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Observations of roosting Water Pipits and comments on the species' British status

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Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*

Abstract The Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta* is an uncommon winter visitor and passage migrant in Britain. The shy and retiring behaviour of the species in its favoured wetland habitats can make it difficult to observe and record accurately. This paper reviews the species' historical status in Britain and describes observations at a communal winter roost in Suffolk, where counts regularly exceed the numbers observed foraging on adjacent marshes during daylight. Observers are encouraged to seek out further roosts, which could support the evidence from this site that the current estimate of the British wintering population may be too low.

Introduction

Nicoll (1906) first presented evidence that the Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta* may be a regularly wintering species in Britain, which could 'be looked for with tolerable certainty' during October to April; the species had previously been considered a 'straggler' to Britain. Nicoll's studies focused on the wintering population between Pevensey and Rye, Sussex, although he put forward the case that his experience would be reflected elsewhere in the country. Poignantly, he observed that he had frequently heard it expressed

that his study area was a 'unique' place for rare birds, but he contended that the east coast was 'quite as good if not better'. These observations were prescient of the documentation of the Hastings Rarities affair (Nicholson & Ferguson-Lees 1962). Water Pipit was first recorded in Britain in Sussex on two occasions in 1864, followed by four records further from elsewhere in the country between 1868 and 1895. Subsequent records followed from Lincolnshire in 1895 and Caernarvonshire in 1897. During the early 1900s, records increased in frequency and geographical spread. Nicoll concluded that he could 'only urge those ornithologists who have the leisure and the inclination to obtain further notes... to obtain proof' on the status of the Water Pipit, 'which is, to my mind, one of the most interesting studies in ornithology.'

The challenge of accurately recording the status of Water Pipit in Britain has been exacerbated by the species' often shy behaviour, making it difficult to observe. This was well described 100 years ago by Alexander (1924), who documented experiences with birds he suspected as being Water Pipits, but which 'behaved most tantalisingly; either they would fly over my head, shrilly calling... or they would suddenly rise from the mud near me and fly right off before I could see their colour.' Ultimately, Alexander concluded that Nicoll's suggestion that Water Pipit was a regular non-breeding visitor was correct, but he remained surprised that it was overlooked by so many observers.

In the late 1960s, the BTO sought to organise a survey to determine the true distribution and status of Water Pipit in Britain (Johnson 1970). This study concluded that the species was being recorded increasingly as a winter visitor to Britain but that it would be unwise to conclude this was a new development, as it may have been overlooked in the past because of challenges with identification and its elusive behaviour. The report noted that

the increase in records was associated 'with certain enthusiastic observers... As with any concentration of attention the observer acquires specialist skill in locating and identifying the bird. One observer has described this dedication to its pursuit as "pipitry".'

Status in Suffolk

Water Pipit was first recorded in Suffolk in 1937, but it wasn't until after an observation in 1951 that reports of the species became regular. It is currently considered to be an uncommon winter visitor and passage migrant. Brown & Grice (2005) noted that many Water Pipits in England are solitary, but small gatherings are not unknown, particularly in early spring, when birds may roost communally. Lack (1986) noted that, unlike Rock Pipits, Water Pipits roost communally in Britain.

At RSPB North Warren, on the Suffolk coast between Aldringham-cum-Thorpe and Aldeburgh, Water Pipit is recorded as a scarce winter visitor, present infrequently on the flooded grazing marshes between October and March. Birds typically return to the site in mid to late October, when the first individuals can be found feeding on the South Marsh. This is a lower-lying area, which floods earlier in the autumn than the North Marsh. Observations of birds at this time demonstrate that they feed amongst rank flooded vegetation, such as Sea Club-rush *Bolboschoenus maritimus*, remaining inconspicuous as they move between the plant stems; such association of Water Pipits with the wetter areas of marshes will be familiar to many observers and has been reported in previous studies (e.g. Bijlsma 1977, Orłowski 2006). As water levels rise across the marsh, the birds appear to disperse more widely and become harder to locate.

Water Pipit

Adam Rowlands

7. Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta* leaving roost at dawn, North Warren, Suffolk, April 2022

Peak counts from North Warren include seven on 21st November 2010 (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S45952938>), 2nd February 2011 (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S57390066>) and 24th November 2021 (pers. obs.). The count in November 2021 coincided with freezing conditions and the birds were concentrated on the frozen margins of a flooded flash, allowing an accurate count. Similarly, another high count, of five birds, was made on 21st February 2021, when the marsh was covered in snow and the birds were observed foraging with Meadow Pipits *A. pratensis* in close proximity to Konik horses, which were clearing patches of snow while they fed. In the absence of these conditions, counts of between just one and three birds have been recorded during daylight hours on the marshes.

Water Pipit with horse

Adam Rowlands

8. Water Pipit with Konik horse, North Warren, Suffolk, February 2021.

Roosting behaviour

Encounters with one or two birds arriving at or departing from an area of reedbed habitat northwest of the grazing marshes known as The Fens, at dusk and dawn respectively, in January 2021 left me under the impression that this was where the birds encountered on the marshes may be roosting. Communal roosting by Water Pipits is well established (e.g. van der Berg 1975), although with limited documentation in a British context (e.g. Frost 1972, Lack 1986).

Since December 2021, I have visited the reedbed at dawn and dusk on a number of occasions, from November through to April, using a microphone

and parabolic reflector to detect Water Pipits arriving at or leaving their nocturnal roost. The birds call frequently upon arrival and departure, enabling detection by this method. I have used a number of vantage points on the periphery of the reedbed to determine where the birds are roosting. These observations have demonstrated that the wintering population at the site is significantly higher than the diurnal observations of birds foraging on the adjacent marshes indicate.

Birds arrive at the roost around sunset and depart around sunrise, in keeping with the observations of van der Berg (1975) and Mester (1957). As has been noted elsewhere, Pied Wagtails *Motacilla alba yarrellii* and Reed Buntings *Emberiza schoeniclus* also roost in the North Warren reedbed. These species appear to roost in the extensive stands of Common Reed *Phragmites australis*, while the Water Pipits roost exclusively in Greater Reedmace *Typha latifolia*. Although Meadow Pipits are occasionally observed flying over the roosting area, I have seen no evidence of them joining the roosts and they appear to seek drier terrestrial habitat in the surrounding heathland and grassland. The Pied Wagtails gather as a flock before dispersing to roost and are frequently disturbed and will fly around calling as Marsh Harriers *Circus aeruginosus* arrive to roost. Water Pipits will occasionally join these flights, sometimes circling the reedbed in calling parties, while others will arrive and go straight to roost. This makes counting birds arriving at the roost rather problematic.

North Warren reedbed

Adam Rowlands

9. North Warren reedbed in February 2021, showing stands of Greater Reedmace *Typha latifolia* where Water Pipits roost.

When leaving the roost in the morning, the birds will typically gain height rapidly and depart straight to the feeding grounds on the marshes. The birds often call before taking flight and will then give a series of flight calls as they leave the roost, making them easier to count. Birds have been observed leaving the roost singly and in small parties of up to seven birds.

Occasionally, in March and April, some birds will leave the roost and alight in other areas of the reedbed. In the spring of 2021, I also observed them undertaking chasing flights over the reedbed, possibly in a pair-bonding capacity, but this behaviour has not been repeated in subsequent years.

The reedbed extends over 18 ha, but the Water Pipits opt to roost in the

discrete areas of *Typha* that occupy less than 1 ha (plate 001). During my observation period, approximately 25% of this *Typha* was removed during conservation management activities in January and February each year to maintain open water, but this did not appear to affect the numbers of Water Pipits, with birds redistributing into the remaining areas of *Typha*. An association with *Typha* has been noted in previous studies (e.g. Frost 1972).

001. North Warren reedbed in February 2021, showing stands of Greater Reedmace *Typha latifolia* where Water Pipits *Anthus spinoletta* roost.

I timed departures at dawn during 14 visits between January to April during the period 23rd January 2021 to 8th April 2024. The earliest departure time varied between 31 minutes before and one minute after sunrise. There was a trend for departures to be later relative to sunrise as the winter progressed towards spring, although departures became earlier again in late March and early April (fig. 1). It would seem likely that these earlier departures on the dates with the shortest daylight hours in January are to maximise foraging time on the feeding sites, while the earlier departure times in late March and early April could represent increased foraging time in preparation for the migratory journey back to the breeding grounds.

The latest birds to leave the roost showed a stronger association for a later departure relative to sunrise as the season progressed (fig. 2). Despite this apparent tendency, the total time between the first departure and the last departure varied between eight and 60 minutes, with a mean of 24.5 minutes, and showed no discernible relationship between the time taken and the season or the number of birds recorded.

fig. 1

Fig. 1. Earliest departure time of Water Pipits *Anthus spinoletta* leaving roost at dawn relative to sunrise (minutes on y axis) and date (days after 1st January on x axis).

Fig. 2

Fig. 2. Last departure time of Water Pipits leaving roost at dawn relative to sunrise (minutes on y-axis) and date (days after 1st January on x-axis).

Counts of roosting birds indicate that numbers of Water Pipits gradually increased from October to December, with peak counts recorded in January–April. The rise in numbers appears to be associated with the gradual increase in water levels in the marshes, so is suspected to be related to the extent of available foraging habitat, not limitations on roosting habitat, which is in fact reduced by management activity during the period of highest numbers.

Counts of up to 16 birds leaving their roost have been recorded in all three winters from 2021/22 to 2023/24. These counts are considered to represent a minimum of the birds present, as a proportion of birds leaving are only heard and not seen and may involve more than the single registrations recorded in such instances.

Discussion

The highest counts of foraging Water Pipits from RSPB North Warren are of up to seven birds. There are no significant observations from other nearby wetlands, suggesting that at least the majority of birds from the roost move to forage at North Warren. This is supported by the fact that roosting birds have only ever been observed departing to or arriving from the southeast (i.e. in the direction of North Warren). Thus, the implied distance travelled by these birds between the roosting and feeding areas is 0.5–2 km (fig. 3), significantly less than the typical 5–9 km reported in Cramp & Simmonds

(1988).

Water Pipits have also been recorded arriving at or departing from roosts in *Typha* in reedbeds at RSPB Minsmere and Westwood Marshes, both to the north of North Warren, but it is suspected that these birds forage on brackish and freshwater marshes adjacent to these sites. I have made visits to these reedbeds in an attempt to quantify the number of roosting birds, but the dispersed nature of the *Typha* stands in these much larger reedbeds has made this task extremely difficult and I have not been able to replicate the counts made at North Warren.

fig. 3



Fig. 3. Map showing locations of reedbed roost (outlined in blue) and approximate probable foraging areas on North Marsh (purple) and South Marsh (orange) at RSPB North Warren.

Implications for status

My observations of at least 16 Water Pipits regularly roosting in the North Warren reedbed indicate that the species is significantly under-recorded during diurnal observations of foraging birds at the site. Casual observations at RSPB Lakenheath Fen/Hockwold Washes, Norfolk/Suffolk, mirror my experience at North Warren. One or two foraging birds have been observed at this site, with occasional records of up to eight in a feeding flock; but, on three occasions during late December 2019 to late January 2023, between 16 and 22 birds have been counted at pre-roost gatherings before taking flight to an unknown roost location (Dawn Balmer pers. comm.).

It appears likely that, if observers were able to target Water Pipit roost sites at other locations, the most recent winter population estimate of 205 individuals (Woodward *et al.* 2020), which is based on diurnal counts of feeding birds in Britain, may prove to be a significant underestimate.

Water Pipit

10. Water Pipit, RSPB Titchwell, Norfolk, January 2015.

Additionally, the wintering distribution of Water Pipits in Britain may well have shifted during the 50 years since the BTO survey in the late 1960s. At that time, birds were associated with habitat such as sewage farms and watercress beds. Many of the operations that provided these habitats have changed or disappeared over the last five decades. During the same period, the extent of wetland habitat created on nature reserves has expanded significantly (Ausden *et al.* 2019). It is likely that these wetlands and reedbeds have restored foraging and roosting habitat for Water Pipits – but that, as a result, the birds have become harder to observe owing to restrictions on access to prevent disturbance to the wetland areas.

I hope that these observations encourage other observers to target *Typha* stands in reedbeds in the vicinity of suitable feeding habitat to see if they can discover further Water Pipit roosting populations and follow in the slightly obsessional pursuit of 'pipitry'.

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