



Tree Pipit, Burnt Edge, Horwich, August 2010 (Ian McKerchar)

August 2010 coincided with two things related to Tree Pipits in Greater Manchester. Firstly, the publishing of a Tree Pipit identification article on Manchester Birding ([here](#)) and secondly, with undoubtedly the best autumnal passage the species has ever seen for a very long time. Needless to say, the latter event wasn't due, in this instance, to the former article! Anyway, the Horwich Moors in Greater Manchester bore the brunt of this remarkable passage which peaked at a daily total of 15 Tree Pipits, part of which was made up of a single lingering flock of ten individuals; unprecedented in Greater Manchester! They became quite well watched during this period, due to their often impeccable manners of loitering in the same spots and allowing reasonably close approach for the patient observer. This however, also brought around the occasional misidentification too. These few instances were mainly due to odd Meadow Pipits which displayed one or two apparently pro-Tree Pipit characteristics. Characteristics sufficient to cause some degree of head scratching.

This short article is therefore intended to deal with some of these 'looky-likey' Meadow Pipits and to reinforce both their identification and that of Tree Pipit.



Above: Meadow Pipit, Wildersmoor, August 2010 (Ian McKerchar). To be fair, this particular individual should present no such identification difficulties. It is a fairly classic Meadow Pipit in all respects, barring perhaps one. Note the following:

- It's Jizz. Complete with steeply rounded head (particularly the forehead) and the particularly weak looking, slim bill.
- Facial expression. Evidently gentle looking, even 'surprised', formulated by the uniform lores, complete eyering and overall bland facial features.
- Rather dull upperparts. Feather edges are muted and in particular the median coverts are a long way from being white.
- Underparts. Suffused completely with a faint brownish-yellow wash. Streaking sparse and rather 'uncoordinated'. The flank streaks look faint and appear to differ significantly enough from the breast streaks but this type of pattern is not uncommon in Meadow Pipit.
- Bare part colouration. Both bill and legs are significantly reddish-brown tinged and are certainly not pink in any respect. But those claws...

Indeed this individual's claws are certainly pale and undeniably short, both being rightly purported as sound indicators of Tree Pipit. In fact, pale claws on Meadow Pipits are far from uncommon and it is fair to say that once again, those on this bird are certainly not obviously pink as we'd expect from a Tree Pipit. Their length is admittedly shorter than the majority of Meadow Pipits but should you study any large quantity of them, particularly in autumn when younger birds are present, you will pick more than a few similar birds out. Their shape though, however short they are, is still clearly not quite there for Tree Pipit. They are rather flat and unlike the more steeply arched hind claws of *trivialis*, though but for all intents and purposes, whilst viewing 'in the field' one may struggle to differentiate that!



Above: Meadow Pipit, Holdens Farm, September 2010 (John Tymon). At first glance there would appear to be some pro-Tree Pipit features within this individual, mainly centred on the facial features. The supercilium appears quite distinct across its full length and the lores really quite dark. Of course, a conspicuous, full-length supercilium can once again regularly be found within the range of Meadow Pipit but on the other count, this image effectively illustrates the potential for misinterpretation when assessing features from images especially, although the same can also occur during brief or poorly considered field observations.

The lores 'appear' dark merely due to the angle they are being viewed from, brought about by the structure of the feathering in this area. They appear as a vaguely darker area, unlike those on Tree Pipit (see images below for comparison). Everything else about this individual screams Meadow Pipit though, from the complete white eyering, underpart and bare part colouration and of course those conspicuous dark rather long, flat hind claws.



Left: Meadow Pipit, Holdens Farm, September 2010 (John Tymon). The same individual as the image directly above but now with the head viewed in square-on profile. Those apparent dark lores all but disappear and now the facial details and expression are pure Meadow Pipit.



Tree Pipit, Burnt Edge, August 2010 (Ian McKerchar). This individual is too being viewed at an angle and so conceivably it might be difficult to truly assess the lores. Note however, that the dark appears as a rather narrow but distinct line (not a vaguely darker area) and that this continues 'through' the eye to form a full and well-defined eyestripe. This bird also admirably portrays a suit of pro-Tree Pipit features too, such as the seemingly meaner expression (note the basic lack of paler eyering), clear pinkish hues to the bare parts and a patent 'two-toned' appearance to the underparts complete with well defined and regimented streaking.

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Left: Tree Pipit, Higher Meadows, August 2010 (Ian McKerchar). Compare the bill structure to that of the first Meadow Pipit in this article. Note again the facial pattern, complete here with characteristic pale 'spot' at the upper rear corner of the ear coverts.



Tree Pipits, Burnt Edge, August 2010 (Ian McKerchar). Both these birds are entirely typical representations for their species, their overall sleek look and bold markings. The pale 'spot' at the upper rear corner of the ear coverts is exhibited particularly well here but note the apparent difference in overall ground colour between the two individuals. The right hand bird is clearly much brighter, almost orangey-yellow in hue around the face.

If this short article endeavours to accomplish anything it is merely this; that rather than focus on one or perhaps two features, we should wherever possible, concentrate on a full suite of features. This way we will build up a 'feel' for Tree Pipits, that almost instinctive impression that facilitates a relatively easy recognition *most* of the time. But as said previously, don't ignore those Meadow Pipits. Failure to appreciate this, our commonest pipit, will ensure that, maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but sometime soon and for the rest of your life, you'll keep getting them wrong.

#### Acknowledgements

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Ian McKerchar, October 2010

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