervinus* (Pallas), Blyth's Pipit *A. godlewskii* (Taczanowski), Olive-backed Pipit *A. hodgsoni* (Richmond), Richard's Pipit *A. richardi* Vieillot, Rosy Pipit *A. roseatus* Blyth (High Himalayas only), Buff-bellied Pipit *A. rubescens* (Tunstall), Paddy field Pipit *A. rufulus* (Vieillot), Long-billed Pipit *A. similis* (Jerdon), Upland Pipit *A. sylvanus* (Blyth) (Himalayas only), and Tree Pipit *A. trivialis* (Linnaeus) (<https://www.kolkatabirds.com>).

The large-bodied, long-legged, and non-streaked bellied pipits, of the genus *Anthus* are called "Large Pipits" in India (Alstrom and Mild, 2010). They also have simple, short calls. Of these, *A. rufulus* is

a local and resident breeder throughout the country. As winter approaches though, it is joined by congeners which look similar and are mistaken for each other (Alstrom and Mild, 2010). Among them, *A. godlewskii*, which breeds in Mongolia and neighboring areas of northern Asia, and *A. richardi*, which breeds in open grasslands of northern Asia, are the long-distance migrants in southern Asia (Richard et al., 2015).

Midnapore is a district in the state of West Bengal in India (Fig. 1). This region is a prime attraction for migratory birds, both water birds and land birds. Rich food sources, along with mild weather, makes it suitable for migratory birds.

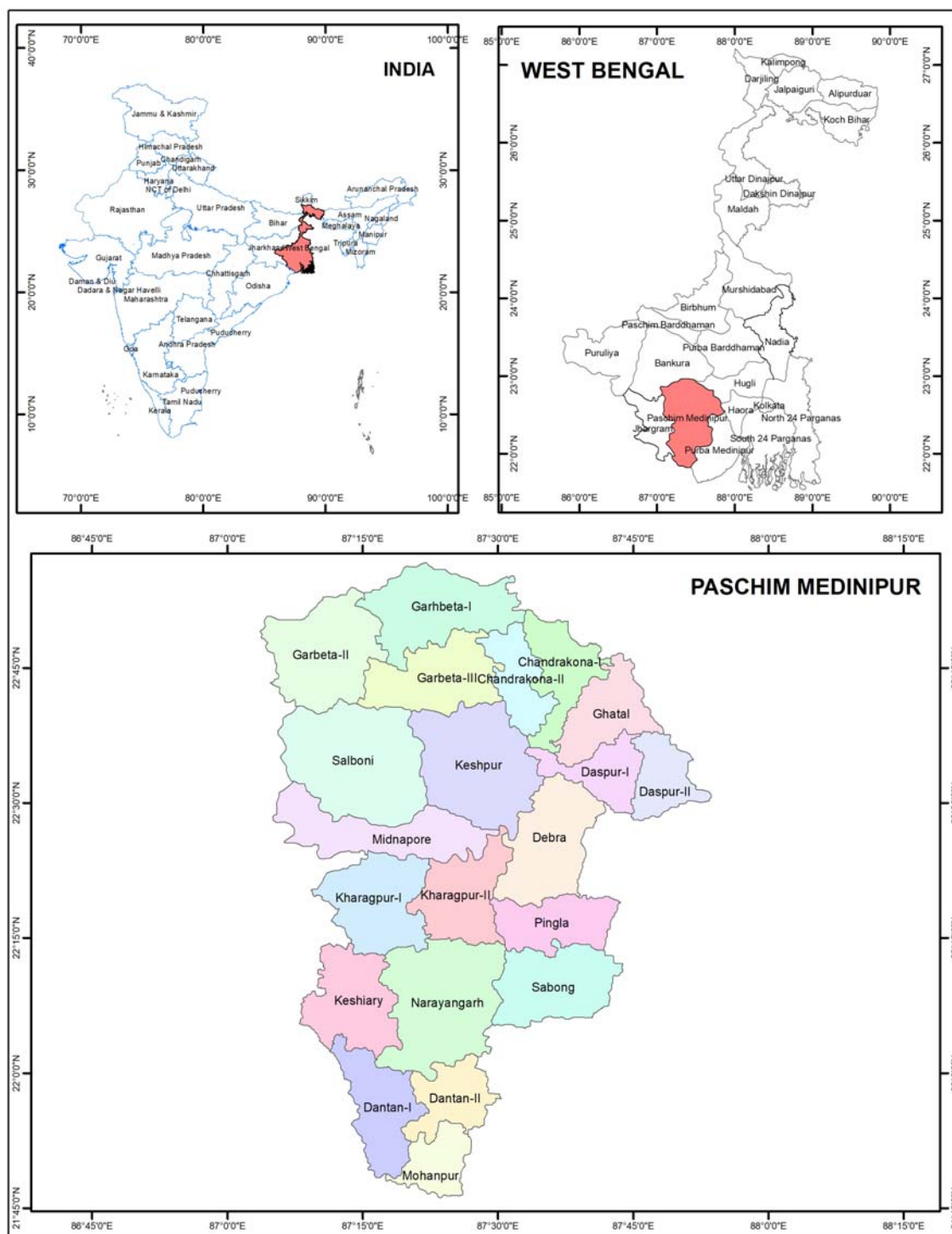
For this study, we conducted extensive field surveys for four years (2017–2020), particularly during the winter months (November–February). We appointed 15 sites for survey, and each site was surveyed once a week for 3–4 hours, on average. During the winter months each site was visited twice. We used Olympus 10×50 binoculars along with Cannon DSLR and Nikon P900 digital cameras for photography, and consulted appropriate field guides for proper identifications of birds (Alstrom and Mild, 2010; Grimmett et al., 2016).

*Anthus godlewskii* is not abundant in West Bengal State, but there is one record from the Bardhaman district and two records from the North 24 Parganas

district of West Bengal state with photographs in 2017 (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S40240320>). This species was also recorded from Goa, Odisha and Haryana states in 2018 (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S40240320>).

During the last four years (2017–2020), we recorded *A. godlewskii* (Fig. 2A) from the Bhadutola jungle

and adjacent areas of the Midnapore district. These are the first consistent records of *A. godlewskii* from this state, and therefore, the species is not vagrant here, as the Midnapore district is one of the most favored wintering destinations of this species.



**Figure 1:** Study area and location map of the present study. Top left: West Bengal State on the country map, Top right: District Paschim Medinipur in West Bengal State, Bottom: the District Paschim Medinipur, Block Map.

*Anthus campestris* is even less prevalent in West Bengal State. One individual was seen around Kolkata city in 1950 (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S40240320>) and another in the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal State in 2019 (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S40240320>).

In the present study, we recorded *A. campestris* (Fig. 2B) during the winter season of 2019 and 2020 in Midnapore district. We have also documented *A.*

*richardi* (Fig. 2C), *A. hodgsoni* (Fig. 2D) and *A. trivialis* (Fig. 2E) from this part of the state in paddy fields and trees. Blyth's Pipit, *A. godlewskii* breeds in Mongolia and is a long-distance migrant that moves to open lowlands in Southern Asia in the northern hemisphere winter (Alstrom and Mild, 2010). It has a slim build, and seems slightly longer-tailed than the Paddy field Pipit, *A. rufulus*, a resident species in the area (see Fig. 2F).



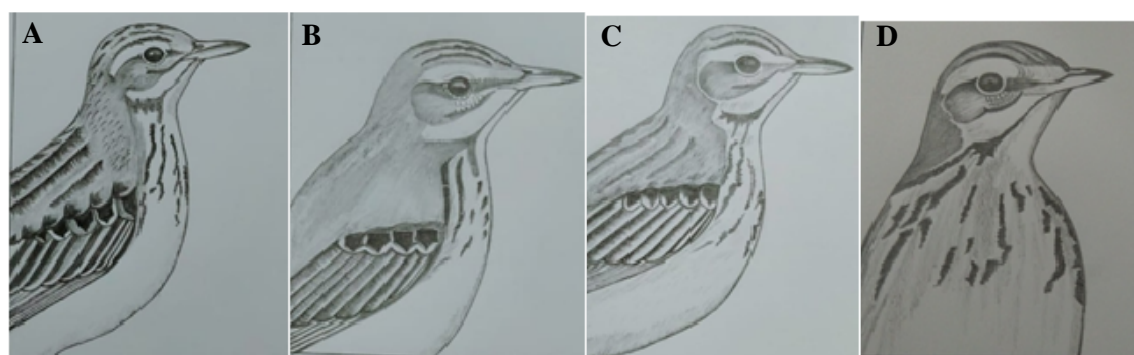
**Figure 2:** Some pipit species from the Midnapore district, West Bengal state, India. *Anthus godlewskii* (A), *A. campestris* (B), *A. richardi* (C), *A. hodgsoni* (D), *A. trivialis* (E), and *Anthus rufulus* (F), a resident pipit species from the Midnapore district, West Bengal state, India. Photo by the authors.

The head in *A. godlewskii* is relatively smaller and the fine bill is usually dark, and the species has the palest lores of all pipits in this group (Alstrom and Mild, 2010) (Table 1; Figs. 2–5). This pale lores gives a different appearance to the supercilium that starts

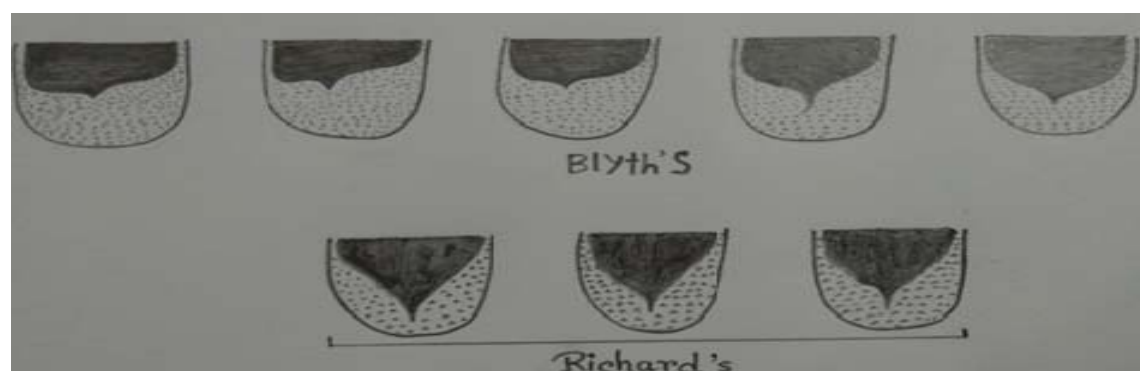
behind the eye. The back and shoulder are also heavily streaked throughout. The dark centers to the median wing coverts (wing bar) along with its call are the best way to distinguish Blyth's Pipit from other related pipit species (Grimmett et al., 2016) (Fig. 3A).

**Table 1:** Field identification clues of five pipit species in the present study (based on field observations).

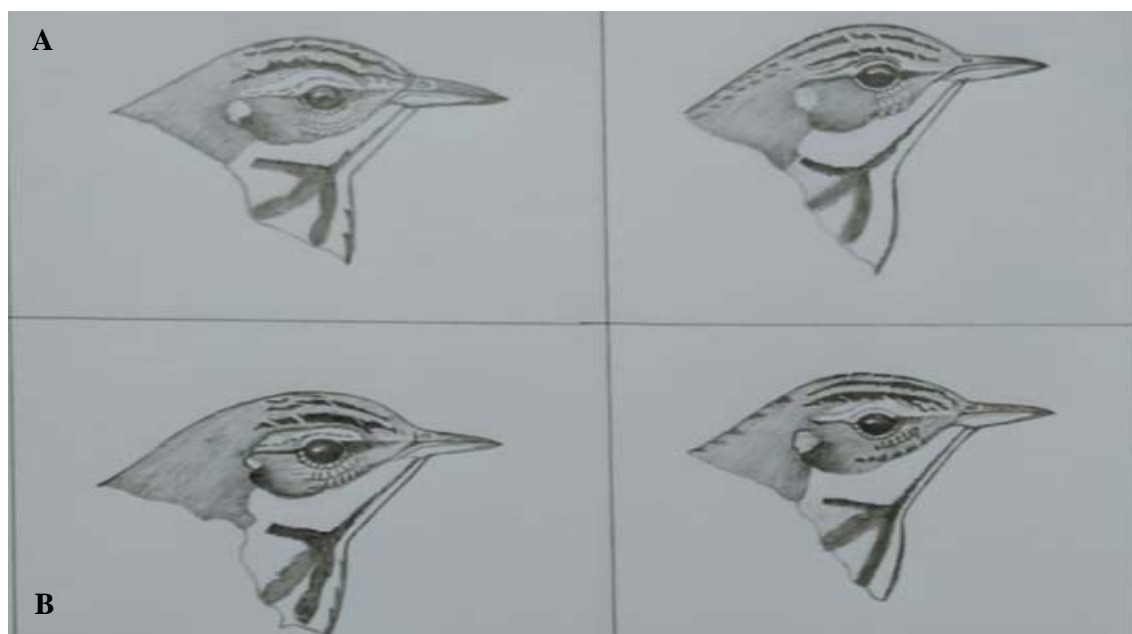
Species	Bill, tail size and shape	Supercilium and wing pattern	Migrant/ resident
<i>Anthus godlewskii</i>	Fine pointed bill, legs, tail; pale lores, supercilium behind the eye; clean face	Squared center to median coverts; distinct wing bars	Winter migrant
<i>Anthus campestris</i>	Long legs and tail; long bill	Poorly streaked, above prominent supercilium, dark lores	Winter migrant
<i>Anthus richardi</i>	Thrush-like bill, bolder streaks on breast, whitish belly; long tail, legs pale lores	Median coverts similar to <i>Anthus rufulus</i> ; long legs and tail	Winter migrant
<i>Anthus hodgsoni</i>	Black margin over strong supercilium; heavily streaked breast and belly	Olive brown above, whitish below, white supercilium; two prominent wing bars	Himalaya's breeding, wintering all India.
<i>Anthus rufulus</i>	Smaller pointed bill; less streaks on breast; small tail	Dark brown streaked above, brown throat; diffusely streaked upper parts	Resident



**Figure 3:** Field identification clues in (A) *Anthus godlewskii*, (B) *A. campestris*, (C) *A. richardi*, and (D) *A. rufulus*. Other than overall color, some distinguishing traits include: the prominence of the supercilium both above and behind the eye; more prominent whitish and blackish spots on rear ear-coverts; and a broad blackish 'brow' above the supercilium. Drawings by Suraiya Parveen from field photographs.



**Figure 4:** Comparison of the extent of the black pattern on the median wing covert feathers between *Anthus godlewskii* and *Anthus richardi*. Drawings by Suraiya Parveen from photographs.



**Figure 5:** Field identification clues in *A. trivialis* (A), and *Anthus hodgsoni* (B). Presence of blackish patch on rear ear coverts in *A. hodgsoni* and absent in *A. trivialis*. Drawings by Suraiya Parveen from field photographs.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Per Alstrom, taxonomist and Professor, Upsala University for his kind help and support. We are indebted to Honorable Vice Chancellor and Director CES, Professor Ranjan Chakrabarti, Vidyasagar University for his kind support and thorough encouragement. Suman Pratihari received funding support from the West Bengal Biodiversity Board, Government of West Bengal, India. Suman Pratihari is also grateful to Professor and chairman West Bengal Biodiversity Board A.K. Sanyal for his guidance, help and unconditional support. Suraiya Parveen is thanked for her excellent drawings. The constructive criticisms and suggestions by anonymous reviewers greatly improved the quality of this article.

### Conflict of interest

All the authors declare that there are no conflicting issues related to this short communication.

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