

*Anthus trivialis*- better known as Tree Pipit. Findhorn, Moray, early May (Photo by Peter Welch)

On the face of it, the identification of Tree Pipit and its separation from Meadow Pipit would appear to be well and truly sown-up. The pair has been comprehensively dealt with in many field guides and various previous identification articles, yet it seems confusion is still encountered on a fairly regular basis. Greater Manchester alone has had its fair share of misidentifications in recent years, including well photographed and watched birds such as the spring 2009 Pennington Flash individual. To further illustrate the point, a search through any amount of Internet images of Tree Pipit will easily find many wrongly identified and which are actually clearly Meadow Pipits.

But why the confusion, especially when it would appear the features between the two are generally obvious and clear cut? As we all know only too well, things are often never quite that easy in the field. Identification features are frequently more demanding to observe on birds creeping through grass or flitting energetically about and are all the more problematical away from the comfort of one's front room and pristine Collins field guide or image laden laptop!

I suppose perhaps the largest factor in any misidentification is a general lack of field experience. Sure, we might *see* plenty of Tree Pipits, singing on heathland in Norfolk, creeping around the grass at some autumnal east coast promontory or perhaps bounding overhead as a speck in the sky uttering its distinctive call, but how often do we really look, really wring out all those characteristic fine details? What makes matters worse is our neglect in actually taking any notice at all of Meadow Pipit, a common enough species by and large ignored. Things get more blurred when we encounter worn birds which are very rarely illustrated in field guides or perhaps hear song and calls that we might not have experienced for some time.

Please take time to carefully study the images then. Not only do they portray the more obvious characteristics of both Tree and Meadow Pipit but equally even the most subtle features should be perceivable. Additionally, the majority of the Meadow Pipit images have been sourced to depict atypical individuals; those birds that may well contribute to misidentifications between the two species. This aside they are all, without exception, amongst the very finest images of the species' that currently exist anywhere and serve as a glowing testimony to the ability of their photographers!

## Tree Pipit



Above: Tree Pipit, Ukraine (Photo by Sergey Osipov).

This beautiful portrait illustrates all the features we'd expect from such a pristine example of the species.

Tree Pipit is generally sleeker looking than Meadow Pipit; more streamlined with a longer overall look. This is often emphasised by its tendency to move stealthily, purposefully with a more horizontal gait on the ground whereas Meadow tends to wander rather aimlessly and is more upright.

The bill of Tree Pipit is clearly heavier than that of Meadow Pipit, especially at the base and that is patently evident in the image. It's more wedge shaped bill forms a smoother integration with the forehead, further assisting with that sleeker overall look. The colouration of the bill is also more noticeably pale pink along the base of the lower mandible against the more often brownish-orange of Meadow Pipit.

The legs and toes are a pale and rather purer pink than the often reddish-brown toned legs of Meadow Pipit.

## Tree Pipit



Above: Tree Pipit, Ukraine (Photo by Sergey Osipov).

The streaking and ground colouration of the underparts here are absolutely classic for the species.

The breast streaks in this image are actually rather rounded and appear almost like large spots, only extending out into streaks towards the sides of the breast and although this is subject to some variation, the streaks on Tree Pipit are generally more well spaced compared to Meadow Pipit and more often lack the dark 'blob' on the centre of the breast commonly found in the latter species. The ground colour of the breast and often (especially in fresh spring birds) the flanks is a beautiful, warm orangey-buff colouration. The contrast between the warmly coloured breast and starkly white belly is particularly well-defined though and is admirably portrayed here.

The change from streaks to the clean, un-streaked belly is subtle yet abrupt, whilst on the flanks the streaks instantly become very fine and pencil-like (as if lightly sketched on by pencil), being consistent in width and strength. This pattern of contrast between the breast and flank streaking is a consistently reliable identification feature and although there is much variation in the streaking of Meadow Pipit (as detailed in the section relative to that species below) I have never found it to match that of Tree Pipit.

Note also that the warm orangey-buff hue from the breast extends right across the face and particularly the supercilium; commonly found on Tree Pipit, especially in fresh plumaged birds.



## Tree Pipit



Above: Tree Pipit, Bahrain, early April (Photo by Adrian Drummond-Hill).

This bird's sleekness is evident right from the off. Its bill and head profile is smooth and overall it has the appearance of being rather small headed and long bodied. This individual is quite buffish along the flanks but the transformation from bold breast streaks to beautifully thin flank streaks is blatantly obvious. Once again, this fresh individual has a distinctly orangey-buff face and supercilium.

An understated characteristic of Tree Pipit but one which is readily visible is the lores, although caution should be exercised in its appraisal. They exhibit a short black eye-stripe (just in front of the eye), breaking the pale eye-ring and contributing to the species' more contrasting look to the head. This look is further enhanced by generally stronger lateral crown stripes and on average, a stronger more noticeable supercilium, particularly in front of the eye. As is visible here, the ear coverts often display an isolated pale spot in the upper rear corner. Bear in mind that when viewing the lores of Meadow Pipit from either head on or an acute angle they may *appear* darker than they actually are. Good views will usually dispel this effect though and if not they never actually display an obvious dark eye-stripe as on the lores of Tree Pipit.

The subtle facial features of Tree Pipit lend themselves to creating an overall meaner look or 'furrowed brow' expression and are opposed to the gentler or even surprised expression of Meadow Pipit. This facial appearance is also worthily portrayed on the Tree Pipit header image to this article by Peter Welch and inspection of Sergey's images above also reveals these important facial minutiae.

There are also further facial differences between Tree and Meadow Pipit but perhaps more so than the other facial differences between the two, they are subject to considerable overlap and their evaluation in the field is fraught with difficulty and is subjective to the point that they are perhaps of little identification value. To that end they are not discussed here!



Above: Tree Pipit, mid May (Photo by Mick Colquhoun).

All the aforementioned identification features are once again visible here but two more are also evident, though one is considerably more diagnostic than the other!

A subtle but consistently obvious feature is the strength and appearance of the median coverts. They have distinctly solid, very dark brownish-black centres with rather broad, pure white edges affording a sharply contrasting and bold appearance on the wing. Of course typically, there is still variation here too and Adrian Drummond-Hill's Bahrain image above exhibits somewhat buffish edges to the median coverts, although their centres are still very dark and even without their very contrastingly pale edges, the overall effect is still very evident. On worn birds in summer of course, these white edges wear and their effect becomes reduced although the very dark centres remain prominent.

The next feature, whilst highly diagnostic in the separation of Tree and Meadow Pipit can often be unfortunately of little value. If seen well, the hind claws of the two species vary significantly on the vast majority of individuals but all too often, especially on passage birds, their hind claws are terrifically difficult to see as they spend most of their time on the ground amongst vegetation. If viewed well though, as here on Mick's perched bird, the hind claw of Tree Pipit can be seen to be considerably shorter than that of Meadow Pipit. It is more steeply arched against the much flatter claw of Meadow Pipit and all the claws of Tree Pipit average a more uniform pinker colouration. There is variation though and Svensson (1992) lists the length of hind claw for Tree Pipit as 7-9mm and for Meadow Pipit as 10-13mm. Whilst there may be no apparent overlap in their lengths, clearly some individuals might just be a little ambiguous. Therefore, regarding the separation of these two species, if your pipit has short, arched (and perhaps clearly pink) hind claws then it will be a Tree Pipit and conversely if it has clearly long, flattish (and quite dark) hind claws then it will be a Meadow Pipit. An illustration of the differences between Tree and Meadow Pipit hind claws can be found further down this article.



## Tree Pipit



Above: Tree Pipit, early June (Photo by Mick Colquhoun).

Worn plumaged Tree and Meadow Pipits can often enhance identification problems.

This individual, typically for the time of year, is looking decidedly worn and tatty, especially compared to Sergey Osipov's pristine individual at the beginning of this article. During mid-summer both Tree and Meadow Pipit vary significantly due to plumage wear. The paler feather edges of the upperparts wear away and their darker centres become more apparent whilst the underparts lose their bright hues so that both species appear darker above and colder below. Their entire plumage frequently also becomes quite ragged at this time of year, particularly when adults are feeding young.

In Mick's image above, the bird has a much paler looking face but the up-side is that the isolated pale spot at the upper rear corner of the ear coverts is more obvious and even on worn birds the other subtle facial features remain as does the overall expression. Despite the apparent overall feather wear, the median coverts maintain their prominence (even though the white edges are much reduced) and the flank streaking remains plainly characteristic for the species. The bill of course maintains its structure and is typically strong looking and wedge-shaped.

## Tree Pipit



Tree Pipit, the Bloreng, Gwent, mid June (Photo by Jon Taverner).

Once again, this individual has worn plumage and exhibits considerably colder underparts than it would have in spring and therefore perhaps than we might usually expect. Nevertheless, the underpart streaking displays the distinctive contrast between bold breast streaks and beautifully fine flank streaks. The breast streaks are noticeably very dark, blackish and often those of Meadow Pipit are perceivably slightly paler.

Even from this angle the bill appears strong and wedge-shaped; the dark eye-stripe in front of the eye (along the lores) breaks the pale eye-ring; the supercilium and pale ear covert spot are prominent; the legs remain undeniably pale pink; and the median coverts are still typically prominent. Classic!

## Tree Pipit



Above: Tree Pipit, late July, Ukraine (Photo by Sergey Osipov).

Even this fresh juvenile displays its characteristic features. As such a fresh juvenile, some features such as the supercilium and median coverts are not particularly prominent and typically; the flank streaking, although just evident, is also much reduced (as it can be in both Tree and Meadow Pipit at this age). Otherwise, it demonstrates structural features and bare-part colourations consistent with adults of the species.



Above: Tree Pipit, Islay, late May (Photo by Amanda Hayes).

This in-flight image still maintains the essence of the species. The bill maintains its rather short and triangular look and the facial pattern has that 'mean' look associated with the species, enhanced by the obvious full length pale supercilium and the broken eye-ring with dark loreal eye-stripe. The streaking on the flanks is also evidently finer than that on the breast and contrasts appreciably.



## Tree Pipit



Above: Tree Pipits, early May (Photo by Mick Colquhoun).

During migration, habitat preference for either Tree or Meadow Pipit has little influence in the assimilation of identification features for they occupy similar habitats. In both spring and autumn, Tree Pipits can be encountered in both lowland and upland areas, with or without the presence of trees. During the breeding season however, each is significantly choosier.

Breeding Tree Pipits typically require areas with scattered trees and bushes such as forest clearings, young plantations and heathland although I have found them within surprisingly well-wooded areas too. They are invariably rigid in their preferences and during active breeding are unlikely to be found outside their comfort zone for habitat preference. Conversely, breeding Meadow Pipits prefer open country, particularly (but certainly not exclusively) in upland areas and as is the case in Greater Manchester, they are happy to occupy areas with trees and bushes although they are unlikely to be found well away from open areas.

Tree Pipits are habitually arboreal though and their peculiar habit of deftly walking along branches, often pumping their tails, is diagnostic when seen. Meadow Pipits however are not adverse to trees and they often utilise them if they occur within their habitat. Indeed, many Tree Pipit misidentifications during the breeding season have been initialised by Meadow Pipits with a fondness for routinely alighting in trees and or for utilising them from which to give their song.

Note in the image above that the left hand bird has an apparent central dark 'blob' on the breast formed by a coalesce of breast streaks; a less regular feature of this species compared to that commonly found on Meadow Pipit. All the other salient features are still evident; the bill shape; loreal stripe; breast/flank streaking contrast; underpart colouration/contrast; leg colouration; and median covert effect.

Even in 'record shots', the distinctive characteristics of Tree Pipit shine through.



Above: Tree Pipit, Irlam Moss, Greater Manchester, mid May (Photo by Paul Heaton).

Here the bill is evidently rather short and strong looking, broad at the base and wedge shaped overall. The facial pattern too is particularly strong with a clear, evenly broad supercilium, 'furrowed brow' look and distinct dark framing to the otherwise pale ear coverts which are complete with a pale spot on the rear upper corner. The median coverts are particularly apparent, dark with broad clear white edges and the flanks streaking is visibly fine and delicate.



Above: Tree Pipit, Barlows Tip, Greater Manchester, early May (Photo by Tony Coatsworth).

Once again, a beautiful full-frame shot is not a prerequisite for portraying the best assets of the species, such as their frequent blatancy. This individual displays the typical bright orangey-buff hue across the breast and flanks plus the strikingly white belly against it. Even in this image the contrast between breast and flank streaking is plain to see as is the particularly strong facial pattern similar to Paul Heaton's image above.



## Tree Pipit



Above: Tree Pipit, Hollingworth Lake, Greater Manchester, early May (Photo by Simon Hitchen).

Again, whilst not exactly a 'full framer' this image admirably reveals the necessary *pro-trivialis* features. Even bleached by strong sunlight coming from the left the streaking noticeably changes in strength from breast to flanks where it is almost unperceivable on the latter. As we would expect, the face pattern is both clean and strong.



Left: Tree Pipit, Hollingworth Lake, Greater Manchester, early May (Simon Hitchen)

This bird too has all the prerequisite features and displays suitably confirmatory short hind claws to boot. The supercilium in front of the eye is rather poorly marked however and was not just an artefact of this particular image, so as always, there is a degree of individual variation. Note the typical very abrupt change from streaked to unstreaked on the chest/upper belly.



## Meadow Pipit



Above: Meadow Pipit, Trefil, Gwent, mid March (Photo by Mick Colquhoun).

This image personifies the species' more typical representation. This is our more usual perception of Meadow Pipit, a boldly and liberally streaked bird on the underparts which should have little cause for confusion with Tree Pipit. It is a bird of rather more obviously rounded head with a generally more upright stance. The bill is rather long, slim and weak looking, the pale eye-ring is complete in front of the eye, underparts more evenly coloured and the legs more reddish-brown.



Left: Meadow Pipit, Trefil, Gwent, mid March (Photo by Mike Warburton).

## Meadow Pipit

Breast and flank streaking is capable of being very variable from our pre-conceived expectations however.

Whilst our usual mental image of Meadow Pipit portrays a conspicuously well streaked bird on the underparts they are often subject to considerable individual variation. Feather wear too plays a significant part in the variability of the underpart streaking but despite this occasional deviation in our more usual expectations, Meadow Pipits never equal the exact pattern to that found on Tree Pipit.

Mike's bird above displays the requisite pro-Meadow Pipit features well. The bill is relatively fine and clearly lacks the wedge shaped look of Tree Pipit. The eye-ring is complete in front of the eye and the lores are plain whilst the supercilium is on the whole rather indistinct. The median coverts certainly do not stand out from the rest of the wing and even taking into account the effect of the sun on the legs, they are evidently reddish-brown.

The underparts however display a certain degree of variation. The colouration of the breast is distinctly orangey-buff and matches the more usual hue encountered on a typical Tree Pipit and initially the underpart streaking seems to be very different from Mick Colquhoun's mid-March Meadow Pipit above. Comparing the streaks to that of Tree Pipit though, they are still unmistakably too bold along the flanks for the latter species. Whilst there is a row of very fine streaks along the lower flanks, those above them (on the upper flanks, closest to the closed wing) are bold and 'messy'. They are broad and vary in width, becoming especially ill-defined on the rear flanks and importantly are equal in strength with those on the breast, lacking the abrupt and striking change in strength from breast to flanks found on Tree Pipit.



Above: Meadow Pipit, the Blorenge, Gwent, mid June (Photo by Julian Evans).

By mid-summer wear is really taking its toll on the plumage of breeding birds.

## Meadow Pipit

All the more usual reliable structural and facial features are present in the individual directly above but yet again the underpart streaking is a little more uncharacteristic. The feather wear of this bird is patently obvious though as the wing covert edges have all but worn off, making the upperparts appear darker than usual. This wear has also impacted on the underparts of this bird and their lack of any colour brings a cold appearance to them with the streaking becoming quite restricted on both the breast and flanks. Despite this, the flank streaks especially maintain their bold look with no real contrast between those on the breast.

The length of the hind claw is blatantly visible and with such a view it is entirely decisive in its identification. It is very long, rather gently curving and is dark along at least three quarters of its length. The colour of the legs is archetypal for this species too with a certain orangey-brown hue not encountered in Tree Pipit.

Finally for this individual, the base to the lower mandible is clearly yellowish, contrary to the more typical pink of Tree Pipit.



Above: Meadow Pipit, Astley Moss, Greater Manchester, late May (Photo by Jon Taverner).

The salient structural features remain discernible here with the rather long and fine bill and very long hind claws. The facial pattern is once again evident and this side-on view allows us to more accurately appreciate the loreal pattern, which is of course plain; without a darker loreal stripe. Judging this feature from the front or indeed at an oblique angle can give rise to a false impression of the lores being darker than they actually are. As is more often the case with Meadow Pipit, this bird lacks any sign of a paler spot on the upper rear ear coverts.

The breast streaking on this individual is marginally paler, more brownish and its distribution is slightly less well spaced than that of Tree Pipit. The large dark 'spot' on the centre of the breast, formed by a coalesce of streaking can be seen here and whilst it too can be encountered in a minority of Tree Pipits, it is much more commonly seen in Meadow.



## Meadow Pipit



Above: Meadow Pipit, Bowland, Lancashire, early June (Photo by Brian Rafferty).

Indeed whilst this bird appears to have very restricted streaking on the flanks (probably due to wear but perhaps also just down to individual variation) the wings are in fact drooped slightly and are thus cloaking some of the streaking. Clearly, we need to be sure we are observing the full extent of streaking before rushing to a decision based on this feature alone! The bill is also duly hidden by its prey item but despite this everything else is indicative of Meadow Pipit.

The most conclusive feature in this image is of course the unmistakable long, flattish and dark coloured hind claws but the lores are also plain and the supercilium unapparent in front of the eye.



Above: Meadow Pipit, Trefil, Gwent, early May (Photo by Mick Colquhoun).

The above classic Meadow Pipit's bill is clearly unlike that of Tree Pipit. Note in particular the upper mandible's very 'flat' profile; compare once again this bird's facial pattern to that of Tree Pipit and of course check out those elongated dark hind claws!

This bird too has restricted breast streaking and although the flank streaking looks quite fine for Meadow Pipit it is still too coarse for Tree Pipit and lacks that species' conspicuous difference between breast and flank streaking strength.



Above: Meadow Pipit, Trefil, Gwent, mid March (Photo by Mick Colquhoun)

The archetypal bland face of Meadow Pipit is patently visible here with its uniform lores, poorly marked supercilium and complete pale eye-ring.

The breast streaking is quite unusual in this bird though but its lack of contrast between the breast and flanks, plus the more usual extensive and uniform ground colouration to the underparts, should permit no confusion.

## Meadow Pipit



Above: Meadow Pipit, the Blorenge, Gwent, late March (Photo by Mick Colquhoun)

This particular individual is curiously bright orangey-buff on the breast.

Whilst early spring Meadow Pipits can occasionally exhibit this colouration, this bird is not only identical in hue to Tree Pipit but its distribution on the breast is very similar too, with an equally prominent demarcation from the warmly coloured breast to the white belly. Note however that this bright colouration does not extend over the 'face' of the bird and that the supercilium especially is contrastingly off-white.

Further complementary features for Meadow Pipit include the slim bill, inconspicuous supercilium in front of the eye and obvious complete white eye-ring which is unbroken on the lores. The lores themselves appear on first glance to be quite dark but note that clearly no short dark eye-stripe exists and that the entire area is uniformly dark, probably due to the angle they are being viewed from. Overall the bird has that typically gentle and even slightly surprised facial appearance.



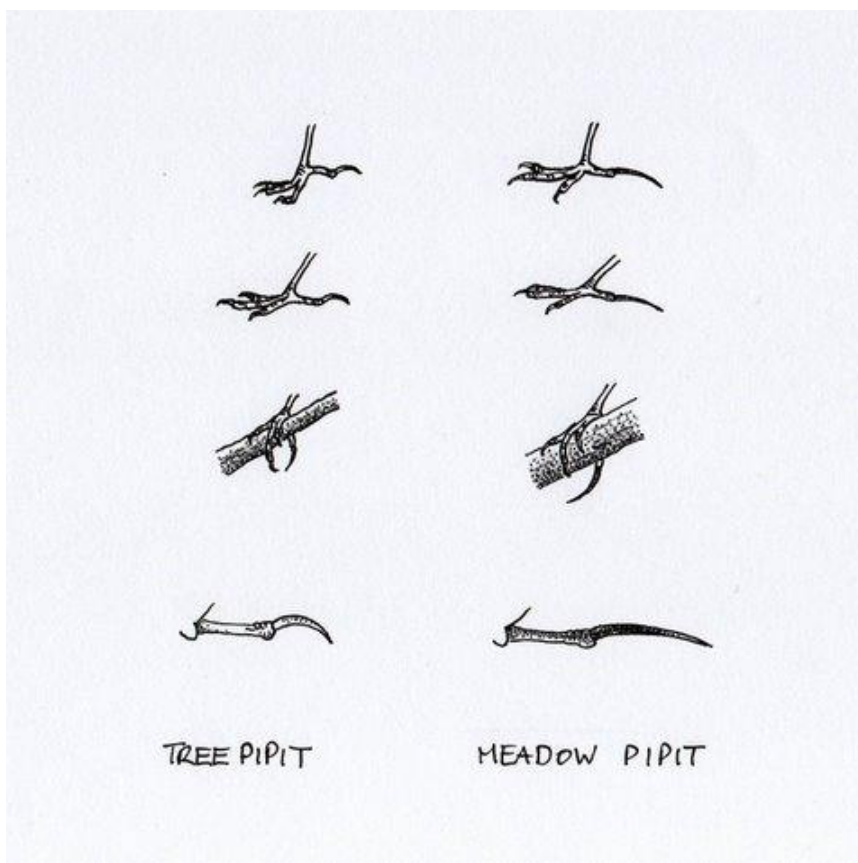


Above: Meadow Pipit, the Bloreng, Gwent, late March (Photo by Mick Colquhoun)

Here in flight, this bird could perhaps easily be mistaken for a Tree Pipit due to that breast colouration and its sharp contrast to the white belly, plus those flank streaks *appear* quite fine.

Firstly though, the complete pale eye-ring, uniform lores and inconspicuous fore-supercilium lend themselves to the more gentle expression of Meadow Pipit. The bill remains admittedly slim, evident in the actual profile of the upper mandible especially. As for the flank streaking, whilst it may initially give the impression of being quite fine a closer look reveals that it is perceptibly bolder and broader than that of Tree Pipit with less contrast in strength between the breast streaks.

### A closer look at those hind claws



Left: Depiction comparing Tree Pipit (left) and Meadow Pipit (right) hind claw lengths and shapes (Illustration by Ian McKerchar).

## Meadow Pipit

As referred to in the aforementioned features, the hind claw lengths of both Tree and Meadow Pipit can be a very useful and indeed decisive separation feature when seen sufficiently well. Whilst there is no apparent overlap in the actual length of the claws between the two species, ambiguous birds can rarely occur and in these instances other primary characteristics should be utilised.

Tree Pipit generally has short and well arched hind claws which are uniformly pale whereas Meadow Pipit has conspicuously longer and flatter hind claws which are dark along much of their length, often with only a paler tip.

## Song and calls



Above: Tree Pipit, mid May (Photo by Mick Colquhoun)

Like the majority of pipits occurring in the UK, both Tree and Meadow are not averse to being very vocal and both their song and calls are distinctive, providing us with a key identification feature.

## Calls

Meadow Pipit's *seep seep seep* call should be familiar to us all but its delivery varies in strength as does the actual number of *seep* calls, from singly to rapidly repeated several times. It is given at all times of the year and flushed birds almost always call in this manner although a small minority remain silent (and unless good views are afforded should always be pursued just to check!). Getting to know the call of this species, its more usual rather 'squeaky' tone, is a prerequisite in separating it from Tree Pipit on call alone.

Tree Pipits call an explosive, rather rasping *speez*, most often heard from overhead migrants and flushed birds. It is unlike any call of Meadow Pipit and is a particular favourite of mine, particularly on a drizzly September morning when its rasping explosiveness pierces the gloom and enables them to be easily identified as they slip otherwise unnoticed overhead.

It should be borne in mind though that both species have quite different calls when nervous and in particular when around the nest. Meadow Pipit utters a *sitip* or *sitit* alarm call which to me always has an almost cricket (*Gryllidae* sp.) like quality about it. Tree Pipit too gives its own alarm call, a high-pitched *sip* or perhaps *tip*, rather soft and audibly different from that of Meadow Pipit.

### Song

The songs of the two species, like their calls, are characteristic and should not really be confused. Expressing their qualities in writing is not only difficult but is typically fraught with the listeners own perceptions and are often rendered meaningless to those reading them. So, instead of me trying to think up words which I feel express what their songs sound like to me, have a click on the links below and emerge yourself in the full range of their songs and calls courtesy of Xeno-canto Europe. Personally, I find the rich tone, it's variation in pitch and the individual phrases in the song of Tree Pipit absolute music to the ears.

[Tree Pipit](#)

[Meadow Pipit](#)

### In-flight jizz

Overhead migrant Tree and Meadow Pipit in particular have subtly different jizz and flight characteristics. Tree Pipit averages a slightly longer overall wing length than Meadow Pipit and has a more pointed wing to boot with the second, third and fourth primaries of equal length but the fifth shorter by 2-6.5mm. Meadow Pipit has a more rounded wing tip due to its fifth primary averaging roughly the same length as the second, third and fourth. As a result, Tree Pipit's longer, more pointed wing produces a stronger, steadier and more powerful flight than the shorter, more rounded wing of Meadow Pipit, whose flight is more hesitant and weaker.

These wing and flight differences are in truth particularly subtle though and require a great deal of practise and experience to perceive on an overflying migrant but once learnt they are nevertheless distinctive and particularly useful.

### And finally...

So, good views plus a sound understanding of the pertinent identification features should facilitate the accurate recognition of Tree Pipits under the majority of circumstances. The most important factor as always though is to increase one's *field* experience. Next time you chance across a Tree Pipit, whether on passage or on breeding grounds, take time to pick out and study those finer features, to take in it's overall subtle jizz and wherever possible to close your eyes and absorb their characteristic song or calls. Ignore Meadow Pipits at your peril though, as they and their individual variation should form the very basis of our knowledge, not only for their separation from Tree Pipit but of course from those rarer pipits not discussed here too.



## Acknowledgements

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Ian McKerchar, August 2010

[manchesterbirding.com](http://manchesterbirding.com)



Above: Tree Pipit, Ukraine (Photo by Sergey Osipov).