

**Submission to BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee  
Submission No.**

**Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus***

**Home Island, Cocos Keeling Islands, Indian Ocean**

**Monday 9 December 2019**

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**&**

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### **Summary**

This submission details the discovery, observation and identification of a Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus* on Home Island in the Cocos Keeling Islands, the Australian External Territory in the Indian Ocean on Monday 9 December 2019.

### **Introduction**

The 4th BirdLife Warrnambool Branch Expedition to the Australian Indian Ocean Territories of Christmas Island and Cocos Keeling Islands comprised sixteen participants; Peter & Rhonda Barrand (organisers and leaders), Charlotte Bryant, Annie Carmichael, Bob & Jenny Cooper, Peter Coyle, Les & Ann Houghton, Brian & Jill Jones, John & Denise Lombard, Carolyn Moore, Lana Tinsley and Glenda Wilson.

The group flew to from Perth to Christmas Island on Tuesday 26 November 2019, then to Cocos Keeling Islands on Tuesday 3 December 2019, returning to Perth on Tuesday 10 December 2019.

### **Sightings**

On Monday 9 December 2019, eleven members of the BirdLife Warrnambool Branch Expedition; PB, AC, BC, JC, PC, BJ, JJ, DL, JL, CM and LT, travelled by ferry from West Island to Home Island for a morning's birding, arriving on Home Island at 0700h local time.

At 0745h, after walking from the ferry terminal and exploring the gardens of Oceania House, the group were walking along Jalan Kampong Atas, which runs parallel to the shore along the southern side of the island, when Jill Jones spotted a bird foraging in deep leaf litter which had piled up along the road embankment at the intersection with Jalan Bunga Kangkong.

The area, bounded by Jalan Kampong Atas along the coast and Jalan Kipas further inland, is open mowed grass, planted with widely-spaced coconut palm and casuarina trees.

Initially little could be seen of the bird as it was almost completely covered by leaf litter. After a few minutes it moved into the open and continued to forage on the mowed grass, often keeping to the bands of shade cast by the palms and casuarinas. The bird would fly to the base of a tree, work its way out along the shade line, then fly to another tree.

On one occasion, it flew to the shoreline and when followed by the group, was observed foraging amongst beachcast seagrass. The bird remained on the shore for less than five minutes before flying back to the mowed area it had recently departed from.

The BirdLife Warrnambool group was joined by independent birders Rohan Clarke and Karina Sorell who also viewed the bird.

The bird was still foraging on the mowed area when the observers moved on at approximately 0820h.

Later in the morning, the group encountered another visiting birder, Mike Carter, who was accompanied by Cocos Keeling resident, Geof Christie. PB directed MC and GC to the site and left them to view the bird while he returned to the garden at Oceania House.

The bird was again viewed by PB for some five minutes at around 1015h as he walked back to the ferry terminal to return to West Island. The bird was still foraging on the mowed grass but had moved inland, closer to Jalan Kipas. The bird walked behind an abandoned and overgrown derelict trailer and did not reappear.

This was the last time the bird was observed, but when it departed the islands is unknown, as no birders were present to monitor its presence or absence.

In total, the bird was viewed by fifteen birders.

### **Initial Identification**

On initially viewing the bird, PB identified it as a Red-throated Pipit based on several features:

The fine pointed bill was indicative of pipit rather than lark.

Patches of reddish colouring on the face. This was sometimes difficult to see when the bird was in deep shade, but was far more obvious in back-of-camera shots taken by BJ and JL.

Pale parallel lines on the sides of the mantle.

Broad dark streaks on the flanks, which joined to form lines.

Heavy dark, bold streaking on the breast.

The lack of extensive red colouring on the face led PB to conclude that the bird was an immature. PB was the only member of the BirdLife Warrnambool group to have experience with this species, having previously observed Red-throated Pipit during travels in Asia. A check of “Birds of the Indian Subcontinent”, carried by the group, supported the identification.

RC, after viewing the bird, agreed with the identification, citing the obvious pale “tram lines” on the mantle and the heavy dark streaking forming almost continuous lines along the flanks as indicative of Red-throated Pipit.

### **Final Identification**

On returning to the mainland, MC compiled an extensive document with embedded photographs, the text of which follows, confirming the identification of the bird as Red-throated Pipit and eliminating all possible confusion species.

The six photos that follow depict all features necessary to identify this individual.



**Photos 1 & 2 Lateral and Frontal view**  
On left by Brian Jones; on right by Mike Carter



**Photos 3 & 4 Rear view**  
On left by Geof Christie; on right by Mike Carter



**Photos 5 & 6 Lateral views**  
By Mike Carter

## **Description**

**General.** Resembled Australian Pipit but was much smaller, darker and browner on the upperparts and with bolder more extensive black streaking on the underparts. Photos 1 to 6 show most critical features with the exception of the hind toe & claw which cannot be seen. Refer to these photos for detailed morphological characters summarised in part below.

**Shape and Size.** Shape similar to Richard's Pipit but thought to be only two-thirds the size with comparatively shorter legs and shorter tail.

**Movements and Gait.** Observed only in flight or on the ground where it moved through the grass, bobbing and dipping as it ran. It had a much lower and more horizontal carriage than Australian Pipit. It was reasonably tame and if approached cautiously allowed views to within 10-15 m.

**Flight.** Strong but undulating.

**Call.** Not noted; the bird was not heard calling while being observed.

**Bill.** Finer, slightly less robust than Richard's Pipit; more resembling Yellow Wagtail in shape. Mostly dark with tinges of yellow at the base of lower mandible.

**Legs.** Surprisingly, these were yellowish brown NOT bright fleshy pink, inclining to orange as in the 1992 Broome bird (Carter 1997). Length of hind claw was not determined.

**Underparts.** White throughout, boldly streaked with black on the breast and along the flanks. Depending on the alignment of the feathers, the flank streaks usually joined up to form two distinct continuous black lines extending through to the vent. The chin and throat were white and unstreaked...

**Upperparts.** The general colour was a darker brown than Australian Pipit. On each side of the mantle there was a pale stripe; as a pair these are often referred to as 'tramlines'. The greater and median coverts were dark brown with broad pale tips that formed obvious wing-bars. The tertials were also dark brown the outer edges of which were pale. They were evenly graduated in length between the greater coverts and the tip of the wing and completely cloaked the primaries.

**Tail.** The upper tail was dark brown with a broad bold white outer edge. The edges of the tail were parallel and the tip was square.

## Identification

The open country habit, terrestrial behaviour, brown and streaked plumage, white outer-tail, long legs and slender bill, indicate that the bird was a Pipit of the genus *Anthus*. Some Larks, particularly of the genus *Alauda*, resemble pipits but are shorter-tailed, tend to be plumper and have a stubbier bill.

There are seven species that are around 15 cm in length, that have dark upperparts, extensive bold markings on the underparts (Alstrom & Mild 2003) that should be considered as contenders in this instance. Those of this description previously recorded in Australia are Red-throated Pipit, Pechora Pipit *A. gustavi* and Tree Pipit *A. trivialis*. Those in the adjacent oriental region and are therefore potential vagrants to Australia are Olive-backed Pipit *A. hodgsoni*, Rosy Pipit *A. roseatus* and Buff-bellied Pipit *A. rubescens*. Because of its similarity, the Meadow Pipit *A. pratensis*, should also be considered.

The more significant features that identify this bird as a **Red-throated Pipit** are as follows:

1. The reddish tones showing in the supercilia and around the base of the bill.
2. The large coalesced group of nuchal spots together with the bold triangular malar stripe.
3. The dense and very bold streaking on the breast.
4. Bold extensive flank streaking joining to form lines.

5. The whitish stripe on each side of the mantle (as a pair they form 'tramlines').
6. Tertiaries reaching to tips of primaries.

The main reference used to determine the above and in the analysis that follows is Alstrom & Mild (2003).

Those features that help eliminate otherwise similar species are as follows:

**Pechora Pipit.** In most Pipits, including Red-throated, the tertiaries extend to the tips of the primaries. In the Pechora Pipit at least three primary points extend beyond the longest tertial. Otherwise in winter plumage, this species closely resembles Red-throated Pipit. As no calls were heard, vocal distinctions are not available. Additional supporting criteria eliminating this species are the mainly dark bill, virtually plain loreal area, unstreaked ear-coverts and cold tone of upperparts.

**Tree Pipit.** Has occurred on Cocos previously (BARC case 976). Readily discounted as a contender because it has a pale spot on the ear-coverts similar to Olive-backed Pipit. Moreover, that species does not have the prominent parallel pale lines ('tramlines') on its back possessed by this bird, see photos 3 & 4.

**Olive-backed Pipit.** Also known as Olive Tree and Indian Tree Pipit, has a distinctive facial pattern usually incorporating a white spot at the back of the ear-coverts just below the supercilium. Its upperparts are rather plain and lack the 'tram-lines'. This is a long-distance migrant breeding north to the Arctic Circle and wintering south to Borneo (Myers 2016) and therefore a contender for vagrancy to Australia.

**Rosy Pipit.** Also known as Vinaceous-breasted Pipit, this Himalayan breeding species is a short distance migrant moving south in winter to northern India, northern regions of SE Asia and south-western China. It is separable at all times by the shape of its supercilium which at its rear turns down around the ear-coverts. Note that in the subject bird the rear end of the supercilium remains level and straight, typical of Red-throated Pipit.

**Buff-bellied Pipit.** Also known as Siberian or American Water Pipit. In winter plumage it is distinguished from Red-throated Pipit by its dark grey-brown head and upperparts which are uniform in colour and virtually unstreaked. The underparts are also less streaked. The Asian race *japonicus* breeds in eastern Siberia and winters mainly in Japan, Korea and S. China but not south of 20 degrees N.

**Meadow Pipit.** Closely resembles Tree Pipit and in some plumages Red-throated pipit. Just conceivably it is a potential vagrant. It is predominantly a Western Palearctic species whose breeding range extends into the Arctic. In winter the majority of birds stay north of the tropics between 20 degrees W and 40 degrees E, thus remote from Australia. In the right wing of photos 3 & 4, it can be seen that the inner web of the two longest tertiaries has a pale edge. This is a feature of first winter Red-throated Pipit not possessed by Meadow Pipit of any age. Moreover, the flank streaking of Meadow Pipit is not as extensive nor as bold as in the subject bird. (Doherty 1990).

## Ageing

The lack of any rufous or pink on the throat suggests that this was an immature. According to Alstrom & Mild (1989b) the vast majority of winter adults show rufous or pink

on the throat and underparts. They state that birds in 'winter plumage' are almost exclusively first-winter birds.

## Acknowledgements

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