

Sprague's Pipit (*Anthus spragueii*)



Scott Somershoe

Sprague's Pipit

Introduction

Sprague's Pipit is a grassland specialist that breeds in the mixed-grass prairies of the Northern Great Plains. They occur very locally in north and central South Dakota, extending through North Dakota and Montana, and north into the southern end of the boreal transition zone in Alberta and Saskatchewan. They also extend east into southwestern Manitoba and west to the Rocky Mountain foothills, although only locally common in central and western Montana. This species generally prefers native grasslands of intermediate height and sparse to intermediate vegetation density, low forb density, and minimal bare ground. Sprague's Pipit is



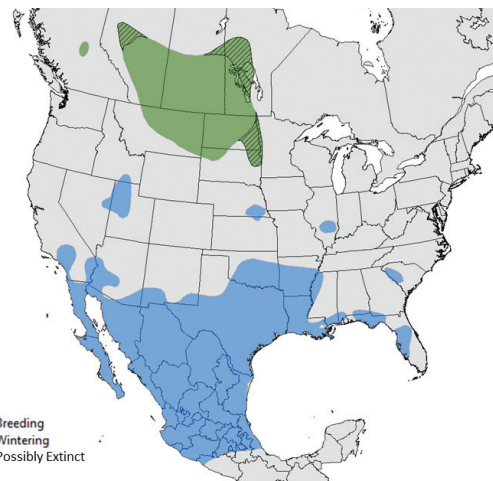
Michael Todd

Sprague's Pipit

most common in large patches of intact grassland.

Identification

Sprague's Pipit is a sparrow-sized songbird (length: 5 inches [15 cm], wing span: 7.8 inches [20 cm], weight: 0.9 oz [25 g]) with a thick, two-tone bill, pale pink-orange legs, heavily streaked brownish back, and pale area around eyes which gives it a blank look. It wears a "necklace" of fine streaks and has extensive white on outer tail feathers which is visible in flight.



Sprague's Pipit Distribution Map (BirdLife International and NatureServe 2012).

Adult plumage: Adult males and females have similar plumage during the breeding and winter seasons.

Immature birds: Young are similar to adult, but with spotting instead of streaking on the upper breast.



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A male Sprague's Pipit establishes and maintains its territory and courts a female by performing elaborate aerial displays above its territory.

Breeding Biology

Flight Display

During the display, the male flies up from the ground about 150-300 ft, singing a descending series of tinkling double notes. He remains nearly still while singing, moving his wings rapidly, and then glides around in an undulating manner. The display is repeated multiple times, often lasting a half an hour to three hours. At the end of the display, the male plummets straight down and levels off just before dropping to the ground. Females are much less visible as they do not perform with males during displays.

Reproduction

Sprague's Pipits arrive on the breeding grounds typically from mid-April through mid-May. Pair formation begins shortly after arrival on the breeding grounds and

eggs are laid from mid-May through early August.

Nest: A nest woven of fine grasses is placed in a depression on the ground. The nests are either a relatively exposed oven-like nest with an opening on the side, in the side of a clump of grass with a side entrance, or well concealed from above by a tuft of grass.

Clutch Size and Incubation: Typical clutch size is 4-6 eggs that are pale whitish with brown blotches.

Instead of approaching the nest directly, the adult birds land several feet away and walk to the nest.

Nestlings: Young pipits are altricial and downy, featherless at the time of hatching and unable to open their eyes or care for themselves. Young periodically leave the nest as early as 10-11 days after hatching, before they are able to fly well.

Diet: Primarily insects during the breeding season with the addition of seeds collected from the ground during the winter.

Fun Fact: They perform the longest known flight display of any bird, with males often remaining airborne for half an hour or more.



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Sprague's Pipit habitat.



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Sprague's Pipit (center of image) utilize a variety of habitats in winter, but prefer relatively shrub free grasslands with variable grass heights.

Habitat

Breeding

Sprague's Pipit almost exclusively prefers native prairie in the breeding season and is only rarely found in cultivated fields, areas replanted with or invaded by non-native grassland species, and tame pastures. They breed in intermediate-statured grasslands (less than 20 inches) with sparse to intermediate grass cover (18-50%), moderate litter cover, and minimal bare ground. In mixed-grass prairie, dominant vegetation consists of wheatgrasses and needlegrasses. The amount of residual vegetation from the previous year is a strong predictor of Sprague's Pipit nest sites. They avoid areas with woody vegetation and deep litter.

Migration

Little is known about this species' habitat use during migration. They have been observed in habitat closely resembling their wintering and breeding habitat, which includes pastures, prairie dog towns, fallow cropland, short mixed grasslands, and heavily grazed tallgrass habitats.

Winter Habitat

Sprague's Pipit is considered a grassland specialist on the winter grounds. They primarily occupy areas with high grass cover and few shrubs. They also use sparsely vegetated grasslands, cultivated lands, and those that have been recently burned, grazed, or mowed.

Note: Although Sprague's Pipits will use non-native replanted grasslands, their abundance in these areas is lower than in native grasslands.



Scott Somers/shoe

Typical Sprague's Pipit breeding habitat with taller grass, clumps of bunch grasses, and little bare ground.

Management Recommendations

Sprague's Pipit needs large tracts of intact native grassland free of woody vegetation for breeding. They prefer grassland with no shrub or tree cover within 300 feet of patches at least 70 acres. Management consists of protecting, maintaining, and restoring native mixed-grass prairie in suitably large expanses. Grazing, fire, and mowing are the most common management techniques used in grasslands to create or restore suitable habitat or to prevent further degradation. Restoration of cropland to native

vegetation is also beneficial. Sprague's Pipit prefers lightly to moderately grazed prairie, depending on precipitation and grass growth rates. The species is tolerant of most grazing regimes and rotational grazing may be an appropriate method of management. A burn rotation may maintain habitat conditions preferred by Sprague's Pipit.