

Passerines are the largest group of birds. They are small to medium sized land birds found worldwide, except on Antarctica. All species have four toes, three pointing forward and one back, well-adapted for perching. Most species are song-birds, with complex musical calls, but there are exceptions (e.g. crows). They show great diversity of form, behaviour and breeding biology.

**NEW ZEALAND PIPIT (Pihoihoi) *Anthus novaeseelandiae***

Uncommon native

19 cm, 40 g. Like Skylark, including white outer tail feathers, but more slender and has the distinctive habit of frequently *flicking its long tail up and down*. Head and upperparts brown, streaked darker; prominent *white eyebrow*; underparts whitish, streaked brown on breast. Runs and walks jerkily on long legs; often flies a short distance ahead, calling a shrill 'scree' or drawn-out 'zwee'. **Habitat:** Open habitats from coast to alpine tops, but avoids intensively farmed areas; mainly near coast, on shingle riverbeds, gravel roads, and scree slopes. **Breeding:** Aug–Mar. [Sp 290]



**PIPITS**

**Motacillidae**

43 species worldwide; 1 is native to New Zealand.

the larks they have long legs and toes, and an exceptionally long hind toe and claw. Their most notable feature is a long tail, which is wagged up and down. Their bill is slender, and they feed mainly on invertebrates caught on the ground. Their calls are loud and unmusical.

The pipits are small birds of open country, especially rough grassland, undeveloped tussockland, beaches and rivers. They resemble larks in having drab plumage to provide camouflage on the ground, and like

**290. NEW ZEALAND PIPIT *Anthus novaeseelandiae***

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**Other names:** Pihoihoi, Richard's Pipit (overseas)

**Size:** 19 cm, 40 g

**Geographical variation:** The species has a wide distribution with many subspecies, four of which are only in New Zealand; the New Zealand Pipit *novaeseelandiae* of the North, South and Stewart Islands, and offshore islands; the Chatham Island Pipit *chathamensis* of the Chatham Islands; the Antipodes Island

Pipit *steindachneri* of the Antipodes Islands; and the Auckland Island Pipit *aucklandicus* of the Auckland and Campbell Islands. Recent genetic research suggests that populations on the various outlying islands are quite similar, and should be treated as a separate species to that on the mainland of New Zealand, perhaps indicating a double invasion of the New Zealand region by pipits.

**Distribution:** Breeds from central and eastern

Africa across central and southern Europe and Asia to Australasia. They are winter vagrants to western Europe, including Britain. In New Zealand, they are widely but patchily distributed in open habitats such as beaches, riverbeds, gravel roads and road verges, rough pasture and tussock grassland, and from sea level to subalpine tussock and herbfields at 1900 m. They are scarce in very dry parts of the South Island and in intensive agricultural districts such as Auckland, Waikato, Bay of Plenty, Taranaki, Manawatu, Canterbury and Southland. They are abundant on the Chatham Islands and common on the Antipodes and Auckland Islands, but are restricted to offshore stacks in the Campbell Islands. Stragglers have reached the Kermadecs and The Snares. In Europe and Asia, they are migratory, but there is no evidence of long-distance movement in New Zealand.

**Population:** Widespread and locally common in open country, especially in Northland, central North Island, eastern hill country from East Cape to Cape Palliser, Nelson, northern Westland, eastern foothills of the Southern Alps, Stewart Island, Chatham Islands, and some offshore islands.

**Conservation:** Protected native. At first, Pipits probably benefited from the clearance of forests and the creation of open habitats, but as pasture improved, pesticides were used and mammalian predators and magpies were introduced. Pipits declined locally and disappeared from some arable districts. Some people think that the Skylark has ousted them, but there is little overlap in diet and both species can be abundant in rough open country, such as on the Chathams.

**Breeding:** Some pairs remain on territory all year and breed year after year. The female builds the nest, which is a deep cup in a bulky structure of dry grass, well hidden at the base of a clump of grass, tussock, bracken fern, manuka bush, or occasionally under a fallen log or in a hollow on a bank or road cutting. Each pair has 2–3 clutches between August and February. They lay 2–3–4–5 cream eggs (23 x 17 mm), heavily blotched brown with a darker zone at the broader end. The incubation period is 14–15 days. Both parents feed the nestlings, which fledge at 14–16 days old. When visiting the nest, the adults usually alight 5–10 m away and walk to it, but they fly directly from the nest.

**Behaviour:** Pairs are strongly territorial during the breeding season, but some birds, perhaps mainly juveniles, form loose flocks in autumn and winter. The territorial song of the male, heard mainly in August–February, is a repeated, high-pitched and slurred 'pip-it' and a musical trill given from a prominent perch. The common call throughout the year is a shrill 'scree' or drawn-out 'zwee'.

**Feeding:** Diet is mainly invertebrates, especially beetles (including grass grubs), wasps, flies, spiders, crickets, moths and bugs, and insect larvae and pupae. On beaches, they eat sandhoppers. Seeds of grasses, clover and weeds make up a small part of the diet. Most food is taken from the ground, but some insects are caught on the wing.

**Reading:** Foggo, M.N. 1984. *Notornis* 31: 1–5. Foggo, *et al.* 1997. *Ibis* 139: 366–373. Garrick, A.S. 1981. *NZ J Ecol* 4: 106–114. Hamel, J. 1972. *Notornis* 19: 20–25. Moeed, A. 1975. *Notornis* 22: 135–142.