

## American Pipit

*Anthus rubescens*

Pipits (family *Motacillidae*, meaning "moving tail") are plain, sparrow-sized, insectivorous birds with slender bills. Although they spend a lot of time on the ground (highly terrestrial), their flight is strong and undulating. Pipits walk upright along the ground with dainty steps, rather than hop. As they feed, they habitually pump their tails and bob their heads, pigeonlike. Their common name, "pipit" (Latin for "chirp"), imitates the sounds of their distinctive calls.



American Pipit

photo: USFWS

Common and widespread, American Pipits breed at high altitudes along water courses, alpine meadows, open tundra and rocky slopes of montane habitats. These drab, slender, 17cm birds are grayish above, with faint streaks on their buffy chin, breast and flanks. Weak bars on the back differentiate this species from other pipits. A pale, whitish eye ring and eyebrow accent the head. Their long, dark and slender bills distinguish them from sparrows and longspurs. Although rather nondescript, their bills, whitish wing bars and white, outer tail-feathers are diagnostic characters that may aid in their identification.

The song of the American Pipit is low series of variable, jingling phrases, "tseewl, tseewl, tseewl" or "pleetr, pleetr, pleetr." During flight, their call is a high, squeaky "slip" or, when flushed, a higher "pipit." On the nest, their call is a lower but rising "pwisp."

Assembled by both parents, the cup-shaped nests of the American Pipit are built in ground-hollows and partially concealed by overhanging rock or vegetation. Constructed in 4-5 days of plant stems, grasses and mosses, the nests are softly lined with fine grasses, fibers and hair. A clutch consists of 4-7, smooth and glossy 21mm eggs. The cryptic, ground-colored (whitish gray) eggs are heavily spotted in brown and pale gray and may be finely streaked, encircled (wreathed) or capped in black at the larger ends. Although the female alone incubates the clutch for 14 days, the male feeds her during this time. Offspring fledge in another 14-16 days and are tended by both parents. Young birds are completely independent by 29 days post-hatching and aggregate together in large, late-summer flocks.



American Pipit nest

photo: USFWS

American Pipits feed on insects, aquatic organisms, seeds and occasionally berries. As they bob along the forest understory, these birds glean food from the ground. They also are known to hunt in shallow water or pursue flying insects from their perches (hawking).

The American Pipit winters in flocks from the southern United States to the fields and muddy shores of Guatemala and El Salvador. They breed throughout Alaska, Yukon Territories and British Columbia, Canada and are dispersed throughout locations in the western United States, from the northern edge of Canada to Newfoundland, coastal Greenland and the associated islands.