

**STATE  
ENDANGERED**

## American Pipit

(*Anthus rubescens*)



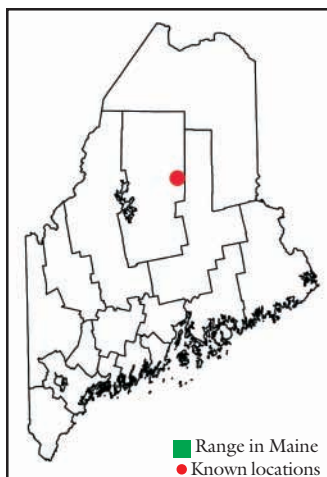
Mark McCollough

### Description

Hikers who successfully climb Mt. Katahdin may share the summit with the American pipit, one of the few arctic birds that nest in Maine. American pipits are small birds (6-7 inches long), with males somewhat larger than females. Both sexes have similar coloring. The belly is buff-colored with brown streaking on the breast and flanks. The back is dark brownish-gray. The throat and chin are white. Pipits have a dark cheek stripe, white eye ring, and white stripe over the eye. The wings are dusky brown with buffy edges. The tail feathers are dusky brown, and the outer tail feathers are white. The legs are dark, and the bill is slender. Male pipits emit a repeated *tjwee* call while displaying on their territories. This display involves a gradual upward flight, followed by a descent with the wings open and the tail raised. It frequently bobs its tail as it moves along the ground.

### Range and Habitat

American pipits were formerly considered to be the same species as the water pipit (*Anthus spinoletta*), which occurs in Great Britain, Scandinavia, Europe, and Asia. The American pipit is now considered a separate species. American pipits breed throughout northern Canada including Labrador, around



Hudson Bay, the Northwest Territories and Yukon, and most of Alaska. Their range extends south in the Rocky Mountains to Colorado, with isolated populations in the mountains of California, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, and Arizona. Isolated populations of American pipits also exist on a few exposed mountaintops in the Northeast: the Gaspé Peninsula in Quebec, Mt. Washington in New Hampshire, and Mt. Katahdin in Maine. It winters in the southern United States, Mexico, and northern Central America.

American pipits breed in arctic or alpine tundra habitats. They prefer grassy tundra in the North. In alpine areas they inhabit meadows of sedges, dwarf willows, and lichens. In the Northeast, there are few mountains with the appropriate plant communities. Mounts Washington and Katahdin are unique in this region because they have extensive alpine plateaus suitable as breeding habitat for pipits.

### Life History and Ecology

The spring migration period in Maine is uncertain, although pipits probably return to Mt. Katahdin in May. Male pipits establish territories by singing, performing aggressive displays, and chasing each other. Pair formation can occur both during spring migration and on the breeding grounds. Nest building begins shortly after pair formation. The nest is constructed of grasses and sedges and is located on the ground, typically in wet and dry meadows, although rockfields and eroded banks are also used in other portions of the species' range. Nests are often hidden in tussocks of sedges, and often the nest is partially covered and protected by overhanging rock or vegetation. A clutch of 3-7 eggs is laid 1-3 days after the nest is completed. The

female incubates the clutch for 14 days before the eggs hatch. During incubation, the male brings food to the female. At hatching, chicks are born blind, covered in down, and helpless. Only the female broods the nestlings, but both parents feed the young. The young fledge in 14 days, and adults continue feeding them for an additional two weeks.

After family groups disperse, migratory flocks begin to form. The fall migration period is more prolonged than in spring, occurring from mid-September to late October, with some birds present in Maine into November and occasionally December. During migration, pipits forage in grassy fields, meadows, coastal beaches, marshes, mudflats, and along rivers. Their diet is primarily freshwater and terrestrial invertebrates supplemented with plant seeds during autumn and winter.

## Threats

Maine's American pipits occur in one small population located on the talus slopes and tablelands of Mt. Katahdin in Baxter State Park. Breeding birds are affected when hikers walk off marked trails and disturb nesting pipits, crush unseen nests, and destroy the sedge vegetation that is crucial to the pipit's habitat. The tendency of hikers to walk off the trail is greatest when the trails are wet during spring and fall, a time when the vegetation is most susceptible to damage.

## Conservation and Management

The American pipit is listed as endangered in Maine because of its small population and limited distribution. Only the breeding population is listed as endangered; migrating pipits are relatively common in the fall. The population on Mt. Katahdin has bred there since at least the 1930s, but possibly much longer. The public nature of this site makes detailed inventories of population size and nesting success difficult. Baxter Park rangers require that hikers stay off sensitive alpine vegetation, so annual counts are conducted from the trail system, but wind and poor weather often render these counts incomplete.

As yet, there are no specific management goals or plans for the American pipit. Because there are few potential habitats in Maine, management should be directed toward maintaining or enhancing the population on Mt. Katahdin. These objectives can be met primarily by protecting potential nest sites from human disturbance. The key to protecting the American pipit is educating hikers who climb Mt. Katahdin.

## Recommendations:

- ✓ Stay on the trails when climbing Mt. Katahdin to avoid damaging the fragile alpine plant community. 