Red-throated Pipit on Ludworth Moor, 3rd May 2015

By John Rayner

Somewhat envious of the special birds that are frequently found on Horwich Moors I have made, over the years, dozens upon dozens of fruitless trips to the similarly named Ludworth Moor, but it just doesn't compare. The remnant moorland here is severely degraded and constantly under threat of conversion to sheep pasture. So, over those same years I have watched this rapid deterioration of habitat with sadness, as gorse is grubbed out and burnt, fields are drained, rushes strimmed or sprayed and sheep grazing takes its ultimate toll. Gone were the breeding Stonechats and drumming Snipe although Curlews, Lapwings, Skylarks and Meadow Pipits hang on. Nevertheless, I always go up there with a forced optimism that something good will turn up. To put this in context, good would be a Ring Ouzel or a Whimbrel - I have only had these birds on single occasions previously. Or better still a Tree Pipit - I have never ever seen one of those up there. Little did I know how events were to pan out.

So, after a night of heavy rain and steady easterlies, there I was, on my usual track along the Greater Manchester/Derbyshire border that leads past the quaintly named 'Robin Hood's Picking Rods'. Ambling along I counted a reasonable number of Wheatears (11) accompanying a flock of Meadow Pipits and a few Pied Wagtails. This was good! Whilst scanning, my binoculars alighted briefly on a pipit, only 20 metres or so away, however, it immediately disappeared behind a tussock of Juncus to preen. But in that split second I was alerted. Was that a hint of orangey-rufous? (As later observers may have noticed this particular bird could disappear for a considerable time behind the smallest tuft of vegetation). I was sufficiently interested to crouch and wait patiently till it emerged, and after a few minutes emerge it did, in full glory. Undeniably a summer plumaged Red-throated Pipit. I still took the cautious approach because this just does not happen up here on the border of Greater Manchester and Derbyshire, I must have made a mistake, must be an aberrant Meadow Pipit or something. However, I had relatively recently found a

Red-throated Pipit on Fuerteventura in 2013 and soon all doubts subsided. But here I was, on my own!

My next two priorities were to take a description and get other birders onto it. I hastily scribbled some notes on the only paper I had to hand, in the back of an old diary, then thoughts turned to obtaining photographic proof. But I only had my beaten up, 40-year-old Bushnell Discoverer telescope (in my car boot) and a phone camera. For me, the identification was secure so I made the decision to dash 200 metres back to the car to get the 'scope whilst simultaneously phoning Ian McKerchar to get the news out as a Greater Manchester rarity text alert.

As luck would have it the 'Mellor March' was held that same day, a charity event undertaken by a few hundred walkers. The first three participants were jogging towards me and, as I rushed the other way to pick up my scope, my heart sank. Surely they would flush it - and they did.

Now, a moment of panic as I was still on my own with no support, and now no bird, but I soon relocated it and started to enjoy the views. At this point it flew and called a thin, scratchy, drawn out 'tseeep', even entering Greater Manchester airspace but yet again it was lost. After twenty minutes or so the first local birders reacting to the news began to arrive. Still no bird. Then, to my eternal relief, Bill Underwood shouted, "I've got it"… and the rest, as they say, is history.

Later that morning I even had a couple of calling Whimbrels land in front of me. An exceptionally good sighting on a normal day. But today was not normal and they were merely the cake under the icing under the cherry!

The pipit was an absolute gem and pretty much a rarity finder's dream as, when seen well, the identification was straightforward with nothing contentious to require a detailed feather by feather description. Although it spent most of its time in Derbyshire it periodically circling over Greater Manchester airspace to please the county listers and even flew to roost in Greater Manchester at approximately 8pm on the 3rd May. Surprisingly, after a clear night, it was still present on the 4th May when it again gave some superb close views to an even larger throng. It was also searched for, but not located, on the 5th (in atrocious weather) and on the 6th (in weather that was only marginally better). Over the two days that this pipit graced Ludworth it was seen by approximately 700 birders and was a new British bird for many. It was a real pleasure to share the genuine excitement of visiting birders and the crowd behaviour on the fairly narrow Gun Lane was exemplary throughout.

It was also an opportunity for many to appreciate this area of the Pennines for the first time and quite a few people remarked to me how beautiful the surrounding countryside was, something we tend to take for granted.

Red-throated Pipit had only been reinstated as a British Birds rarity a few months before this discovery. My best previous BBRC success was as long ago as 1984 when I shared the identification of the Frodsham Stilt Sandpiper with Geoff Lightfoot. I hope it isn't another 31 years before my next submission!

John Rayner

5th May 2015